



# WHO'S LISTENING?

## UNDERSTANDING 'US' TO KNOW 'THEM'

**Transcending borders to explore identity and connection**

Raymond Hyma, Karen Simbulan, Suyheang Kry,  
Bao Ngoc Ho Huynh, Staci B. Martin, and Phasiree Thanasin

*Foreword by Dr Suria Selasih Angit*

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The views expressed in this book come directly from participants who shared their perspectives, the research team who reflected on the findings and their experiences, the analysts who reviewed the recorded data, and the authors who translated it all to written form. They do not necessarily reflect the position of any particular organisation or partner involved in the implementation or publication of this work.

All participants ("Sharers") of the inquiry activities provided informed consent to enter the process freely with full information on the project's scope and the plans for publication of the perspectives they shared.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

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# Foreword

by Dr Suria Selasih Angit





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*Who's listening?* That is indeed the question many of us living as minorities within our own borders have asked ourselves. The first time I read the draft of this publication, I was immediately drawn to its message: could we understand others much better if we could see ourselves through them? I believe this is such important work for the region that allows us to listen to stories which would otherwise be left unknown, ignored, or forgotten. Such stories need to be shared in a safe, respectful, and non-judgemental environment in which we can - if we dare - begin to see some aspect of ourselves in the daily lives of others that may seem so different.

As an Indigenous woman from a minority group called the Orang Asli Temiar in Malaysia, I know all too well the value of being listened to and the danger of being ignored by the mainstream world. I know being listened to is a privilege that not everyone is afforded. "Who's listening?" is the question that I've constantly asked myself in different phases of life while wearing different hats and acting in different capacities. Before embarking on the stories of minorities in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, I would like to ask the honour in this storytelling space to share my own story - the story of the Orang Asli minority.

The Orang Asli (The Original People) are the Indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. Being a multiethnic country with a population of around 32.7 million, Malaysia has a rich variety of ethnicities, languages, cultures, religions, lifestyles, and values. Statistically, the vast majority (69.9%) of Malaysia's population is made up of those referred to as the "*Bumiputera*." *Bumiputera*, a Malay word literally meaning the sons of the earth or soil, is a special status granted to several ethnic groups: the Malays (the largest ethnic group), the Orang Asli, the original ethnic Portuguese in Peninsular Malaysia, and various Indigenous ethnic groups in East Malaysia. The second largest ethnic group are the Chinese, representing 22.8% of the country's population, followed by the third ethnic group, the Indians, representing 6.6% (both who do not receive *Bumiputera* status). Despite the *Bumiputera* rights that the Indigenous peoples of modern-day Malaysia are (in principle) entitled to, the Orang Asli - who make up a mere 0.7% of the country's population - are disadvantaged in regards to a number of societal indicators compared to the other sectors of the diverse Malaysian population.

Further divided into 18 sub-groups, the Orang Asli come from different landscapes, each with its own unique sense of place that we call “home.” Some come from hilly and forested areas; some live in villages and near townships, and there are also those who are known as the descendants of the seafaring people. When put together, the diversity of our ways of knowing and living become a beautiful tapestry against the multicultural and multiethnic backdrop of Malaysia. A tapestry that is rich with ancestral knowledge and culture - a richness that is seldom mentioned in the wider community and, unfortunately, rarely valued as real capital by other more mainstream ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Like so many other Indigenous and minority communities across the globe, the Orang Asli of Malaysia also face numerous socio-economic struggles that put us in a disadvantaged position within our own borders. Despite the harmonious beginning that our ancestors had with newly-arrived groups in the late 14th century, the Orang Asli history has been tainted with memories of our ancestors being enslaved by others as we became more and more insignificant in number and prominence. We then saw our great-grandparents and grandparents lose their rights to their lands and be pushed to the margins. As times changed, many of us were removed from our traditional settings and resettled in new environments that we knew very little about. We were told that for our people to “develop,” we needed to “integrate” into the mainstream world. Many were told to hide our indigeneity and celebrate - if not embrace - the more dominant identity in the name of integration, even when we lacked clarity of what integration meant.

Ideally, integration is said to lead to equality and social cohesion; but how many of us can clearly conceptualise what an integrated society really looks like? And who gets to decide which vision of integration we should adopt? Within the complex multi-ethnic setting where power imbalance between the majority and minority is often status quo, how much of the minority’s views on integration is listened to? Delving deeper and given the lack of clarity of what integration really means, could our current idea of integration actually be assimilation in disguise? These questions are not only applicable to the Orang Asli of Malaysia, but also to global Indigenous communities and other ethnic minority groups throughout Asia and around the world who have suffered from colonisation, marginalisation, and border demarcation for generations.

It's important to point out that despite the painful experiences Indigenous and ethnic minority groups have faced, we do not wish to be seen merely as the disempowered or the oppressed. Many of us (including the Orang Asli of Malaysia) are working together towards a more just and inclusive society. Community members have moved beyond their national borders to form alliances that place diversity and shared identities at the centre of these collective efforts. For the Orang Asli, we also acknowledge the importance of building coalitions beyond our borders. We have been learning from the experiences of other global communities such as the Maoris in New Zealand, native Hawaiians in the USA, and our brothers and sisters living in minority communities in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Within our borders, many of us are now building bridges between our communities and mainstream society through constructive dialogues, educational programmes, and everyday interactions. We hope that these bridges will help us regain the precious gift we lost generations ago of mutual trust within wider Malaysian society. These collaborations may look different in nature, but at the heart of such joint efforts often lie two identical elements: a story that needs to be told and an audience that is willing to listen and learn from it.

I invite you to open your mind when reading the stories of minority groups in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The participants who chose to lead in mobilising their communities (beautifully referred to as “Listeners” in this work) show us that although borders may create this socially constructed idea of nationality, there is far more to connect us through culture, language, and even values. They teach us that the best way to cultivate empathy for another is to find yourself in that person. Their ask is very simple but extremely powerful: is the person you consider as “the Other” truly different, or could you possibly find yourself in them and consequently include them in your own group? For that is the power of understanding ‘us’ to know ‘them.’

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# Preface



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Such was the love of this grandson for his grandmother that two years after the death of his mother, when she herself fell gravely ill, he vowed to her that someday he would try to tell the world her life story.

'But why?' she asked humbly. 'I'm no one, just a girl from the coast'  
'But you are everyone, Grandma,' the young Pramoedya told her. 'You are all the people who have ever had to fight to make this life their own.'

— Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Gadis Pantai* (The Girl from the Coast)

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Stories are powerful. They have the power to define or transform relationships. They have the power to shape how people view the world - what they pay attention to and what they ignore; what they accept and what they refuse; what they consider 'normal' or right, and what they consider 'abnormal' or wrong.

In the storytelling process we refer to the interaction between at least two people, someone sharing their story and someone listening, watching, or reading the story - both actors go on the story's journey together. In this process, transformation can occur at several levels.

All good stories have the power to draw our attention to the invisible - the assumptions that we are often not even aware of but that are used to explain or justify the status quo - and to challenge them. This is the preliminary step to the transformational process as it invites people to question what they know, but in a manner that promotes empathetic introspection rather than by confrontation and argumentation.

Instead of attempting to tell you what you think you know is wrong, a good story asks you to close your eyes, imagine you are someone else, and try to understand better how this person, due to various aspects of their identity, experiences the world. In

this way, we are given the freedom to look beyond factors that typically bar us from relating to someone, like their nationality, gender, sexual identity or orientation, their ethnic or religious identity, their political affiliation, their socio-economic class, etc. Stories allow us to use our imagination and recognise the similarities of our experiences instead, opening up the possibility for new connections and relationships to form. In some instances, these stories are so powerful that they lay the groundwork for solidarity and mobilise people to action.

The storytelling process is also transformational for the person sharing their story because it requires reflection, processing, and understanding on the part of the storyteller. In telling a story, the sharer is demonstrating this assertion of control over their own story and shaping how it is understood by others.

Unfortunately, the transformational power of stories can negatively impact relationships and promote harmful perceptions as well. As shown throughout history, stories have been powerful vehicles to promote stereotypes, reinforce differences and discrimination, or justify the exclusion of others. As noted by Johan Galtung, stories can be a potent element of cultural violence, providing the narratives and justification needed for the general public to accept and even support direct or structural violence.<sup>1</sup> The impact of stories on communities thus depends on which stories - and what type - are being promoted and have platforms for amplification.

It is important to note here that everyone has a story to tell, and everyone has the capacity to tell that story. The key difference is that some groups of people or communities have better access to tools, opportunities, and platforms to share their stories, while others do not. This lack of access results in the stories of entire communities being ignored by the majority population. Even worse, this opens up the possibility for stories based on prejudice and stereotypes to circulate, rather than truthful stories directly from these communities.

This is why *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* is such an important contribution to the collection of stories and narratives available about the lives, experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): pp. 291-305, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/423472>.

and perspectives of diverse ethnic minority groups from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. These stories are being shared by the people themselves, and they are being shared to people from their own communities who are better able to recognise and see the similarities of their shared experiences.

This is the third and final publication of the series *Who's Listening?* The series has been an evolution of using Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a participatory action peace research approach to mobilise communities. FLD uses inquiry-based activities to engage participants with other communities that are initially thought to be different. Over and over again we find that the process of engaging others through information gathering not only provides unique snapshots of often marginalised and less-heard communities, but it also fosters new understanding and cultivates transformational learning about *the Other* and ourselves.

The first edition of *Who's Listening?* (“Taking hard issues with empathy”) was the pilot of using this novel approach in understanding the perceptions of ethnic Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese residents living in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. This work was groundbreaking and first of its kind to explore perceptions from two groups on the same issues. Learnings from it, however, taught us that working through such a binary view of conflict – either overt or unspoken – can often be polarising.

The second edition of *Who's Listening?* (“From Centre to Periphery”) expanded the scope, analysing dynamics of different ethnic groups along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. In addition to Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese voices, it also sought opinions and views from Cambodian Muslims and Indigenous peoples. With life on the border providing more exposure to life in another country (Vietnam), the idea was born to explore beyond our borders and understand dynamics from a wider view.

This final edition of *Who's Listening?* (“Understanding ‘Us’ to know ‘Them’”) turns the idea of ethnic and national identity upside-down. Rather than focusing on different perspectives among diverse minority groups, it has brought together ethnic minorities from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand to explore any similarities, shared experiences, or even kinship. This edition of *Who's Listening?* is also different for rather than systematically presenting FLD data to provide a snapshot of community

perspectives, it focuses more on highlighting the stories that were captured. 120 stories were curated, recorded, and shared by Listeners who conveyed the messages and often helped to explain the nuances from their own communities.

This collection of stories provides us with multiple invitations to go on a journey. While many of the stories have familiar themes and elements, we hope that they also draw attention and reveal new things for the reader to reflect on and consider.



# 1

## Introduction



How do you define home? There is such a personal dimension of home. Is it based on where your parents or grandparents are from? Do you have immediate or extended family at your home or nearby? For many people, family can also go well beyond present-day and refer to past ancestors who may have never been personally known; it can be burial sites where relatives and generations of people lay from centuries before. In civilisations around the world, family, clan, and dynasties have all defined who was part of a family and who was not. For many, going “home” has often meant returning to where parents, siblings, and other family members reside.

Does home mean community? The society one finds themselves in is often so important in framing home to others. Is it rooted in being in a place where you share the same language, same religion, same physical characteristics as everyone else? Sharing the same culture can provide strong cultural references that can be understood by everyone raised within a community. Speaking a mother tongue connects you to people in an often comfortable way that allows you to express yourself in the way you are most used to, referring to syntax and lexicon that you have been brought up with through natural acquisition.

Can home be based on having the same opportunities, protections, and rights granted by the state as everyone else who are also nationals of the same country? In the modern world, nation-states are powerful “identity producers,” where people who travel around the globe identify themselves first by the country they have a passport from. Whether born there or naturalised, nation-state identity often involves some form of connection to a government and a level of rights and entitlements, such as access to health, education, and protection. *I’m Canadian, I’m Filipino, I’m Brazilian, I’m Ugandan, and I’m Hungarian*, are all commonly heard as identities that associate the speaker with some form of home that involves a country.

What if your parents came from a place that did not welcome them? How about if your children moved to a new community that made them feel like real outsiders? What would your perception of these places or communities be? What if you had no nation-state to call your own, and you lived life in a perpetual state of precariousness, without a proper legal identity that allowed you to call yourself a citizen of anywhere? Although you may have experienced generational gaps with parents or children throughout your life, what would you be able to connect to in that context and what would foster the most empathy towards them? How far would you go to consider whether someone is indeed part of your community or outside of it? How would you perceive the identity of someone born and raised in your country but without any form of legal recognition or nationality that allows them to call themselves a national like you? These questions are fundamental when exploring layers of identity, and more specifically, how we decide whether a group belongs to “us” or to “them.” Such questions are only the beginning of an inquiry that leads to an endless amount of further questions that can dissect every aspect of our own identity and compare and contrast it to that of another.

The idea for *Understanding ‘Us’ to know ‘Them’* emerged after a reflective conversation following an art exhibit that explored identity through a spectrum of ethnic identities in Cambodia. As we sat in a circle, both exhausted from the copious amount of work but full of energy from the learnings and exploration, we knew we had all been illuminated by connection through difference. We were fixated on questions of “us” and “them” and really peeling the layers of identity that made us decide who the so-called “other” was at the end of the day. This point of the journey was by no means the start. Beginning in 2017 with the goal of better understanding anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the city of Phnom Penh, the first generation of so-called “Listeners” went out to embark on a learning initiative to talk to people from their communities about sources of tension between ethnic Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese communities living side-by-side. The following year, armed with new information and rich data, the second generation of Listeners went to the border between Cambodia and Vietnam to delve deeper into inter-ethnic issues and to find out if things were as bad as impressions in the capital city seemed to indicate. That phase appeared to question many perceptions and stereotypes and provided a more detailed picture of other dynamics, including positive aspects and bonds that were present in different communities living as neighbours. Fast forward to 2019, when

through much learning and reflection, Listeners decided to try something new and formed a team to explore other sides of the borders, including neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam.

To be fully transparent and genuine, it is important to fully disclose from the start that this work began through a Cambodia-centric lens. As we grappled with issues that were happening in Cambodia, we turned towards our neighbours (Thailand and Vietnam) to understand where we could find our differences but also where we could find ourselves. Migration, ethnic identity, and minority status are certainly not new concepts in a contemporary global make-up. Many of the age-old issues of “us” and “them” still stand up today. However, as we engaged with each other across our borders, we broadened our understanding of each other’s communities, saw very different perceptions of similar issues but also shared many common themes on sense of place and identity .

# 2

## Understanding 'Us' To Know 'Them:' A Framework



# On conceptions of home and sense of place

## How do you define home?

For many of us reading this, the concept of home is straightforward. Home is a physical space where we were born and raised, where we reside with our families. It is where we can place our childhood memories and first gain a sense of self, the starting point we use to ground ourselves as we seek to define and make sense of who we are.

Home is therefore viewed as the backdrop where we accumulate experiences and memories and establish relationships and networks developed through interactions with others in different institutions - schools, churches, youth groups, cultural groups, and later through livelihoods and industries. In this way, our sense of home is integral to identity formation because it provides us with the input (through experiences, interactions and memories) to determine who we are vis-à-vis others.

Home is associated with a sense of community, of being able to find others who feel familiar, whether this feeling of familiarity is rooted in sharing similar physical features, using the same language, enjoying the same hobbies or activities, having similar principles, values or beliefs, or working for the same or a similar goal. At the heart of these similarities is the sense of being seen and recognised while simultaneously being able to see and recognise others. These commonalities evoke feelings of acceptance and belonging that we often associate with the feeling of home.

Home is also defined by feelings of security, of comfort, literally and metaphorically, where one can put one's feet up. But this sense of comfort and security is linked to the place that provides for one's needs. Beyond being a place that meets our physical needs of food and shelter, home is often also associated with conditions that provide at the very least a source of income and livelihood to enable survival, if not opportunities for advancement and an environment that allows one to improve their situation in life.

Also linked to survival is the conception of home as a place that guarantees rights and entitlements. This refers to the political dimension of our conception of the

home, which includes citizenship that guarantees state protection and other important rights and entitlements such as access to education, healthcare, state recognition and protection of cultural heritage and identity, including one's mother tongue. Citizenship is also the basis for political participation, representation, and often protection and access to corrective action against the invasive powers of the state. All of these serve as the foundation on which our sense of security is built.

Lastly, home is a place where one can find a sense of meaning to our existence; a situation with conditions conducive for us to figure out how we fit in the world as defined by our ability to contribute and give back to our families, our communities, and perhaps towards the common good. Much of the personal and cultural identity that people hold onto is intimately tied to *place identity*,<sup>2</sup> or how people see themselves or identify themselves in relation to their community and ecosystem. That sense of place in which a loss of home or one's place can even result in an "identity crisis."<sup>3</sup> Such a phenomenon was observed in the case of one of the communities in this very study that was facing physical relocation.

The preceding paragraphs speak of what home is for most of us lucky enough not to think about it or question it. But, as the stories in *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* illustrate, there are many others who consider a place their home even if they are not afforded the same rights and entitlements as others; even if they are not guaranteed safety and security, nor are they encouraged to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance, or recognition.

*Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* explores these stories to better understand why, despite these deficiencies, some people continue to consider a place their home. It examines what binds people to places and what conditions they prioritise when they define home. It also explores their survival strategies – how they strive to preserve this sense of home despite the challenges, negative experiences, and even threats to

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<sup>2</sup> Harold M. Proshansky, "The City and Self-Identity," *Environment and Behavior* 10, no. 2 (1978): pp. 147-169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916578102002>; Vanessa A. Masterson et al., "The Contribution of Sense of Place to Social-Ecological Systems Research: A Review and Research Agenda," *Ecology and Society* 22, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-08872-220149>.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Buttimer, "Home, Reach, and the Sense of Place," in *The Human Experience of Space and Place*, ed. Anne Buttimer and David Seamon (Croom Helm Ltd., 1980), pp. 166-187, 167.

their economic and bodily integrity and security. Ultimately, *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* is a celebration of the human will to survive by claiming a place and finding reasons to call it home, even in the face of great adversity and insecurity.

## On belonging and 'othering'

The need to belong is an intrinsic human need. For many, the first sense of belonging after birth is the relationship that attaches one to their family. From there, children begin to experience belonging to extended families, neighbourhoods, communities, cities, countries, etc. Much of our identity develops within the nexus of how one relates to oneself (individual), to others (relational), and to our social groups (collective). Navigating within this nexus, we continually define ourselves between "I" and "we." This constant self-definition is how many of us find meaning in our own identity, measure our self-worth, and are motivated to seek out social relationships.<sup>4</sup> As beautiful as it is to belong, one of the pitfalls of belonging to one collective is not belonging to another, which can potentially lead to a negative relationship in certain conditions.

*Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* is a framework that challenges the implicit building up, actions, and responses to 'othering.' Othering often stems from the concept of 'us' versus 'them,' positioning one group against another through difference. The philosophical and psychological literature on concepts of the 'other' has been common in Western literature for centuries. From a sociological perspective, however, we can conveniently analyse much of 'othering' we see around minority groups and migrants. Our social identity is constructed through our interactions with others, followed by how we reflect on ourselves and who we are. Identity is formed through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation with others.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marilynn B. Brewer and Wendi Gardner, "Who Is This 'We'? Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, no. 1 (1996): pp. 83-93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.71.1.83>.

<sup>5</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles William Morris (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1934).



Eventually, societies establish their identity categories that inherently divide groups from one another.<sup>6</sup>

We can see othering all around us. On the one hand, othering reinforces that sense of belonging to a group. We can find our collective identity with others that we come to feel are the same. On the other hand, it can foster a deep sense of collective that begins to distinguish itself from others and contribute to negative perceptions, stereotypes, discrimination, power inequality, conflict, and even violence. We begin to see others outside of our group as “they” and can start to resent them for their differences or opposition to how we see ourselves. In psychology, this is known as social identity theory, which helps to explain how people sense who they are based on the group they belong to.<sup>7</sup>

There are many examples of this found worldwide throughout history. The loyalists and the patriots of North America forming themselves into two distinct groups based on their aspirations for either continued British monarchy or independence as a Republic led to the war of 1812 and the distinct sovereign nations of Canada and the United States of America. The French and the Germans had three major wars from 1870 to 1945, based on territory, identity, and ideology. The infamous genocide of Rwanda pitted the Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsi minority ethnic group, resulting in a 100-day massacre of hundreds of thousands of people, often seen as othering of economic status. The Japanese and Koreans, with a long antagonistic history, have historically othered one another which persists today in continued discrimination against each other in both countries.

The three countries included in this study have also experienced othering in their historical contexts. In Cambodia, the genocide during the Pol Pot regime was a three-year example of how anyone can be instantly othered, even neighbours, by way of ideology. Any person, regardless of ethnic identity, was deemed an enemy of the state simply by association with the former government or any ideology that

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<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Henri Tajfel and John Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Pub. Co., 1979).

diverted from an agrarian lifestyle. In Vietnam, the Vietnam War stretched 20 years, dividing the North and the South, and those who strived for a Communist government versus those who aligned with a democratic republic. In Thailand, the ongoing conflict between the central government and the Deep South's Malay population pits Buddhists against Muslims and continues to foster a deep sense of difference between the populations based on religion and ethnicity. Beyond these examples, many other countries around the world have extensive divisions where othering has persisted over time and place.

*Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* is through the lens of ethnic minorities living in a state with a mainstream majority that somehow differentiates them. In Cambodia, there is a great diversity in ethnic Vietnamese groups and they are by no means homogenous. In the study, the focus on the residents living in floating villages along the Tonle Sap River was intentional. These communities have lived in that area for generations and have not integrated into Cambodian society the way other minority groups have - even ethnic Vietnamese in other areas - and continue to live marginalised. They are often stateless, leaving them deeply excluded from mainstream society and without access to long term education, resulting in low levels of Khmer fluency. They are undoubtedly seen as "the Other" by the vast majority of Cambodian society and are one of the few minority groups in the country that are not considered "Khmer" or "Cambodian."

In Thailand, two very different groups portray another story. The Khmer Surin in the Northeast part of the country bordering Cambodia is home to a large ethnic Khmer population that is part of present-day Thailand. This group is largely integrated into mainstream society, speak and write Thai fluently, and are citizens with full rights. Their ethnic minority identity is often related to cultural preservation, language, and their ways of life inside their communities that often reflect a mix of cultural practices. They are certainly othered in Thai society, but their othering is likely more connected to being culturally different, being located in a more remote area, and living in poorer conditions. In Trat, however, the study with Cambodian migrants living in Thailand is very different. The migrant workers are nationally Cambodian and have a strong sense of identity attached to being "the Other" in Thailand. Their status and outlook may be temporary or permanent, but they are regularly seen as "migrants" and hold all the perceptions attached to being in a country that is more

economically developed than their own. Their othering is better understood as that of immigrants and migrant workers living in other countries around the world and facing similar challenges in adapting and integrating.

In Vietnam, the Khmer living in the south make up one of the many minority groups in the country. With historical roots to the land similar to the Khmer Surin of Thailand, the Khmer of Vietnam eventually found themselves a minority due to border arrangement. As a minority group, the Khmer are well known for preserving their native culture, speaking and writing the Khmer language, and practising customs that have been passed to them from centuries before. There have been notable movements among the Khmer populations for separation over time, though in contemporary Vietnam, much of the Khmer population - particularly the youth - is well integrated into mainstream Vietnamese society and often live biculturally and bilingually.

Each minority group in the study faces othering to very different extents in regard to mainstream populations in their countries. However, all groups share commonalities such as speaking more than one language, practising cultures that are different from majority groups, and holding an identity that is distinct from the majority. *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* seeks to break away from the binary identity of minority/majority and brings together different minority groups in the region to explore potential connectedness as minorities.

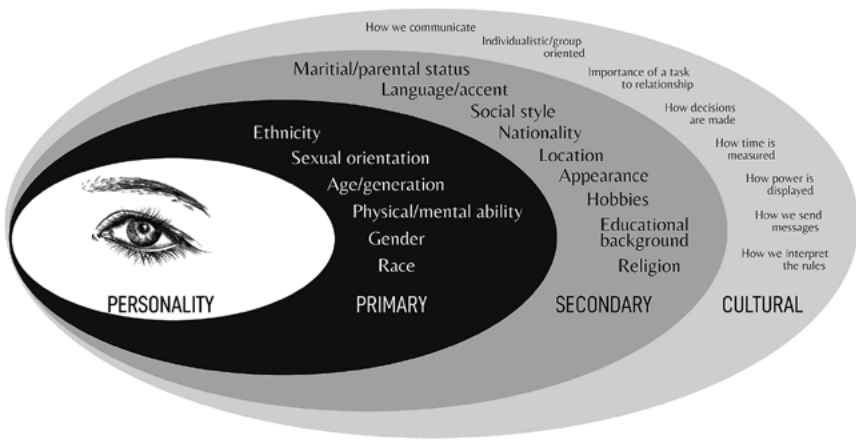
## On intersectionality

In recent years, intersectionality has become a more commonly used concept for issues and studies related to identity. With roots in the early exploration of identity, it initially challenged the idea of analysis that treated race and gender as mutually exclusive and rendered certain groups as invisible.<sup>8</sup> The mutually constitutive

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<sup>8</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989]," *Feminist Legal Theory*, 2018, pp. 57-80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>.

relations among social identities,<sup>9</sup> intersectionality offers a more complex but realistic view of how aspects of our identity are multidimensional. Our identities are diverse and made up of an intersection of aspects and elements, some with which we are born while others are based on the experiences we have had. These dimensions help us define ourselves and determine how we see the world. They also begin to inform us about who we might consider as “us,” while differentiating those we see as “them.” Primary factors, including ethnicity, are fundamental to our identities, while secondary factors, such as nationality, are central in how we see ourselves and the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup>



Adapted from Bilodeau, originally based on the Four Layers of Diversity wheel by Gardenswartz and Lee.<sup>11</sup>

More obvious ones like ethnicity, race, and nationality are the focus of this study, however, other layers of identity are just as important. Gender, language, immigration status, religion, sexuality, and age are also definitive factors on how participants

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<sup>9</sup> Stephanie A. Shields, “Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective,” *Sex Roles* 59, no. 5-6 (2008): pp. 301-311, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8>.

<sup>10</sup> Talia Bilodeau, “Intersectionality and Multiple Identities - the Need to Move beyond a One-Dimensional Approach to Diversity and Inclusion,” *IMPACTxAsia Blog Series* (blog) (Community Business, March 29, 2018), <https://www.communitybusiness.org/latest-news-publications/intersectionality-and-multiple-identities>.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, *Diverse Teams at Work: Capitalizing on the Power of Diversity* (Alexandria, VA: Alphaetta: Society for Human Resource Management, 2003).

viewed their communities and themselves in the scope of understanding who they are, particularly in relation to ‘the Other.’

Traditionally, most work on intersectionality has been through a critical theory lens, centred around power and who has it versus who does not.<sup>12</sup> Intersectionality helps us to define power relations, explain marginalisation, and often gives us a deeper understanding of issues about social injustice and inequality. *Understanding ‘Us’ to know ‘Them’* applies intersectionality through a critical theory lens to identify minority groups across borders and explore issues, challenges, and injustices they may face. It also uses intersectionality as a framework to seek out connections across different layers of identities, work towards cultivating a space where shared qualities can be leveraged and bring people together through alternative pathways beyond those that differentiate them. In essence, rather than only focusing on power dynamics, intersectionality explores alternative parts of our identity that allows us to connect with others that we normally would not associate with.

In this initiative, nationality or the geographic location that participants referred to as their home was the entrypoint on identity. Initially, teams were created based on country: Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. This structure immediately gave participants a team and a geographic location where they conducted their work. Since the focus of the study was on ethnic minorities or migrants of a particular ethnic background, ethnicity did not always match up. In Cambodia, an ethnic Vietnamese and a mixed-race ethnic Khmer-Vietnamese made up the team. In Vietnam, an ethnic Khmer and a mixed-race ethnic Khmer-Kinh-Chinese joined. In Thailand, three ethnic Khmer who were all Thai nationals, and one Khmer with Cambodian nationality who worked in Thailand as a migrant became Team Thailand. Linguistically, all participants were bilingual or multilingual. In Cambodia, the team spoke Khmer, Vietnamese, and Thai. In Vietnam, Vietnamese, Khmer, and English were spoken. In Thailand, participants spoke Thai and Khmer. Khmer became the common connecting language in the group. Yet, in break-out groups, four languages could be heard simultaneously depending on the mix of people in the groups.

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Beyond nationality, geography, ethnicity, and language, other dimensions of identity connected participants. There were four women and four men. The women often found similarities in their own contexts with the status of women in their communities, building connections around shared experience. There were three queer participants that were able to find shared culture through an LGBTQI+ lens that transcended borders. Seven of the eight participants were devout Buddhists, and shared deep cultural roots to Theravāda Buddhism. They all had strong connections to their families, and discovered many shared values within their family structures that defined their roles and responsibilities in the family unit.

The defining factor of the group of participants in *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* was that they all viewed themselves as minorities within the larger context of their country. They were not only bilingual, but they were “bicultural,” practising two forms of culture: the culture of their minority community and the mainstream culture of their country they lived in. All of them lived comfortably navigating two cultures. It is through this minority identity that the group let borders fade away and merge into its own community of shared experience as a minority with mutual understanding on the intersectional issues that impacted each of their realities. Meeting in all three countries at different points of the initiative, participants demonstrated that the location they were in had little impact on this growing community rooted in these connections. The relationships they were making transcended borders and places and focused on the members and the knowledge and experiences they brought to the group.

# 3

## Facilitative Listening Design: Methodological evolution



Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) was first piloted in 2017 to better understand and respond to anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia's capital city of Phnom Penh. It has since been deployed in numerous contexts related to conflict, negative sentiment, and identity. This iteration of FLD did not greatly change from the original, however, it was the first time it was implemented outside of Cambodia. The introduction of FLD in neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam brought a great opportunity to refine the approach and experiment in different languages, cultural contexts, and with a broader range of people.

FLD is all about the people it serves and who choose to lead it. It takes great courage to tell one's story, and enormous commitment to decide to listen. The relationship between Listeners and Sharers is fundamental. The evolving dynamics among the different groups of Listeners determine the potential for transformation in thinking, perceiving, and reacquainting oneself with the so-called "other." The direction of this FLD initiative was very unique in its selection of participants and target communities. Rather than putting equal focus on diverging conflict parties in an intervention, it sought out groups that might share something in common across a region and leverage any such connection to illuminate others and foster deeper understanding.

Bringing people together in tailored participatory research, where the focus is precisely on seeking information about them as active subjects, and positioning them as central researchers to collect the very data they are charged to obtain, provides innumerable opportunities for cooperation. Such joint projects provide both direct objectives and indirect pathways and processes to foster reconciliation and assist in building trust, even with "the enemy." Although *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* did not necessarily bring together enemies at war or in direct conflict with one another, it did employ a conceptual joint project among different people. At the forefront, minority groups from each country demonstrated a juxtaposed viewpoint of communities but also a paralleled dimension of connection through minority status. Complementing the minority-centred design, the inclusion of mainstream ethnic majority participants to directly provide coordination support, and indirectly also serve as de facto listeners for the active Listeners of their own communities, added a strong design feature for a true joint project. The outcome was a people-focused patchwork of individuals able to share collective narratives, individual stories, and provide group analysis through personal interpretations and experience in collecting and analysing data.



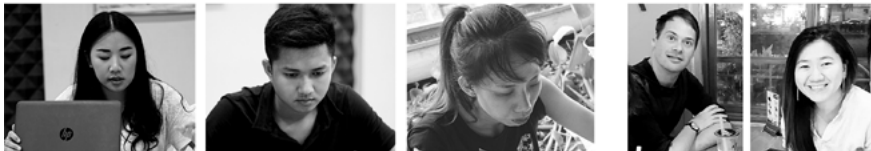
The resulting relationships cultivated through the design of *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* was not unintentional. The friendships among minority groups and mainstream participants provided a shared understanding of complex realities across the region. This is not the first time FLD has leveraged the process to build relationships across differences. FLD, through its participatory action peace research framework, has frequently fostered meaningful relationships between different groups, even to the extent of building alliances and advocacy collectives to work together towards societal change.<sup>13</sup> The group of eight Listeners from minority groups, three in-country coordinators from mainstream groups, and two global advisers contributed to a space in which very different views could be shared, but where connections could be discovered over and over.

## Sharers: Community Foundation



**In-Country Directors and FLD Coordinators**

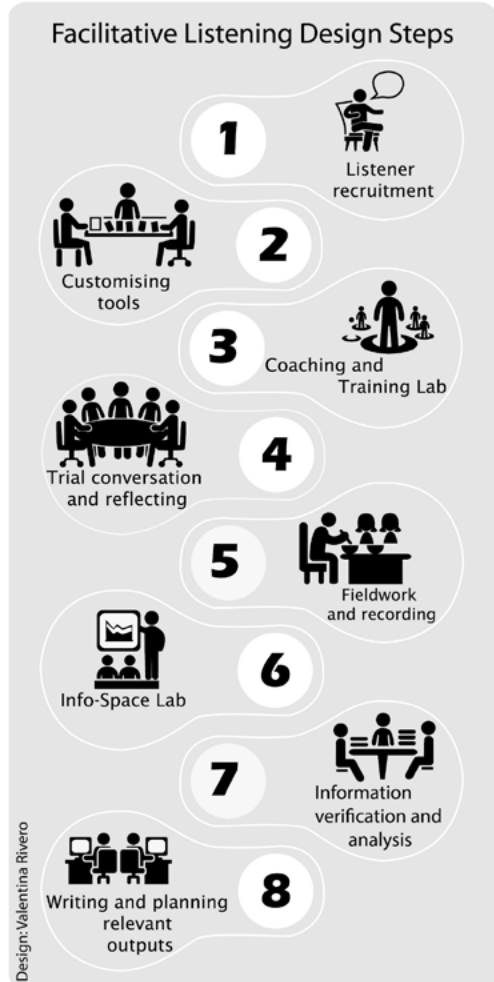
**Global FLD Advisory**



<sup>13</sup> Raymond Hyma and Le Sen, "Inquiry as Practice: Building Relationships through Listening in Participatory Action Peace Research," *Peace Review* 34, no. 3 (March 2022): pp. 343-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2022.2092396>.

# FLD – The steps that continue to work

FLD is a participatory action peace research approach that involves standardised steps in developing an intervention which leverages inquiry as both an information-gathering activity and as a transformational process in itself.<sup>14</sup> For this iteration, FLD was carried out through its prescriptive process involving the standard eight steps in four target communities.



<sup>14</sup> Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Listening Design For Your Project*, ed. Melissa Martin (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2017).

## Listener recruitment



Due to the multi-country focus of the project, it was necessary to begin Listener recruitment with the involvement of dedicated coordinators that could support bringing together and leading country teams. Three country coordinators were selected coming from Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Although the initial plan was to bring in minority coordinators, subsequent discussion led to the thought of whether bringing in ethnic mainstream majority members could enhance the project design. Given that the focus would be on listening and fostering dialogue on ethnic minority groups across the region, the inclusion of mainstream ethnic majority members for coordination was thought to be both strategic and complementary. Such members would inadvertently be exposed to issues raised by minority groups and also connect with other mainstream audiences to bring such conversations to a broader public.

Coordinators from each country took the lead in recruiting ethnic minority participants in their jurisdictions to join as Listeners. In Cambodia, due to the sensitive situation of the ethnic Vietnamese community, it was not possible to recruit Listeners directly from the target community on the Tonle Sap. However, an ethnic Vietnamese Cambodian and a mixed race Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodian were selected to engage the target community in their language and cultural context. In Thailand, two ethnic Khmer minority Thai women in the province of Surin were selected after recruitment took place in community events involving Khmer silk weaving. An ethnic Khmer minority Thai woman and a Khmer Cambodian man living in Thailand were selected for the Cambodian migrant study. Both worked for a Thai organisation serving migrant workers and were well connected to migrant communities in Trat province where the work would take place. In Vietnam, two ethnic Khmer minority Vietnamese men were recruited in the province of Tra Vinh. All recruited Listeners spoke the languages of the target communities they engaged with and also considered themselves representatives of the minority groups in question.

With a team of eight Listeners representing minority groups in all three countries, along with the three country coordinators coming from their own country's mainstream ethnic majority group, a diverse team was formed.

## Conversation facilitation and recording tools



FLD incorporates fully adaptable and versatile tools that the Listeners can use to have smooth and effective conversations. Tools are also provided to guide Listeners to be able to discreetly record and begin analysis of the collected data by helping them identify the range of issues and themes heard across the conversations. The following tools were developed and customised to meet the particular objectives of this initiative:

<p>Conversation inquiry</p>	<p>Conversation inquiries were developed to help guide and frame the conversations. During the FLD Coaching and Training Lab, Listeners from each group developed their own guide questions to help them navigate conversations with Listeners. Each group chose basic questions that were culturally appropriate and clear in the languages they were planning to have the conversations in.</p> <p>Groups developed questions based on the following themes they wanted to explore with their minority groups:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Background and identity</li> <li>2. Way of life and current living conditions</li> <li>3. Culture and community</li> <li>4. Connections in the region</li> </ol>
<p>Conversation log</p>	<p>The conversation log served as one of the key recording tools for Listeners to be able to capture the details of the Sharers' thoughts, opinions, and perceptions based on their conversations. Since conversations were conducted by listening pairs, each conversation was captured in two separate conversation logs, one from each Listener. Each Listener individually completed the log immediately after their conversation, beginning with the demographic information.</p> <p>Listeners are required to gain consent from the Sharer so this is recorded in the log. Each Listener then provides a recap of the conversation and highlights the main themes or points they heard from the Sharer.</p> <p>Each Listener then fills out the concluding section with up to three quotations that stayed with them from the conversation. In the final section, each Listener includes any observations they had about details, dynamics, or opinions that they want to share about the conversation or the Sharer.</p> <p>Conversation logs were completed in the preferred language of the Listener. They were received in Khmer, Thai, and English.</p>

Quad journal	At the end of the day, or after the completion of four conversations, the Listeners work together to reflect and analyse what they heard from all conversations in their quad journal. Most Listeners used the quad journal to identify recurring themes they heard, contrasts or differences they observed among the Sharers, and issues they might have disagreed about or have understood differently. If Listeners do not necessarily agree on what they each heard, they make a note of this in the quad journal for later discussion and clarification with the analysts.
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## FLD Coaching and Training Lab

FLD coaching and training was delivered over three days in January 2019 in Phu Quoc, Vietnam. The location of the lab was chosen given the controversial position of the island, having been disputed by Cambodia since 1949 as its own territory known as Koh Tral. Beginning the journey at such a destination allowed participants to see the area for themselves and explore the more human side of a politicised issue between two bordering countries.

Listeners were trained in FLD methodology and learnt fundamental research skills, active listening techniques, and bias recognition. They also developed FLD conversation inquiries for each group, which included probing and follow-up questions that could be used to foster a richer conversation as it progressed. Listeners studied the conversation recording tools so they could familiarise themselves with the documentation process of what they heard in their fieldwork and held trial conversations. Planning sessions also took place to consider where each pair would work as well as with whom they intended to speak. This included consideration of appropriate demographics, logistics, and practical ways they would find people to participate in the project as Sharers in the three countries.

## Conversations in the field

Most Listeners went back to their communities in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand and began searching for Sharers immediately following the FLD Coaching and Training Lab. Many of them had extensive networks in their own communities and reached out directly and set their own targets and goals. Each group was able to reach out to 40 Sharers and have conversations.

## Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab (Info-Space Lab)



Listeners convened in August 2019 in Buriram, Thailand to begin the group analysis phase of FLD. The Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab, informally called the Info-Space Lab, focused on two primary objectives: processing information and data that Listeners heard directly from conversations they had with Sharers and providing a safe and encouraging space for Listeners to express any impact FLD may have had on them, their own perceptions of the issues, and any personal or group transformation that may have occurred over the course of the project among the different minority groups.

The first goal - to collect and process information from Sharers - was achieved through intensive pair work and presentations to the full group on their findings. After submitting all reporting documentation, including conversation logs and daily journals, pairs relied on their memory to provide an overall breakdown of the ideas, topics, and themes they heard most often in their conversations with their minority communities. Each pair presented to the whole group and answered follow-up questions from a small analysis team composed of project staff, designers, and external note-takers for further clarification and deeper analysis. Following all presentations, the analysis team held a session to discuss recurring themes, the reliability of the data, and identify any patterns that emerged.

The second goal - to explore any transformative elements in the process - was carried out through group reflection, storytelling, and break-out groups. This took place after processing the data in order to keep Listeners initially focused on what they heard from others before delving into their own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

## Information verification and thematic analysis



The next stages of analysis took place independently in each group after Info-Space Lab. Data was entered into a database by the in-country coordinators. They went through the conversation logs and journals and extracted data that matched with the themes that had been developed by Listeners during the Info-Space Lab.

First, quad journals were closely examined to compare with the themes that Listeners identified during the Info-Space Lab. Conversations were broken down and classified under corresponding themes together with examples and quotations to explore the depth and variations among Sharer opinions on each subject. The analysts also classified surprising or unique stories that emerged from particular Sharers to expand on the emerging alternative narratives.

## Methodological learnings

FLD is a constantly evolving methodology and has proven itself well suited to engaging in difficult conversations, challenging perceptions, and fostering empathy and transformation.<sup>15</sup> Previous work that showed the potential of FLD to bring minority groups together and provide the space for mainstream majority participants to listen has been successful in amplifying less heard voices.<sup>16</sup> *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* was built upon these evolving findings and put minority groups from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand at the centre of its design. The Listeners not only engaged Sharers from minority communities, but they were minorities themselves. They were from the same communities they implemented FLD in and later went on to film their stories. They came in as community researchers ready to listen and learn, but they entered with their own perceptions and associations of minorities on different sides of multiple borders.

Several Listeners noted that FLD helped them to connect more deeply to their own communities and better understand how they fit into them. In reflection on the process, one Listener said, "I had a chance to listen to others and reflect on my own life... I found myself in FLD." This self-reflection component of FLD has been observed before in a more critical thinking context in relation to others, but the inward personal dimension of how one relates to their own community is insightful on how listening may impact identity and belonging. Another Listener

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<sup>15</sup> Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? Tackling Hard Issues with Empathy*, ed. Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? From Centre to Periphery*, ed. Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2019).

shared, “I listened to others [in my own community] and I began to think how can I contribute more and help them?” This connection to community, identification with one’s community, and the growing sense of place that was explored by Listeners demonstrates the potential for FLD to be a strong inward exercise to reflect more deeply on ourselves and the connection to the community we consider ourselves part of. One of the more unexpected developments over the course of project design was the inclusion of three in-country coordinators that came from the mainstream majority groups of their own country. These coordinators were responsible for working with the Listeners, engaging the minority communities, and ensuring that their country component flowed into the regional scope. A fascinating emerging outcome began to become apparent each time the group met. The three coordinators all revealed that they felt different from the Listeners in some way. They did not come from minority groups and they did not share some of the same connecting elements that the Listeners from minority groups expressed. Even when the Khmer language began to emerge as a de facto language among the group, two coordinators were unable to fully participate without translation. At one gathering, the coordinators expressed that at times they felt like the minorities when they were in the group. It was at this time that we realised that the simulation of placing minority groups together by removing the relevance of borders and having mainstream participants join on the periphery had deepened a true and genuine sense of understanding ‘us’ to know ‘them’ in practice.

The focus on listening and the systematic process of listening with structure provided similar benefits for participants exploring new groups. Not only did the Listeners benefit from listening to their own communities and presenting that information to the entire group, but the coordinators once again had the opportunity to listen to something they would not normally be privy to - the perceptions, opinions, and views of minority communities within their own countries. This conduit of information sharing through listening allowed people from outside the minority groups to hear first-hand the issues brought up by the communities and presented by representatives in the form of FLD Listeners. As one coordinator reported during the Info-Space Lab, “FLD gave me the chance to listen to people in my country I hardly knew much about. I got to hear the unheard.”



Outcomes aside, this dimension of the process fits well into more contemporary discussion on Encounter Theory within the peace and conflict studies realm. This theory centres on the idea that people engage with each other in their differences, with the commitment to non-violent appreciation of what they learn, and move towards understanding, relationships, and humanisation.<sup>17</sup> The process of this study provided two opportunities of engagement and encounter through the FLD framework, centring on curiosity and listening. The first was to convene minority groups from across the region that had not been previously exposed to each other. This allowed for a space to learn about each other and to discover similarity and connection. The second was to bring in mainstream groups from the three countries to support in coordination, and subsequently providing the chance for them to listen, engage, and understand a minority viewpoint. FLD can be the inquiry process to foster “encounter” even among unlikely groups with little to no exposure to the other.

This iteration of FLD has taught us that adaptations of the methodology to include other groups - such as mainstream populations - in a peripheral way can be a powerful tool in providing the space for listening from those who may have further opportunity to influence in other ways. It provided the testing grounds to see how mainstream populations may first interpret the voices of minority communities in their own countries and further demonstrated the potential to build allyship through the process. This design could be further refined and potentially used in cultivating the space for deeper listening and more understanding of groups who normally do not have the same level of visibility as other populations

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<sup>17</sup> Katerina Standish, “Encounter Theory,” *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 1 (2020): pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2020.1811192>, 7-8.

# 4

## Findings

In their own words: Voices from the communities



In this section, we explore the findings from FLD work in four communities across the Mekong Region. The ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, from a community mainly residing in floating villages along the Tonle Sap River that have been living afloat there for many generations. The ethnic Khmer in Vietnam, from both the provinces of Tay Ninh and Tra Vinh, where significant historical Khmer minority communities have lived for centuries. The Khmer Surin of Thailand, primarily from a small village in Surin province where the Northern Khmer minority continue to live traditionally. Finally, the Cambodian migrant community in Thailand, specifically in the eastern province of Trat that borders Cambodia and is home to a large number of migrant workers.

A context is offered to situate the community and provide some outside understanding into some of the background and any issues they are currently facing. The Listeners provide a firsthand account of the work carried out by our community teams and share perspectives and insights they have to better contextualise the findings. The findings are shared in two main thematic sections. The first is on a sense of place, which shares the story of how Sharers see their “home.” The second is on identity and pulls from the data to better elaborate on how Sharers see themselves or how they believe others see them. Each section is accompanied by a story that comes directly out of the conversations had with Sharers in the communities. The stories offer more depth to the context and provide a human face to the profusion of findings that emerged. As a conclusion to each section, a more visual component furnishes readers with a sample of some of the artistic explorations and works that were produced over the course of *Understanding ‘Us’ to know ‘Them.’*

# Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia

## Floating communities on the Tonle Sap



Along the banks of the famous Tonle Sap River in Cambodia lies a floating community that stretches far into this great connector between the enormous freshwater Tonle Sap Lake and the mighty Mekong River. For centuries, if not millennia, communities living in the region of this waterway have compared the lake to the region's heart, with the river being an artery that flows into the Mekong's lifeline. Through a geographical phenomenon, seen more like a natural miracle, the lake that flows into the Mekong during dry season is inundated with the rains of wet season actually reversing its flow backwards into the lake, bringing along a bounty of fish and wildlife to all those who live on or along it.

Due to the rich natural resources and abundance of fish in the Tonle Sap waterway, thousands of ethnic Vietnamese have migrated to Cambodia's Kampong Chhnang region since the 19th Century. Much of the larger scale migration of the Vietnamese population to Cambodia took place during the French colonial period from the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> By the 1930s, the population of settled ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia was about 200,000.<sup>19</sup> In Kampong Chhnang, it is likely that many original Vietnamese migrants did not initially settle in the floating villages but rather were on land further away. Areas that are now home to Khmer communities, such as Bralai Meas commune, were once the home for significant Vietnamese populations. This shifted during the expulsion of ethnic Vietnamese decades later.<sup>20</sup> According to a provincial administration report, 4,563 Khmer, Cambodian-Muslim, and Vietnamese families live in floating houses on the Tonle Sap lake in Kampong Chhnang. 2,480 of those families are ethnic Vietnamese.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Justin J. Corfield, *The History of Cambodia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Joachim Schliesinger, *Ethnic Groups Of Cambodia Volume 2: Profile Of Austro-Asiatic-Speaking Peoples* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2011), p. 259.

<sup>20</sup> Kristina Chhim et al., "Life before Expulsion: Community History from Vietnamese Minorities in Kampong Chhnang" (Kdei Karuna, May 2014), [https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/sites/default/files/media/file/2022/zfd-life-expulsion-2214\\_186.pdf](https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/sites/default/files/media/file/2022/zfd-life-expulsion-2214_186.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Phoung Vantha, "Cambodia Says Relocated Vietnamese Families Cannot Own Land," *Thmey Thmey*, December 12, 2019, <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-says-relocated-vietnamese-families-cannot-own-land>.

According to many of these ethnic Vietnamese residents who live and work on the river, they have been in Cambodia over generations. However, since 2017, strict immigration policies have led to many residents being unable to obtain proper documentation or prove legal residence. Many ethnic Vietnamese residents blame the civil war and the subsequent period of exile, when ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians were forced to go to Vietnam during the conflict. Upon returning to Cambodia, the lack of proper registration procedures meant many of them lacked documentation and these issues have only surfaced more recently as changes come into effect.<sup>22</sup> According to the United Nations, this has left most of these residents stateless and without access to citizenship from either Cambodia or Vietnam. This means they have limited access to education, health care, formal employment, banking, freedom of movement, and property ownership.<sup>23</sup> This is not necessarily an oversight of administration. It is believed to be rooted in longstanding discrimination against Vietnamese in Cambodia, going far back into history. Given that statelessness is such a sensitive issue in the country, this particular population is often left unacknowledged by the government, international organisations, and civil society. They are also largely seen negatively by the mainstream Cambodian public.<sup>24</sup>

Since 2017, there has been much attention focused on a relocation process led by provincial authorities in Kampong Chhnang province, though talk of relocating river dwellers is not recent. Provincial authorities have made attempts to dismantle the floating villages for over two decades.<sup>25</sup> Most residents in the floating village across from Chong Koh and other communities have been informed of the pending move and their requirement to leave the river at some point. Authorities have cited environmental concerns as the rationale behind the relocation order to restore the

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<sup>22</sup> Kong Meta and Andrew Nagemson, "I Have No Feeling for Vietnam. I Only Live in Cambodia," *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-post-depth/ethnic-vietnamese-some-living-cambodia-generations-see-documents-revoked>.

<sup>23</sup> Rina Chandran, "No Room on Water, No Home on Land for Cambodia's Ethnic Vietnamese," *Reuters*, June 26, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-landrights-refugees/no-room-on-water-no-home-on-land-for-cambodias-ethnic-vietnamese-idUSKCN1TS03L>.

<sup>24</sup> Christoph Sperfeldt, "The Perpetual Foreigner: Statelessness among the Vietnamese Minority in Cambodia," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, June 14, 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/06/14/the-perpetual-foreigner-statelessness-among-the-vietnamese-minority-in-cambodia/>.

<sup>25</sup> Saroeun Bou, "Floating Villagers Protest Eviction Order," *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 5, 2001, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/floating-villagers-protest-eviction-order>.

water quality of the Tonle Sap.<sup>26</sup> With the relocation plan focused on moving all floating villages to dry land, the policy is moving towards entirely banning any permanent settlement on the river.<sup>27</sup>

By the beginning of 2019, over two-thirds of the ethnic Vietnamese floating village residents in the Tonle Sap had been moved from their houseboats to land. The community across from Chong Koh village, along with several other floating villages, is designated to relocate to a 40-hectare settlement site in Rolea B'ier district, about 1km from the river. 700 families with fish pens under their homes have been able to delay the move as the government has given more time to reduce the impact on their fish farming activities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mech Dara, "Local Gov't to Move 2,000 Families from Tonle Sap," *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/local-govt-move-2000-families-tonle-sap>.

<sup>27</sup> Ros Chanveasna, "Floating Villages to Be Relocated," *Khmer Times*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/15419/floating-villages-to-be-relocated/>.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua Lipes, "More Than Two-Thirds of Ethnic Vietnamese Evicted From Cambodia's Tonle Sap Floating Village," *Radio Free Asia*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/eviction-01042019150151.html>.



## A Perspective from the Listeners

Transcending borders through a human lens

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Vanti is a Vietnamese-Cambodian who has lived in Cambodia for most of his life. At the same time, he has strong roots in Southern Vietnam where his family comes from. Vanti has mostly Khmer friends and finished his university in Phnom Penh. Interestingly, Vanti chose to focus his studies in Thai language and feels a deep connection to Thailand, its language, and the people. Being trilingual and with a feeling of home in three different countries, Vanti understood the profound meaning of this initiative even before it began.

“Borders are a strange phenomena,” Vanti once said in a conversation. “At some point in history, a group of people decided to artificially put a line somewhere and say this is ours. But as we move across borders, our sense of identity doesn’t change and we can connect equally if we look at being simple humans rather than nationals from one side or the other.”

Vanti expressed something at the crux of the concept of *Understanding ‘Us’ to know ‘Them.’* With the original intent of this work to explore groups across borders that “we” may be able to see “ourselves” in, that transcend nationality or geography, we learn that borders are simply lines that may bring people together inside, but can create “others” with those who are on the outside.



# A Sense of Place: The story of home

## Water, fish, and change

In spite of being seen as perpetual foreigners, the ethnic Vietnamese living afloat along the Tonle Sap had no question that this was their “home.” Conversation after conversation, Sharers from the floating communities shared memories, snippets of daily life, and stories of family and neighbours that could compare to those of any community in the world. Home revolved around water. Floating was a sensation that they experienced at home for the great majority of their lives.

Perhaps unsurprising for a community living on the water, fishing was one of the most common topics brought up among the 40 community members who shared their stories when talking about home. Fishing tended to be the core of everything else in the community. Whether they recounted long excursions down the waterway for days on end to catch fish, or others who talked about raising their own fish underneath their floating houses, the connection between residents and fish was apparent and clearly conveyed. “Fishing is everything” was one of the common themes from the conversations between Listeners and Sharers. Fishing connected generations and was something that everyone could relate to, young and old. Interestingly, it was often when they spoke about fishing that they would bring up their ancestors or other family members in the conversation.

Fishing is certainly a practice and a way of life that has connected generations of ethnic Vietnamese living on the water in Cambodia. Throughout the conversations that took place during the FLD process, many of the Sharers mentioned fishing along with their ancestors and relatives in the same context. Often heard across conversations was that the graves of ancestors on the land were important dimensions of a homeland or a sense of place where roots were planted and identities were formed. These burial sites, marked with tributes for ancestors and relatives who also made up the community, were often expressed as common ties to the land. They also helped to explain why, in spite of outside views that these people were foreign and could simply move on, they were attached to this place as much as anyone else would be in their desire to visit the graves of their families.

**"I am 67 years old and these days I am living with my children and grandchildren. I have been fishing my whole life. We've been here for three generations now."**

-A man who not only had three generations of his family in Cambodia, but came from three generations in Cambodia prior.

During the time of FLD conversations, the idea of sense of place and home for ethnic Vietnamese living along the Tonle Sap was in a serious state of flux. The most heard theme from the conversations was the increasing pressure to leave the river and relocate to land due to environmental concerns coming from outside the community. Residents felt that this pressure was becoming worse every year. In 2019, when the fieldwork was conducted, the relocation efforts by outside actors were being communicated sporadically. Sharers frequently mentioned that there was much confusion about relocation details or future prospects. They mostly received information from visiting authorities and by word-of-mouth from other locals living both on the water and along the riverbank. Most Sharers were uncertain about when they must leave their homes, where they would go, and what support was being provided. The anxiety and preoccupation with this uncertainty dominated the majority of the conversations, both with those still living on boats, and those who had moved to the nearby shore.

At the time of this unstable change in the community and the physical threat to their floating homes, many stories of evictions were shared with the Listeners, particularly when they sought out community Sharers who were now living along the riverbank rather than on the water. Many had already been forced to leave their houseboats and some had even been relocated several times on land. They also discussed rumours that they would soon be moved to an isolated piece of land 3 to 4 kilometres from where they were at the time. They had heard from others that the new site had no electricity or drainage system. Many of these Sharers, both still living on the water and those now living on the riverbank, were living in limbo. One of the key concerns from the study findings was the ongoing worry that those who had been living on the water their entire lives would not know how to adapt to living on land. From wondering how to earn a living away from fish to not being able to use a motorcycle or vehicle, Sharers expressed various levels of anxiety imagining a life on land.

## Linh's Story

### Forced ashore

Linh is a 30-year-old ethnic Vietnamese mother who was born on the river in Cambodia and has spent her entire life in the community. She has three children who go to a nearby school to learn Vietnamese and Khmer. Having never been to Vietnam herself, one of her brothers did decide to leave the community and travel to Vietnam to live. She has not seen him for over ten years.

For much of her life, she lived in a houseboat on the river with other residents in her floating community. She sold beef soup on the water. One year prior, however, she was ordered to leave her boat and move to shore after water levels rose.

Living on land became very challenging for her. Moving into a shack, she suddenly had to pay for water and sanitation, which she could not afford. She was trying to build a toilet system to carry waste away when water became the most costly item in her life. At home on the river, water was her life. She had access to as much water as needed. She used it to travel. She lived on it day-to-day.

Linh was now facing further pressure to move inland - like so many others who had recently moved to the shore near their floating community. Given that everything she owned was still located on the river, relocating to an unknown area thought to be quite distant from the river was worrying.

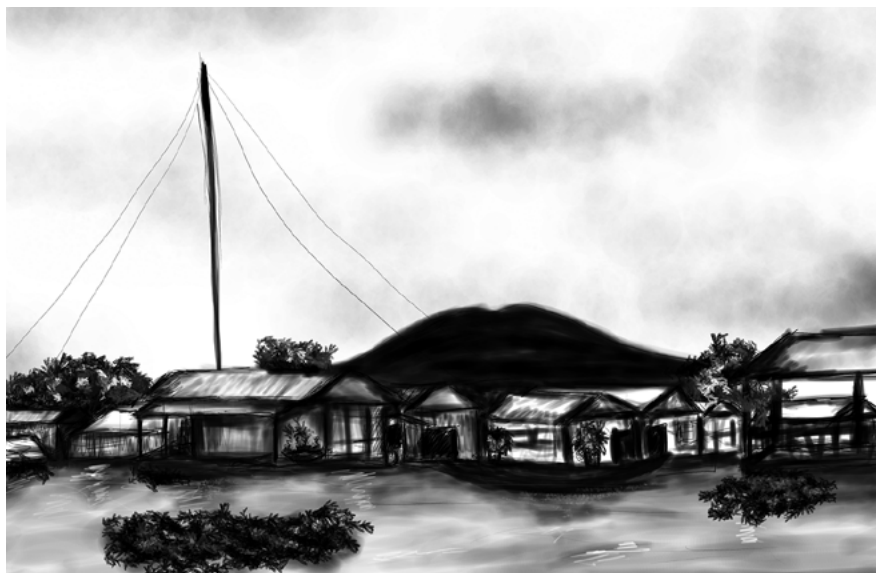


*If we must live on the land permanently, we can do our best. But we are being forced over-and-over to move far from here without any water supply or roads.*

Like others who were uncertain about their residence, she felt that certain conditions would have to be met to convince people to relocate willingly.

*We won't agree to go. Our homes are all on the river so if we must move to land, we need to live near the river so we can still take care of them.*

Like Linh, many others both on the water and on shore feared rumours about being relocated to a community far from the river without any infrastructure. Those who were told they might be able to keep their fish pens going without any accommodation structures struggled to see how they could live anywhere but close to the river. Others who did not have that same opportunity still felt that living close to the river was essential as they had no idea how else they could sustain their lives after having only experienced life in a floating village on the water. Although it was expected that communities living their whole lives on the water along the Tonle Sap would face a difficult transition to move to land, there were no concrete plans to relocate residents near a waterway.



Linh shared how home for her had been a place where she lived, worked, had a family, and resided near the final resting place of her ancestors. Like so many others in her community, life in the floating community was a continued way of living that had spread generations. She also expressed, however, that the sudden change in her sense of place had caused her, and other residents on the river, great distress as they felt forced relocation from the place they called home.

# Identity and seeing 'Us'

## Perpetually foreign, precarious, and different

Despite living in Cambodia for generations, the ethnic Vietnamese living in floating communities along the Tonle Sap do not feel “Cambodian.” The common perspective held by many Cambodians that these communities belong to the neighbouring Socialist Republic of Vietnam is simplistic and misguided. The perceived link of ethnic identity and national association tends to be much stronger for ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia than for ethnic Khmer in neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam. For many residents of Vietnamese heritage living on the waterways in Cambodia, Vietnam continues to be a vaguely foreign country. For younger generations, it is a country most have never been to. Despite longstanding efforts to relocate water-based communities to dry land or trying to encourage ethnic Vietnamese residents to “return home” to Vietnam, many outsiders have missed an important point: for them, this is their home and a crucial part of their identity.

The understanding of a unique identity that vastly differs from the mainstream is often misunderstood among others and those who see integration as an only viable means for peaceful co-existence and collective prosperity. It is important to understand identity dynamics in Cambodia in relation to ethnicity and background. Other minority populations in Cambodia that are able to hold onto their minority identities (even proudly) within the ethnic mainstream Khmer majority do so by accepting a certain level of assimilation for benefits of acceptance and harmony. For example, Muslim Cambodians often refer to themselves as “Khmer-Islam,” associating themselves with the Khmer majority - which is an ethnic group - by adding Islam to denote their religion rather than a historical connection to the Cham ethnic group. People of 24 Indigenous groups, mainly in the northeast region of the country, are commonly referred to by other Cambodians as the “Khmer-Loeu,” which is literally translated as upland Khmer. Chinese Cambodians with long histories of migration to the country are usually known either as “Khmer Kat Chen” if they are of mixed Chinese and Khmer ethnicity, or as “Chen Khmer” to denote fully ethnic Chinese who were born in Cambodia and hold Cambodian nationality. Nevertheless, despite long-standing historical migration patterns of the

Vietnamese in Cambodia and throughout the region, the ethnic Vietnamese of Cambodia have no such denomination in the linguistic or social context. What is this juxtaposition in comparison to others that makes a clear cut determination of whether you are Khmer or Khmer something, or Vietnamese? Why are Vietnamese so othered to the extent that any form of integration would be impossible in comparison to other ethnic minorities who make up a vibrant multicultural society that does not threaten a Cambodian identity in the least?

One of the important findings from the FLD work was the view from Sharers; that they saw themselves as “ethnic Vietnamese who are born in Cambodia.” There was no doubt that residents saw themselves as different from mainstream Cambodians that lived on land around them. The ethnic Vietnamese living in the floating communities along the Tonle Sap River have a much stronger sense of Cambodia being “home,” above their shared national identity among Cambodians. Listeners noted that most Sharers speak Vietnamese at home and some speak Khmer when they go out and interact with other Cambodians for business. Many of the children, all born in Cambodia but who had not attended school, could not speak any Khmer since they had only ever been exposed to the Vietnamese language. Young adults and the older generation could mostly speak Khmer at varying levels and some that had left the community at some point for work had often integrated into Khmer and mainstream Cambodian culture. According to the Listeners, who are both as much culturally Cambodian as they are Vietnamese, life in the ethnic Vietnamese community in the floating village on the Tonle Sap is culturally Vietnamese with far less Khmer influence than other land-based Vietnamese communities in Cambodia.

**“We don’t even have the right to own any piece of land because we don’t have enough documents to support our status.”**

-A 68-year-old man who was born on the river and claims his grandparents were also once part of the community but holds no nationality to any country.

Citizenship and identity were far more complex issues for Sharers to articulate. Over the last several years, documentation requirements have changed and not been consistently implemented; therefore ethnic Vietnamese residents, many born and raised in Cambodia, are wondering whether they are indeed citizens. The two biggest repercussions of having precarious status in Cambodia were about being unable to own land and about their children not being allowed to attend public school. Although many Sharers openly admitted that they did not feel deeply connected to the mainstream Cambodian population (the Khmer majority) or saw themselves as culturally “Cambodian,” several did convey a belief that they should be afforded the right to stay in the country having been born and raised there. They saw a path to clear citizenship status as something they were owed, given they have been residing in Kampong Chhnang for several generations.

Although viewing themselves as distinct from the rest of the Cambodian population, ethnic Vietnamese residents overwhelmingly shared positive feelings for Khmer neighbours and nearby communities with examples of good relations between the groups. Sharers discussing their views on the Khmer talked about business relations, such as selling fish at the market. Some felt they were like siblings; others shared stories of friendship. Sharers mentioned that many Khmer acquaintances frequently expressed pity to them in regard to the relocation situation and the process of them losing their homes as pressure mounted to move them to land.

Through the voices of those who shared their dreams and perceptions of life along the Tonle Sap, it became apparent that ethnic Vietnamese were not searching for an identity that constructed an association with the Khmer. The residents, however, did seem to understand the nuance of identity related to a sense of place that happened to be in Cambodia and the ethnic majority mainstream group around them.

After spending months in the floating community, one of the Listeners confessed her similarities in perceiving her identity in a Cambodian context. Following so much time working as a community researcher and listening to many others, she took a moment to look more inward and listen to herself.

*It's funny because I can kind of relate to the residents in Kampong Chhnang's floating village. I'm half Khmer, half Vietnamese, so I see both parts of my ethnicity. But Cambodia is my home, it always has been. Sometimes people think we can just go "back" to Vietnam when things are hard, or we don't belong here because we're "Vietnamese". Yes, we are "Vietnamese", but many of us aren't "from" Vietnam. Some of the Sharers I talked to in Kampong Chhnang get confused when others have the idea they can go to Vietnam. For some of them, Vietnam is even seen as a really foreign place. Most of the people who have lived on the river their whole lives see this special place as their home.*

The Listener also recognised her mixed race differences and the privilege of having Cambodian nationality with the benefits of clear identification. Despite these very significant variables, she strongly shared the same sense of place and feeling of "home" in Cambodia. "Whether you think they should be able to stay, move to land, or leave Cambodia, you have to realise for them, this is where they are from," she pointed out in a group trying to analyse the data that had been collected. "This is where their roots are. This is what they call their home." Within that intimate space she was able to express something so human and universally understandable, bringing the data to life through not only her fieldwork, but also her own lived experiences.

## **Anh's Story**

### **Finding identity as "the Other"**

Anh is 35 years old and sells gasoline and oil in his floating shop on the river. Born in Cambodia and having spent his life there, Anh still refers to himself and to ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia as "immigrants." With two sons and a daughter, Anh is not shy to talk about the challenges of being a family without any nationality or citizenship or being seen as a foreigner in Cambodia.

"Kids can't go to public school because they don't have a birth certificate. Those who have can go to public school but they have to face pressures like bullying and discrimination. Their classmates call them *Youn*. That's why they don't pursue higher education. The word *Youn* doesn't sound nice at all."



Anh explained to the Listeners that most children lack the legal documents to attend public school. In Cambodia, public schools require birth certificates to enrol students. Although birth certificates can be issued to foreigners in the country who are living there legally, the status of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia for generations continues to be in limbo and local authorities do not issue proper documents in practice.

Anh's children attend an informal school nearby to learn Vietnamese and Khmer, where he must pay daily attendance fees. He notes that these kinds of schools are not standard, they only teach basic reading and writing skills.

Although Anh and his family see themselves as Vietnamese people living in Cambodia, he said there is no option to move to Vietnam despite the ethnic association. Since they were not born in Vietnam and have no identification that shows they are Vietnamese, they have no identity there either. "Even if we live there for ten years," Anh said, "nobody will recognise us."

Although Anh appears to have lived his entire life without clear citizenship, the repercussions of being stateless have become more apparent in recent years as life gets more challenging for floating village residents to remain. Without an option to go elsewhere, their identity in a land where they feel perpetually foreign to others around them poses great challenges to everyday life, such as land ownership, education, healthcare, and facing discrimination.



# Through their own eyes

## A photo exhibition

Many of the stories and insights shared come from members of a community that is no longer physically there. At the time, the issue of relocation was one of the defining issues of residents living along the Tonle Sap River. In 2019, community members learnt how to use cameras and take photos. They went out to shoot spaces and places of life in their floating villages as a way to capture a moment in time. Their images were displayed at an exhibition and were shared with them during and after relocation. These photos show a glimpse of life at a time that can never return. As most residents now live on land, have left to another part of the river, or have gone to live in Vietnam, these images highlight a history of the community that spent generations along the river.

These photos were taken by community members of the floating villages along the Tonle Sap in Kampong Chhnang province.

PHOTO EXHIBITION



PHOTO EXHIBITION



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# Ethnic Khmer in Vietnam

## Centuries of tradition in the Mekong Delta





Rich in Khmer history, southern Vietnam is a land of pagodas, Buddhist temples, and historical evidence of past empires. Unlike neighbouring countries, Vietnam does not recognise “indigenous” groups but presents itself as a country with 54 ethnic groups. About 14.7% of the entire population is considered one of the 53 ethnic minorities, while 85.3% are of the mainstream ethnic majority group known as Kinh. The ethnic Khmer minority is thought to make up around 1.4% of the population and is considered the fifth largest minority in the country.<sup>29</sup> Internally, Vietnam sees itself as a strongly multi-ethnic nation where diversity builds unity.

Most of the ethnic Khmer population of Vietnam live in southern provinces that were historically part of the Khmer Empire but ceded to Vietnam in 1949. Along with ethnic Khmer, there are many Kinh residents and Chinese, Cham, and other ethnic minority groups throughout the area. Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh are two provinces in the area with considerable Khmer populations. Known as the “green city” of Vietnam, Tra Vinh’s provincial capital is lined by its hundreds of seasoned century-old trees. The province has protected more than 140 Khmer pagodas along with other famous architectural sites and historical relics over centuries. About 200 kilometres north of Tra Vinh is the province of Tay Ninh, which lies on a route often used for travel between Phnom Penh in Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh. Since it shares a border with three Cambodian provinces, it is seen as an intersection between the two countries. Tay Ninh is also very well known for its highly diverse population, including 29 ethnic groups living within the province.<sup>30</sup>

The ethnic Khmer population in contemporary southern Vietnam live in an area that has been a contentious point between Cambodians and Vietnamese. For Cambodians, the area known as “Kampuchea Krom,” or “Lower Cambodia,” is seen as a tragic loss of land and people who were separated by geopolitical shifts and

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<sup>29</sup> General Statistics Office of Vietnam, *Completed Results of the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census* (2020). <https://www.gso.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Ket-qua-toan-bo-Tong-dieu-tra-dan-so-va-nha-o-2019.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> As described by the Vietnam FLD team whose members live in Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh.

power. For Vietnamese, the region known as “Nam Bo,” or “South Vietnam,” is home to stories of interethnic cooperation where the Khmer minority is one of national heritage and part of its diverse make up as a multiethnic state. Despite competing claims on territory and sometimes seen with suspicion by nationalists in both countries, the ethnic Khmer of the area have been observed by some as in-between people who have a very unique perspective of history and sovereignty.<sup>31</sup>

There are different socio-economic views on the Khmer minority population in Vietnam. Some see them as more successful and as one of the top performing minority groups in Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Others see a discriminated minority population that is exploited through land acquisitions and who continue to lack clean water and basic healthcare.<sup>33</sup> The difference in viewing poverty levels among the ethnic Khmer could result from the distinct definitions social actors have on measuring poverty.<sup>34</sup>

The ethnic Khmer of Vietnam are a sizable minority population that tend to strongly preserve their cultural heritage, language, religion, and many other facets of their identity over generations. At the same time, they are also considered quite integrated into mainstream Vietnamese society, often fully bilingual, moving to other parts of the country for work opportunities or other reasons, and identifying themselves as Vietnamese nationals with Khmer ethnicity. Although many outsiders hold onto varying perceptions of the Khmer minority in Vietnam from different vantage points, they undoubtedly live in communities that transcend the idea of nationality and borders, connecting with different people on either sides of a border in various contexts.

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, *Drivers of Socio-Economic Development Among Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam* (Washington DC, 2019), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/168971565786956800/drivers-of-socio-economic-development-among-ethnic-minority-groups-in-vietnam>.

<sup>33</sup> “Khmer Krom,” Minority Rights Group, February 5, 2021, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/khmer/>; “On the Margins: Rights Abuses of Ethnic Khmer in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta” (Human Rights Watch, January 21, 2009), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/01/21/margins/rights-abuses-ethnic-khmer-vietnams-mekong-delta>.

<sup>34</sup> Ngoc Thuy Truong, “Poverty Reduction Strategies in an Ethnic Minority Community: Multiple Definitions of Poverty among Khmer Villagers in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam,” *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 6 (May 2012), <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n6p196>.



## A Perspective from the Listeners

Being Khmer outside of Cambodia: What does connection to an ethnic group as a minority really mean?

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One of the Listeners from Vietnam shared a more nuanced perspective from the younger generation of Khmer living in Vietnam. Hieu was born in Tra Vinh in a mixed family of Khmer, Kinh, and Chinese descent. He remembers his Khmer grandmother encouraging him to study the Khmer language at the pagoda when he was seven. During the school break, he spent three months not only learning how to speak and write Khmer but also about the customs and traditions of Khmer people taught by the monks.

Having learnt Khmer, Hieu later received an opportunity of a lifetime and was awarded a full scholarship for a boarding school for ethnic minority students. In such a rich academic environment, he continued to focus on Khmer culture and never missed a summer at the pagoda, continuing to deepen his language ability. Eventually, Hieu attended university and majored in English to fulfil his interest in language acquisition, leading to his multilingual talents and his love for teaching language.

Joining the FLD work and carrying out conversations in Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh provinces, Hieu connected more deeply to his Khmer roots and enjoyed hearing how people from both older and younger generations expressed their identity. Through such inquiry, Hieu said, “I have been able to better understand my own Khmer heritage and identity, almost as if something had awoken in me from listening to others.”

For Hieu, one of the most surprising things he learnt about his Khmer connection was the existence of Khmer people in Thailand. He had always thought the Khmer were in Cambodia and Vietnam and did not know anything about the Khmer Surin people in Northeast Thailand. Engaging with the Thai-Khmer Listeners and later visiting Surin gave him a new feeling of connection to Thailand, where even borders could not separate the sense of being part of a larger community. It also meant that this awakening of culture, traditions, and multiculturalism gave him a sense of place.

## **A Sense of Place: The story of home**

### **Culture, traditions, and multiculturalism**

For ethnic Khmer in Vietnam, there is no doubt that the lower Mekong is their home and their intergenerational connection to the area is deep. With attachment to the land spanning generations, ethnic Khmer communities in Vietnam tend to have a strong sense of place in their homeland.

This study took place in two distinct areas of southern Vietnam. Many Sharers came from Tra Vinh, a province along the Mekong Delta, about 150km from the city of Ho Chi Minh. Home to over 1.2 million people, including Kinh, Khmer, Chinese and Cham ethnic groups, Khmer are believed to make up about 30% of the province’s population. FLD was also carried out in Tay Ninh, a province that lies closer to Cambodia. With 17 ethnic groups in the province, it is believed that about 1% of the population is ethnically Khmer.

In Tra Vinh, the high number of ethnic Khmer residents and the commonplace of the Khmer language cultivated a rich association between place and culture. Many were proud to talk about local events and the Khmer Cultural Museum in Tra Vinh city. They also expressed excitement for a project in progress that was planned to become a Khmer cultural and tourism village. With Khmer culture being a tourism magnet for the area, their sense of place provided them with a distinct pride in how they were tied to their homeland as an ethnic minority within the contemporary borders of Vietnam.

In a region rich in historical architecture, it was not surprising that many ethnic Khmer communities in Vietnam participating in the study felt a deep attachment to temples and pagodas. Sharers frequently discussed pagodas in their conversations, particularly in Tra Vinh province where they expressed pride in having over 140. Many who talked about studying Khmer associated that with time spent in a pagoda accompanied by monks. For them, pagodas were the core of their cultural identity, with Buddhist monks seen as the human embodiments of where they came from.

For those who spoke about Khmer pagodas in their conversations, many discussed them in relation to their memories of studying the Khmer language during their holidays. Even those who were able to study Khmer in their usual schools frequently mentioned nothing compared to their experiences studying it at their local pagodas.

**“I realise that students studying Khmer at school are not able to have the same level of knowledge as those who are at a pagoda. In the village, children really like learning Khmer at the pagoda and more and more go to study there during their summers.”**

-A 30-year-old woman working as a secondary school teacher in Tra Vinh.

For those living in Tay Ninh, there was similar pride expressed about pagodas. Often, pagodas were associated with festivals and community gatherings, not only among Khmer people but also with Kinh residents. In both areas, many people talked about a multicultural setting as the context of how they viewed home, where diverse festivals of different groups were celebrated together.

One of the interesting aspects that came out among Khmer Sharers was the connections expressed for different areas of both Vietnam and Cambodia. There were several people in Tay Ninh that had moved from Tra Vinh, or people in Tra Vinh that came from Tay Ninh to study. People also discussed having family in Ho Chi Minh or even Cambodia. In the case of Cambodia, 35 of the 40 Sharers mentioned having at least one relative in Cambodia. This could refer either to relatives originating in Cambodia or to those who had once lived in Vietnam but had migrated at some point. Some continued having close relations with such family members or relatives and would travel to Cambodia to visit them or receive them when they visited Vietnam. This reinforced nuanced feelings that home could be connected to both Vietnam and Cambodia. On the other hand, some had never been to Cambodia and had no interest in moving there because they were already “home.” This was particularly heard in Tra Vinh, where some Sharers felt that it was home regardless of whether it was in Vietnam or Cambodia.

## Duong's Story

### Finding diversity in home

Duong is a retired farmer and is over 80 years old. Listeners met him just after he had finished praying in a Khmer pagoda in Tay Ninh. They were surprised to find out that he originally came from Tra Vinh, where they had previously conversed with many other Sharers.

Having lived in Tay Ninh for over ten years, Duong formerly worked as a bus driver for nearly five decades in Ho Chi Minh city, where he moved to during the Vietnam War. Having married and raised his children



there, his wife and several children are still in Ho Chi Minh as they see it as their home. One of his daughters ended up moving to Cambodia and starting a business. Although he was happy she could live in Cambodia and experience Khmer life there, she eventually returned to Vietnam and settled with him in Tay Ninh to raise her daughter.

Duong enjoyed living in Tay Ninh because he saw it as a place where ethnic Khmer and Kinh lived well together, with mutual respect for one another's cultures. He felt it was very important to continue to practise his own culture and was proud that his accent had not changed since he was young in Tra Vinh. For him, Tay Ninh was a place where he could be the person he wanted to be and live well with others from different ethnic groups. Being able to live on the land and previously farm was one of the things that gave him a sense of belonging, despite being far off from where he was born.

## Identity and seeing 'Us'

### Culture, values, and duo layers of national-ethnic identity

Throughout conversations it became apparent that the ethnic Khmer in Vietnam still hold a long standing affinity for their heritage. The most common theme that emerged surrounding identity among the 40 ethnic Khmer individuals in Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh was knowledge and use of the Khmer language. The participants said that learning the Khmer language was key to protecting and preserving the Khmer identity and culture in Vietnam.

**“Studying Khmer is not only about knowing the language, but also the culture.”**

-A 22-year-old mixed ethnic Khmer-Vietnamese-Chinese law student who grew up with his grandparents and speaks Khmer fluently.

Learning the Khmer language was mentioned to help some Sharers connect to others through media. For example, many who were fluent in Khmer enjoyed reading newspapers, books, and watching Khmer language news on TV for Khmer speakers

in Vietnam. It also gave them access to Cambodian media, providing insight into the neighbouring country with those who shared a similar culture.

Not only did Sharers see learning the Khmer language as key to protecting and preserving their Khmer identity and culture, but they also saw the distinct advantage of bilingualism and the economic opportunities for those with additional language abilities. Many shared pride in speaking both Khmer and Vietnamese, and subsequently having better qualifications to gain employment. Indeed, a follow-up to the most frequently heard theme in conversations about the importance of Khmer language also included an appreciation of the opportunities available for bilingual individuals.

Some also discussed how ethnic Khmer in Vietnam were beginning to use both languages in a mixed form. The shift in mixed language usage was more prevalent among the youth and was often discussed by the older and younger generations. It was frequently mentioned that only the older generation spoke “pure Khmer” and several stated that it was only spoken by monks. Reasons given for this shift to a mixed language among Khmer was varied. There were examples of young ethnic Khmer people marrying Kinh partners, which led the entire family to start speaking more Vietnamese to accommodate the non-Khmer speakers. Some talked about being in communities or workspaces that were Vietnamese speaking which caused them to speak less in their mother tongue. Young people were often moving to Ho Chi Minh City, a predominately Vietnamese-speaking metropolis where they no longer spoke Khmer daily. This led to some people feeling they were losing their ability to speak the language.

**“Unfortunately, teenagers nowadays speak in five-word sentences... if three spoken words are Vietnamese, only two words are Khmer.”**

-A 29-year-old monk who is a university student majoring in Khmer language.

Being Buddhist was also a significant aspect of the Khmer identity in Vietnam. This is likely due to the contrast to the mainstream Kinh majority’s practice of folk religions and gave Khmer a unique religious identity that connected them with



others both in Vietnam and outside. Every Sharer but one identified themselves to the Listeners as Theravada Buddhists. When talking about Buddhism, it was often connected to generations of practice and knowledge being passed down from one to the next. One of the Listeners who had recently completed his time as a Buddhist monk in a pagoda in Tra Vinh explained that in Vietnam, most people of Khmer ancestry were ordained into monkhood for weeks, months, or even years, which was a way to give back to their parents.

Given cultural, religious, and community factors, ethnic Khmer residents in Vietnam often viewed themselves as unique, particularly for characteristics and values they saw as distinctly Khmer. Apart from identifying themselves as strong followers of Buddhism and the positive values associated with that, they held general beliefs that Khmer in Vietnam were exceptionally honest, hard-working, and intelligent. The Listeners emphasised this positive reflection on identity they heard through the example of an elderly Khmer woman in Tra Vinh. She told them that being in a city with so many Khmer residents, a wallet would ultimately be returned if one was lost. She even said that many ethnic Kinh Vietnamese residents in the city also decided to practise Theravada Buddhist traditions simply because it was seen as a good way to live.

Having an ethnic Khmer identity in Vietnam was a connecting factor to those across borders sharing the same ethnicity. An emerging theme in FLD conversations in Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh was the concept that “Khmer blood runs deep” and that all ethnic Khmer people living anywhere share the same language, culture, beliefs, food, and even dress. Sharers frequently mentioned celebrating the same festivals in their communities as those in Cambodia. Speaking the same language, albeit with a different accent from Cambodia, was heard among ethnic Khmer residents in Vietnam. Once again, the common practice of Buddhism was considered a deeply connecting element among Khmer people regardless of which country they lived in.

**“The culture of Khmer in Vietnam, in Thailand, and in Cambodia are the same.”**

-A 30-year-old monk who has never been outside Vietnam but dreams to meet Khmer people in other countries.

## Van's Story

### Language means everything

Van lives at a pagoda in the northern part of Tra Vinh province and became a monk when he was 18 years old. He started studying Khmer language at seven and always felt it was crucial for him to master.

“To me, the Khmer language is the spirit of Khmer in Vietnam,” he passionately told the Listeners. “It helps Khmer people to get together and build up a strong community.”

Van also felt that the Khmer language was even more important for people like himself practising as Buddhist monks. It was the language that connected him to his motherland, his people, and the culture that had been practised in his area for generations.



At the same time, Van deeply appreciated bilingualism and felt that speaking both Khmer and Vietnamese was a huge advantage and a unique aspect of his identity. He said that if he ever opened up a business, he would make sure to hire people who could speak both languages.

Van said that he dreamt of visiting the land of the Khmer (Cambodia) but that he was unable to because of finances. He felt a deep connection to Khmer people everywhere and said that Khmer culture was the same across the region in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. “It would be amazing if I had the chance to visit all of those Khmer communities.”

## Through their own eyes

### Khmer dance in Vietnam captivates crowds

During the work to better listen to the perspectives of ethnic minorities, the team in Vietnam met a dancer in Tra Vinh province who they decided to film. Cam is an ethnic Khmer woman from Vietnam. As a minority, she is proud to hold onto the traditions of her ancestors. She has found a way to connect to her roots through dance.

“When I dress up in traditional Khmer costume or I dance, I feel proud because we are Khmer and we can dance.”

“Though I am living in Vietnam, I am Khmer. I do love the place where I live because we have a lot of Khmer people here. We hold onto our Khmer traditions and practise our culture in its original form.”

Explore the movements that make up rituals passed down from generations in what became known as “An Ancestor’s Dance.”

AN EXHIBITION OF KHMER DANCE



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AN EXHIBITION OF KHMER DANCE



# Khmer Surin in Thailand

Thais of Khmer origin, Northern Khmer of the Khmer Empire, or both?



Before the 12th century, the Khmer inhabited the south of the Khorat Plateau in north-eastern Thailand. The Khmer Empire pushed westward into present-day Thailand and established garrison towns in the area. Numerous ancient Khmer structures, inscriptions, and sculptures dating back to the 1150s were discovered.<sup>35</sup> However, with the rise of the Sukhothai and Lan Xang kingdoms came the rise of hostilities among Siamese, Laotian, and Khmer populations in the area. Most of the Khmer gradually retreated from the region, while the remaining went into the jungle and were known as *Khmer pa dong*, or ‘Khmer jungle people,’ by the people of Siam.<sup>36</sup> In addition, during the Thonburi and Rattanakosin periods, Surin was on the front lines of Siam’s battle against Cambodia in their territory. After the victory, a large number of Khmer people were forcefully taken to Surin and Buriram.

Once a historical stronghold of the Khmer Empire, Surin eventually became a province of modern-day Thailand with a sizable ethnic Khmer population, along with Kuy and Lao that coexist with central Thai. For many Cambodians and ethnic Khmer in Vietnam, Surin feels far away and mysterious, yet familiar and connected. The perception of Surin is similar for Thai people, particularly those in the central parts of Thailand. Surin seems to be a distant province with ethnic minorities. Thai-Khmer people prefer the name “Khmer Loeu” to distinguish between the Khmer of Thailand and Cambodia. It is used frequently in Khmer culture across the region and denotes northern Khmer people. Furthermore, they append a city name as a suffix to the term “Khmer,” so in Surin, they are referred to as “Khmer Surin.” In Cambodia, ethnic Khmer in Thailand are generally referred to as Khmer Surin.

Surin is Thailand’s largest Khmer-speaking city. Over half of the population speaks Khmer, and most Northern Khmer speakers are bilingual, speaking both Thai and Northern Khmer. Northern Khmer (spoken in Thailand) and central Khmer (spoken in Cambodia) share 93 per cent of their vocabulary, while official Khmer

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<sup>35</sup> Prakop Phonngam, *Saranugrom Glum Chaat Dhi Pan Kamen Tin Thai [Encyclopaedia of Khmer Ethnic Groups in Thailand]* (Bangkok: Sahadhammika Co., Ltd., 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Paitoon Mikusol, *Gaan Seuk Sa Glum Chaat Dhi Pan Nai Pra Tet Thai [Studies of Ethnic Groups in Thailand]* (Bangkok: The Social Science Association of Thailand, 1990), 5.

shares just 17.2 per cent.<sup>37</sup> This happened due to the officialisation of Thai while disregarding other languages. As a result, the Khmer Surin has no written language in Thailand and is mainly taught through spoken words.<sup>38</sup>

Although the number of ethnic Khmer in Thailand is estimated to be over a million, they are often considered the “invisible minority” due to their lack of participation in national politics and their similarity to nearby Isan groups. This invisibility tends to foster national apathy towards the Khmer minority population.<sup>39</sup> In terms of social economics, Northern Khmer speakers are at the lowest rung in Thai society. They are farmers from regions deficient in natural resources and therefore are forced into low-skilled labour and have almost no opportunities for social mobility or academic advancement. The Northern Khmer minority is consequently often seen as a group of people who are powerless, underprivileged, and invisible in society. The “Khmer” identity became, at best, a regional variation within a broader Thai national identity and, at worst, a cultural and social stigma. There have been some forms of Khmer identity revitalisation coming from the state level, though some see it ridden by political undertones and a form of further disconnecting the northern Khmer of Thailand from the central Khmer of Cambodia.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to learning Khmer culture and language at home, people also learn about Khmer culture through crafts and music. Some well known folk genres in singing and dancing are known to have blossomed among the ethnic Khmer in Surin province. *Load An Re*, for example, is a form of folk plays that are freely choreographed with hopping and jumping and performed during the Songkran New Year Festival. *Ruem An Re* is an adapted form that uses gestures and music and is performed at festivals

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<sup>37</sup> Bunsanoe Triwiset, “A Comparative Study of Vocabulary of the Khmer Dialect in Thailand and Standard Khmer in Cambodia,” *Journal of Mekong Societies* 14, no. 1: pp. 85-107, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/119682>.

<sup>38</sup> Chan Chaithongdee, Glum Chaat Dhi Pan Ka Mae Lue [Ethnic Groups Database in Thailand: Khmer], 2019, <https://www.sac.or.th/databases/ethnic-groups/ethnicGroups/160>.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Vail, “Thailand’s Khmer as ‘Invisible Minority’: Language, Ethnicity and Cultural Politics in North-Eastern Thailand,” *Asian Ethnicity* 8, no. 2 (2007): pp. 111-130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360701406247>.

<sup>40</sup> Direk Hongthong, “Breaking the Bronze Palace: Why Northern Khmer Women Opt for Western Husbands?,” *Humanities Journal* 20, no. Special Issue (2013): pp. 54-74, <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/abc/article/view/53332>.

throughout the year.<sup>41</sup> Village life and festivals revolve around the Khmer violin and kanteum, a music genre that has been listed in the national register of intangible heritage in Thailand, but is also said to foster connection to neighbouring Cambodia as a “border practice.”<sup>42</sup>

Traditionally, Khmer women weave cotton and silk throughout the dry season. Surin silk is a weaving expertise practised by the Khmer, Lao, and Kuy ethnicities while preserving the unique weaving technique, colours, and patterns. For the Khmer Surin, the silk tradition goes back over 1,000 years and is a powerful part of identity for ethnic Khmer in Thailand, who see their techniques and styles as distinctly “Khmer.” For some, silk production in the communities of the region contributes to a sense of both belonging and exclusion, influencing relationships and status.<sup>43</sup> Aside from preserving the distinctive local wisdom, silk weaving also helps young people become more connected to their local culture. They absorb weaving culture from past generations while also learning and practising the language that the community wishes to preserve.

FLD conversations were carried out in Phan Si, a village in Surin province located about a half-an-hour drive from the provincial capital. Named by residents in the late 19th century after local plants that grew in the area, Phan Si is a close-knit community. Not far from Prasat Sikhoraphum, a 12th century Ankorian temple later influenced by Lao restorations, the village is a centre for traditional Khmer culture, where spoken Khmer is commonly heard by residents in the community. It is also well-known for its silk weaving and Phan Si hosts a community enterprise that brings together silk producers and weavers to generate revenue and promote local silk. Many FLD conversations stemmed from this group and subsequently focused on aspects of sense of place, culture, and identity in relation to silk.

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<sup>41</sup> Bhagawin Chantong, “Ruem An Re: Its Evolution,” *SPAJA Journal* 15, no. 1 (2005): pp. 37-48, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Alexandra Denes, “Folklorizing Northern Khmer Identity in Thailand: Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Production of ‘Good Culture,’” *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 30, no. 1 (2015): pp. 1-34, <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj30-1a>.

<sup>43</sup> Alexandra Grace Dalferro, “Shimmering Surfaces: An Ethnography of Silk Production in Surin, Thailand” (dissertation, Cornell University, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.7298/v6gz-5s95>.



## A Perspective from the Listeners

Changing perceptions through action

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Oil is a proud Khmer Surin woman in her late thirties from Thailand. She has a daughter and lives in her village, helping to produce silk. Able to fluently speak the Khmer Surin language, she was interested when she was approached to be a Listener for *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them.'* She was excited to show other participants her hometown and to introduce her community to people from other countries.

When Oil conducted her FLD work in the village with her partner, she was curious about how people thought about Cambodia. The border to Cambodia was not so far away, but most people had never been. Many of the young people she spoke with were interested in travelling to another country and visiting Cambodia, though surprisingly, many of the community elders did not express any wish to cross the border. As she gathered more information through her conversations, she learnt that the older Khmer Surin generation still held onto fear from the years of war and genocide in Cambodia during the late 1970s.

"Old people said they are afraid to visit Cambodia because of the Khmer Rouge. When young people were saying they want to visit Cambodia, the elders replied that they don't want to because of that so they have never had a chance to go there."

Like the other Listeners, Oil had a chance to visit the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh for the first time to learn about filmmaking and how to return to their communities to listen through another method in order to produce a film. Spending a week in Cambodia was eye-opening to Oil. She heard the central Khmer language, which differed from her Khmer Surin dialect. She saw the urban life of Cambodians and also many aspects of culture that she found similar to Surin.

When she returned to Surin, many people whom she had spoken to during her FLD work came to see her and ask questions about her trip to Cambodia. She showed them many photos and videos and shared stories of the work she did and the people she met. Older people in her village were especially curious and she was happy to tell them about modern Cambodia, that the war had ended long ago, and that there were many beautiful things about this neighbouring country.

Oil's story reminds us that it is common to hold onto perceptions about places and people, even those that might just live a few hours away across the border. Borders sometimes create lines that prevent people from crossing or artificially create perceived differences between one group and another. Oil teaches us that we can challenge these perceptions simply by making contact and exploring others who may be "us" in some way or another.

## **A Sense of Place: The story of home**

Home is a unique blend, and is ours

There was an enormous amount of pride expressed by Khmer Surin Sharers who engaged in conversation with Listeners. When speaking about home and where they were from, many felt proud of the atmosphere of the Sikhoraphum district and Surin province. They often described life in rural Surin as simple, providing them with the basic needs they required to live. Some mentioned that the village of Phan Si - where many Sharers were from - had not always been there, but was established after ancestors discovered the water and tree resources.

Several residents of the area spoke about the nearby Sikhoraphum Temple as a strong connection of their district and a symbol of home. Known as the most complete and best-preserved Khmer temple in Surin, it was built in the 12th century in the Angkor Wat style commonly seen in Cambodia. It was later remodelled by ethnic Lao inhabitants in the 15th and 16th centuries and somewhat transformed. By the 16th century, it was converted for use by Buddhists. The temple was an important reference to those living in Sikhoraphum district and is associated with many stories and legends about ancestors. One of those stories was told by a Sharer who explained that Sikhoraphum was a female temple built by women. Another male temple was being built, but the men left it to help the women. In the end, the female temple of Sikhoraphum was completed in all its beauty but the male temple was left unfinished.



Sikhoraphum Temple, photo credit: Phasiree Thanasin

Given that most conversations took place in and around Phan Si village, where silk production is prevalent, silk was a strong theme that emerged in connection to reflecting on home. In fact, silk or silk weaving was mentioned in well over three-quarters of the conversations that took place in Surin. Some even thought that silk weaving was the core of the community. One of the Listeners spoke about her own father and his role in promoting silk production in Phan Si village.



*He helps teach other people how to weave silk in order to keep people connected and together. It keeps the family and community together, because if we don't continue this, people leave the village and find work elsewhere.*

One of the themes coming from the data reflected the residents' desire to see the silk economy of the area grow and dominate the market. A large majority of Sharers expressed their wish for Phan Si to become known as a Silk Village and for outsiders to visit the area. They compared the village to other nearby villages that had their own fame for silk and the unique patterns they became known for. Many believed that silk was the connecting element in the community and that it could be a driver of the local economy.

**"I see people in my community making silk clothes with beautiful mudmee techniques on wooden looms in almost every house."**

-A 40-year-old Thai-Khmer man who had been living his entire life in Surin.

Local festivals were frequently spoken about by community members, who often saw them as part of a unique sense of place. The San Don Ta festival, in particular, was mentioned especially by older Sharers. They shared that the festival was an opportunity for all their children and grandchildren to come home, no matter where they were. Several said it was a time when the community could connect with ancestors and those living on the land before them. Many also spoke about Reuam Trot; a dance carried out as a performing art during the Thai-Khmer Songkran festival. The dance, originally performed as a rite and song to tell the festival's story, had modernised over the years and adapted to changes in social conditions. They also recognised festivals celebrated across Thailand as their own, including Loy Krathong, a lantern festival to celebrate the water. For nearly all the Sharers in FLD conversations, these festivals and rituals were important aspects of their communities and what they saw as "home."

**“The most important tradition in my hometown is the day of San Don Ta that I always join with my grandma. It happens every year, I've never missed it!”**

-A 25-year-old silk weaver who has lived in Surin her whole life where she is raising her two children with her husband, a farmer.

Ethnic Khmer residents in Surin also had dreams for their communities and hometowns. On the one hand, many deeply wanted to preserve the area's cultural heritage. On the other hand, most simultaneously wanted more development for Surin, particularly in terms of infrastructure and tourism. Some mentioned wanting better universities, more transport, an airport for the province, and better roadways. A common dream among Sharers was the wish to have more tourists - particularly from foreign countries - visit Surin and see its unique character and culture. This was often the reason for wishing for an airport since the closest one was in the neighbouring province of Buriram. It was clear that most residents had strong attachment to a sense of place and the nostalgia associated with it, but also wanted to modernise and develop it in a way that corresponded to their perceptions of the identity of their province.

## **Malee's Story**

### **There's no place like home**

Malee is a 20-year-old woman born and raised in Phan Si village located in the heart of Surin province. Growing up, her family spoke to her in the Khmer language. She got married to a Thai man from another province and consequently ended up speaking more Thai. Her husband moved to Phan Si and began helping her and her family weave silk. Eventually, he learnt some Khmer words and started speaking a little Khmer Surin in the community.

*Being born in Surin, I am happy and proud of this home atmosphere. I do not want to go to the city or work in a factory outside where life is difficult.*



Malee felt very at home in Surin province and was proud of her community. She loved all the events in her hometown, especially the annual festivals involving Khmer and Thai traditions. Unlike some of the other young people in the area, Malee had no interest in leaving her village or living anywhere else. She said she was not interested in being in any other province in Thailand or even crossing the border to Cambodia. However, like many others in Phan Si village, she strongly wished for the community and area to be more developed. She especially hoped that it could become a famous silk village and that the silk patterns and quality unique to Phan Si would become known to other Thai people and even those around the world.

In a similar sentiment to many other Sharers from Phan Si village, silk seemed to be a solid reference to the sense of place that most residents shared. Stories were shared about silk patterns, the fusion of Khmer and Thai styles, and the cultural and economic value that silk had as part of the community identity.

## Identity and seeing 'Us'

### A continuously growing culture and identity

For the ethnic Khmer Surin of Thailand, their roots in Khmer origins that have evolved in present-day Thailand contribute to a fuller identity rather than a diluted one. This dynamic is complex and may not be fully understood by Thai and Cambodian outsiders. In Thailand, many people are comfortable with calling the Khmer Surin as Thai with Khmer origins. In Cambodia and the Khmer-speaking areas of Vietnam, many prefer to refer to the Khmer Surin as the northern Khmer, associated with the Khmer Empire and the famous site of Angkor. Conversations with 40 Sharers in Surin show that the Khmer Surin likely see themselves somewhere in between. They expressed enormous pride in their ethnic and cultural identity, but similar appreciation of their Thai nationality and geographic location in Thailand.

For many of the Sharers, their cultural and historical origins were shrouded in mystery and were relayed from family knowledge. Many did not know the exact nature of their family history, while some knew their ancestors had come from the region of modern-day Cambodia or had been living in Surin for as far back as they remembered. In spite of much pride expressed for culture, festivals, and language, one of the most commonly heard themes across FLD conversations was that people were not completely sure about their origins. Although they knew they were Khmer, most did not know details about their families before their grandparents.

**"I used to talk about my ancestors but my parents don't seem to know anything so I never asked them again. I don't really know exactly where my ancestors came from. I just know that I was born in this house in Surin province... I could have also come from Cambodian ancestors because we speak in Khmer as well."**

-A 48-year-old father of two children who also married a Khmer woman and has great pride in coming from the province of Surin.

Like their ethnic counterparts in Cambodia and Vietnam, the Khmer Surin feel a sense of connectedness across borders. Cambodia, in particular, seemed to influence Sharers to think deeper into their origins and culture. For those that had never been to Cambodia, many Sharers expressed a desire to visit. That connection to Cambodia and Cambodian people came from a feeling of shared culture and heritage as ethnic Khmer.

**“The life and traditions of Cambodian people are the same as our Khmer in Surin. Maybe they are our relatives from the past... If I have an opportunity, I want to go to Cambodia, I want to go to Angkor Wat. Here in my hometown we have festivals that are similar to Cambodia.”**

-A 50-year-old silk weaver speaking in Khmer Surin who has never been to Cambodia

At the same time, most Khmer Surin Sharers felt a deep connection to their national identity as Thai and to their country of Thailand. It was mentioned in some conversations that parents of children hoped for them to eventually work for the Thai government. Similarly, reverence for the Thai monarchy was heard, particularly in discussions about King Rama IX who passed away in 2016.

Language was an important aspect of identity for the Khmer Surin of Thailand. Most Sharers professed to speak both Khmer and Thai and felt proud to be bilingual. In discussing language, Khmer and Thai languages were not always seen as binary options. There was a sense that the Khmer Surin of modern-day Northeast Thailand was a blended language that had evolved over generations. There was a difference between the older and younger generations in how they perceived the fluency of their mother tongue. Older people sometimes expressed how children no longer spoke the same language as they did. That perception was not always seen negatively, however. One of the common themes in conversations was that Sharers viewed the Khmer Surin dialect as having uniquely evolved through generations of contact between Khmer and Thai peoples and was constantly evolving into its modern form spoken today. Younger Khmer speakers overwhelmingly expressed pride in their bilingualism and ability to speak Khmer Surin. They talked about

hearing it spoken as children and about other Thai people having the interest in hearing them use it. Overall, Khmer Surin was a significant part of how the ethnic Khmer in Thailand identified themselves.

**“I am Khmer from Surin province. I am also proud that I can speak Khmer unlike some of my friends, they only can speak Thai... I think that my Khmer Surin language is good and unique. When I talk, others might be able to guess we are from the northeast or from Surin province.”**

-A 24-year-old man who is learning how to weave silk from his mother.

Ethnic Khmer people in Thailand mainly viewed themselves positively regarding values and characteristics that defined them in Thai society. When talking about how they might describe their communities, they saw themselves as friendly, kind, caring, and hardworking. Many Sharers also talked about how others saw Khmer Surin in the rest of Thailand. Mostly, they felt that others in the country saw them similarly as they saw themselves with positive traits. One of the only negative stereotypes they believed others had of them was an association with black magic or witchcraft. This came up in several conversations, particularly by those who had spent time living outside the province. Some examples were provided of experiences with other people in Thailand who were scared of them or tried to avoid them because of beliefs they could perform spells or cause problems. However, some expressed that after getting to know those that held this misconception about the Khmer Surin, most people would let go of such beliefs and recognise they were good people and not different from other groups in the country.

**In the past, people from other provinces were not so close or ever mingled with us Surin people. They would think that we use black magic and they were afraid. But when they get to know us, talk more with us, they found out how Surin people actually speak in a very sweet way and how patient we are and always trying to help out each other during hard times.**

-A 54-year-old Khmer Surin woman who farms and weaves silk.

## **Nang's Story**

### Melding cultures, emerging identities

Nang, a 68-year-old woman from Phan Si village in Surin province, was excited to share her story with two Listeners from her community. Having lived there all her life, she proudly identified herself as a Thai-Khmer woman, part of the Khmer minority group in the country. She made a living as many in the village do, working as a farmer and silk weaver. She spoke Khmer with her family and spoke Thai outside the community. She lamented that although many children in the area also spoke Khmer, they were no longer fluent like her generation. She thought this was mostly due to Khmer children being sent to other schools outside of town to study.

“I love and am proud to be born in Surin speaking Khmer language, a unique language. When I go to the market, I also speak Khmer. I am never embarrassed to speak it. I think I can be myself and feel comfortable when speaking.”

For Nang, the Khmer language was her identity. That sense of pride in language was heard across many Sharers in the study, particularly among those from older generations who used the Khmer language in their everyday lives.

Nang was also immensely proud of the Buddhist traditions passed down through her family over generations, especially San Don Ta, a festival celebrating the traditional homage paid to ancestors and was practised in several areas of Thailand where there were Khmer minority populations. She also adored the time of year when the Loy

Krathong festival was celebrated across Thailand to honour the goddess of water and pay respects to Buddha. During Loy Krathong, Thais release baskets with candles and other ornaments into the water. Like many Thai-Khmer in Surin, Nang celebrated her Khmer minority roots through tradition and language but also took on Thai culture and traditions as part of her own.

The life priorities of Nang reflected common themes heard across other conversations in Surin. She hoped for a more robust economy in Thailand, particularly in her province. She also wanted the local silk industry to thrive. Like so many in the village who were dedicated to producing the highest quality silk derived from Khmer and Thai tradition, Nang wanted to see their silk reach more significant markets, both in the country and abroad.





# Through their own eyes

## Silk transcends borders and connects

The village of Phan Si has a long weaving history among the Khmer Surin population who have been producing high quality silk for generations. The process of weaving silk today in the village brings the community together, much like it did long ago. The revitalisation of local silk has been a community project involving elders and youth from over 40 families. The style of Phan Si silk patterns has evolved over the years incorporating influences from the Khmer Surin and Issan cultures. Contemporary colours and patterns often borrow from Khmer influences with roots in neighbouring Cambodia as well as from Siam silk traditions in central Thailand. Many patterns tell stories and use auspicious symbols, such as elephants, tigers, and flowers. They also use clay from the Sikhoraphum Temple to dye and soften the fabric with the belief the sacred soil under the temple's lotus flowers will bring luck and fortune to the wearer of the silk product. The fusion of culture and traditions make Phan Si silk unique and part of a longstanding silk legacy that has defined Surin and its people.

Photo exhibition credit: Phasiree Thanasin

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Story weaving”**

Traditional silk weavers in Phan Si village use a loom to press the fabric together and bring their patterns to life one stroke at a time.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Giving patterns life”**

A rope is used to tightly tie the silk on base colours where the patterns are being formed before dyeing with other colours.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Not just for women”**

Traditionally, it was common in the area for men to focus on farming and outdoor work while women led silk production during the dry season. These days, however, many men in Phan Si weave silk as part of their family businesses.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Inner intricacies”**

Silk strings are spun to untangle and clean them to prepare for weaving.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Wake to weave”**

“I wake up and don't even wash my face. I wake up and weave. It's the first thing I do in the morning.”

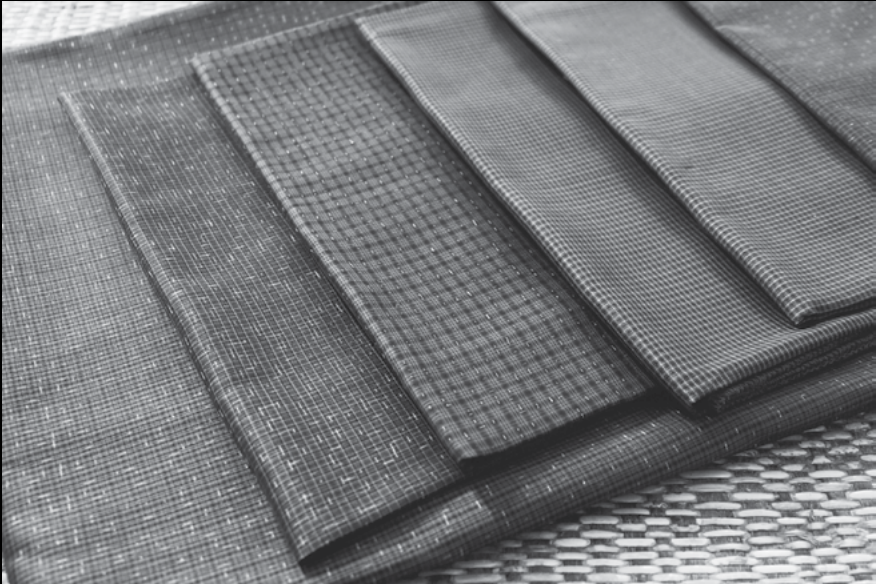
## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Modern tendencies”**

Younger generations are also contributing to community silk weaving in Phan Si. Multi-talented, some can even weave while staying on top of their social media updates.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



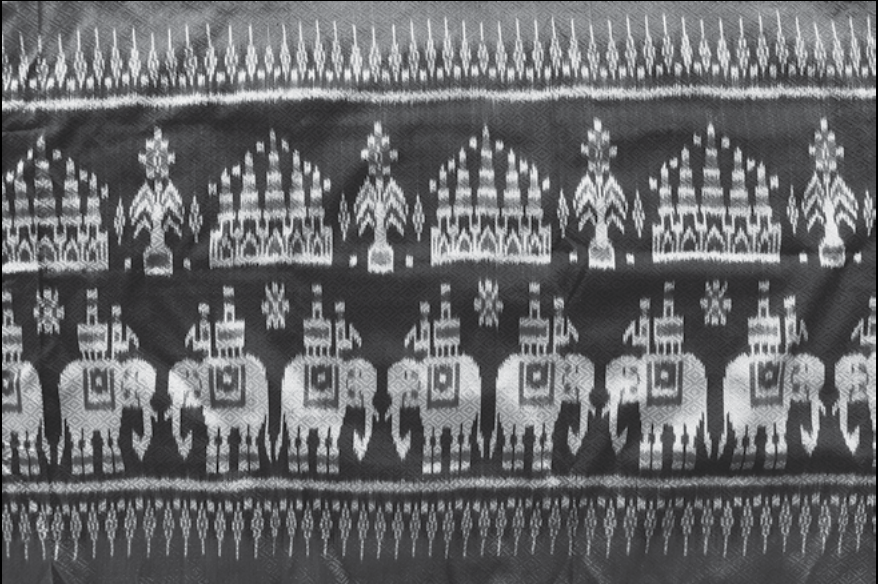
### **“Re-making the classics”**

The “Um-prom” pattern (on left side) is a traditional Thai-Khmer pattern only found in the southern part of Thailand's Northeast region. Um means “sky” while prom means “deity.” The pattern represents the stars in the sky and is commonly used at funerals as an offering to monks, as a gift to parents at a marriage, and worn as a sarong by Khmer Surin women in everyday life.

The “Samor” pattern (on right side) is dyed by using black myrobalan, a fruit usually eaten with traditional Khmer salted fish. The fruit transforms the silk into a brownish green tone and the garment is usually common to wear at home.



## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“The pattern of the elephant of good fortune and the city pillar shrine”**

Elephants are regarded as noble animals and symbolise the province of Surin. The elephant in this pattern is known as Erawan, a god who is ridden by the Hindu god of rain and thunder, Indra. According to ancient legends, Erawan and Indra travel between the heavens and the earth to watch the fortunes of humankind.

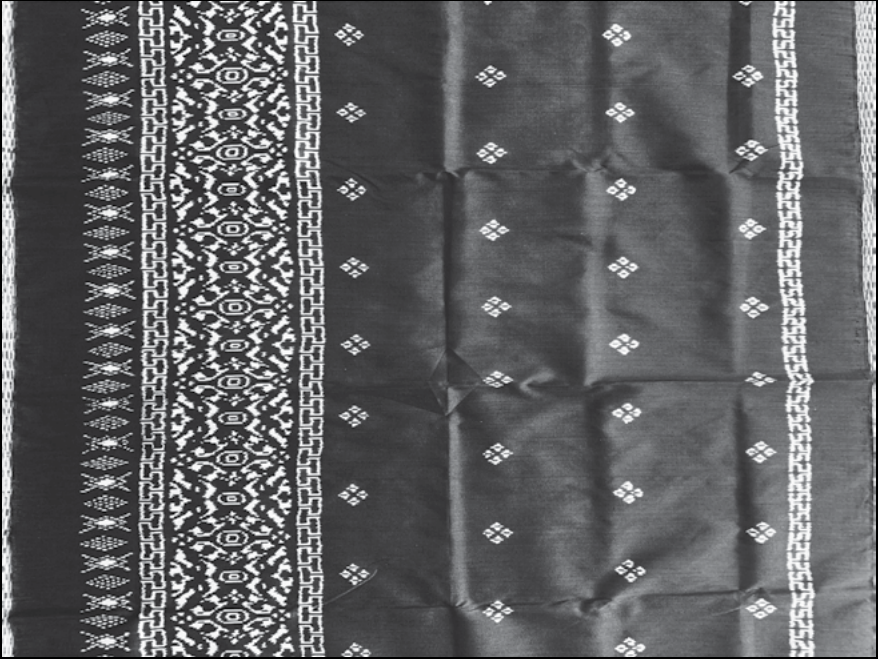
## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Prasat Sikhoraphum pattern”**

Sikhoraphum Temple is both a historical and sacred spot for the people of Sikhoraphum district, which includes the village of Phan Si. In this pattern, Naga, the divine half-human half-serpent being flies above the Sikhoraphum Temple to protect it. The lotus flowers and lily pads below lie in an auspicious place where good fortune abounds in the mud.

## AN EXHIBITION ON SURIN SILK



### **“Sikhoraphum pattern”**

In 2019, the province of Surin designed a pattern that represents five diverse ethnicities that live side-by-side in the area: the Khmer, Kuy, Thai, Chinese, and Lao. Before finishing the fabric, it is first softened for 39 minutes in the mud under the lotus flowers at the Sikhoraphum Temple to bring good fortune to the future wearer.

# Cambodian migrants in Thailand

## House and home, dimensions of two sides of a border

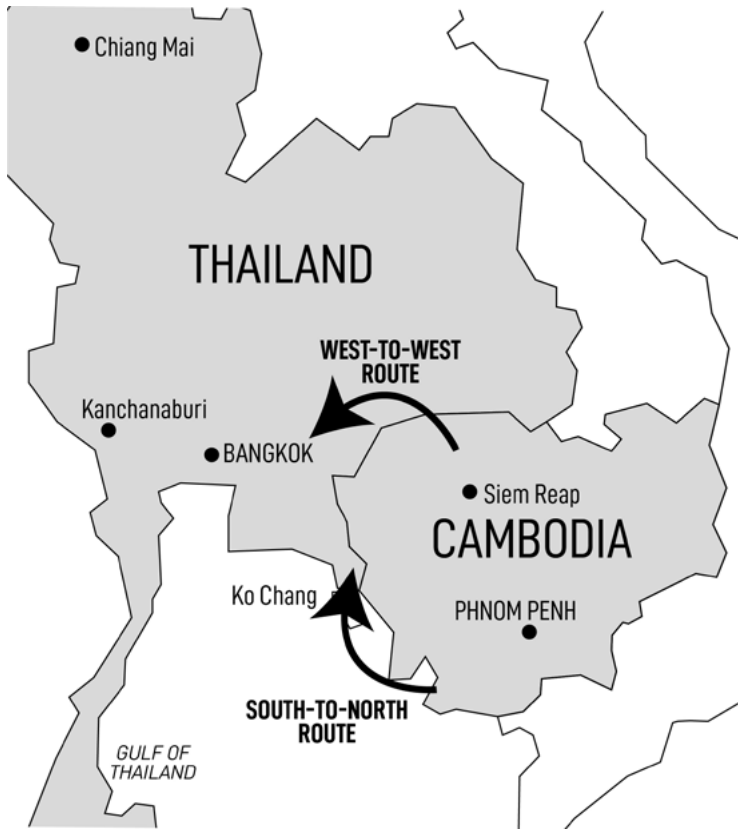


Thailand is a centre for Cambodian migrant workers in search of a better life, especially through construction, fisheries, agriculture, livestock, manufacturing, and other general labour and service sectors. Although Cambodians migrate throughout the world, many choose Thailand due to its “geographical proximity, cultural familiarity, higher wages, and the prior migration by friends and family members.”<sup>44</sup> Despite the official figures in 2019 showing that about 700,000 Cambodians registered through various immigration processes, it is informally estimated that there are over one million Cambodians working in Thailand, of which 20% may have no legal documents.<sup>45</sup> Trat province is a well-known place for Cambodians searching for better economic opportunities. Located in the southeast of Thailand and bordering Cambodia along the Cardamom Mountains, Trat boasts a long seaside and islands that provide access to abundant sea resources in the Gulf of Thailand and beyond. Many Cambodian migrants who have come to Trat tell stories of crossing the mountain ranges to get in. Though some go through the legal processes and cross through the formal border, there are many ways they can cross illegally as well. In our study, Listeners expressed surprise in hearing from many Sharers who told them all the different routes and methods they could get from Cambodia to Thailand under the radar.

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<sup>44</sup> Siwat Chairattana and Thawatchai Khanawiwat “The Report on the Route of Migration from Myanmar and Cambodia to Thailand. Thailand: Plan International” (Plan International, April 1, 2020), <https://plan-international.org/thailand/publications/the-route-of-migration-to-thailand>, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Chairattana and Khanawiwat, 18.



Map of Migration Route. Adapted from Siwat Chairattana and Thawatchai Khanawiwat, 2019, p.31.

There are three common routes to cross into Thailand: West-to-East, South-to-North, and sea routes. Moreover, there are seven international checkpoints, ten border trade checkpoints, and numerous small unofficial crossing points along the border that locals often use.<sup>46</sup> The West-to-East route is the most popular for migrants entering Thailand due to its convenient facilities, while the South-to-North route is viewed as more difficult because of the Dangrek Mountain range that goes through it. Most FLD Sharers reported using both routes, while few chose to use the sea route.

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<sup>46</sup> Chairattana and Khanawiwat, 35.

Despite many challenges of migrating to a new country, most Cambodian migrant workers remain working in Thailand for the long term. Those who bring their children with them also register them in Thai public schools. Since the adoption of the 1999 Education for All Policy and the 2005 Cabinet Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons, all children of migrants, regardless of their legal status, are allowed to attend 15 years of free education in Thai public schools. They also benefit from receiving “subsidies for tuition fees, school uniforms, school textbooks, learning materials, and school lunch.”<sup>47</sup> However, challenges remain in public education to make it more inclusive, accessible, and acceptable for all migrants. This is particularly true in terms of improving the lack of awareness among migrant workers regarding the rights to education for all children, strengthening the relevance and appropriateness of the school curriculum and institutions that facilitate the education of the migrant children, and addressing drop-out issues.<sup>48</sup> Approximately 14% of the enrolled students in Trat public schools are migrants or stateless students, 75% of whom are Cambodian. Some best practices observed in Trat schools are the efforts to promote trilingual education, including Thai, Khmer and English, the inclusion of vocational skills in early schooling, and home visits to reduce drop-out rates.<sup>49</sup> In our study, many FLD Sharers reported sending their children to public school and vocational education.

The vast majority of Sharers reported to have been living in Thailand somewhere between three to 27 years; the average was over a decade. Having spent such a long period of time in another country, where do Cambodian migrants in Thailand consider “home?” What does sense of place and identity mean to them? How do they define themselves or do their layers of identity become more complex? How about those in mixed marriages and those whose children were born in Thailand?

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<sup>47</sup> Thithimadee Arphattananon, “Education That Leads to Nowhere: Thailand’s Education Policy for Children of Migrants,” *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 14, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v14i1.537>, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Arphattananon, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Apikul, “Education Knows No Border: a Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand” (UNICEF Thailand, December 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/3696/file/Education%20knows%20no%20border%20-%20report.pdf>, 47.



## A Perspective from the Listeners

Having a house, thinking of home

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Thany is a Cambodian having lived in Thailand for seven years. Working for an organisation to protect and improve the lives of migrant labourers living in the country, he spent much of his time with Cambodian populations. Able to speak both Khmer and Thai fluently, he was used to working between cultures and often helped Cambodian migrants to access services, fill out paperwork, and adapt to life in Thailand.

Having worked with the Cambodian migrant community in Trat for several years, Thany easily found Sharers to have FLD conversations with as he knew many of them from before. In reflection, Thany shared that the process of listening to others also helped him to reflect on his own life. Like the migrants he spoke with, he also had been living as a Cambodian in Thailand for many years and had a unique sense of “home.”



Thany noted that for most Cambodian migrants in Trat, Thailand was a good place to live but they often looked forward to the day they would have better lives and return to their homeland. They dreamt of being close to their families and relatives. In Thailand, some felt like they were living in a box, having to always bring documents with them and living with a sense of insecurity. “They feel they have their ‘house’ in Thailand, but they belong to their ‘home’ in Cambodia,” he said when reflecting on what he heard during his FLD fieldwork. Thany felt that his perception of sense of place and home was similar. “Home is where I have the freedom that I can do anything I want and I’m surrounded by my parents and relatives,” he shared during the Info-Space Lab.

## A Sense of Place

### Transcending home in a new world

What does home look like when you are in a land you were not born in? Or how about when you are from parents who did not originally come from there? The dimension of a migrant perspective differs from that of ethnic minorities born and raised in lands in which they differ from the ethnic or cultural mainstream.

Exploring the perspective of migrants living in Thailand was an important component of this work. Unlike the ethnic Khmer of Thailand or Vietnam, or the ethnic Vietnamese of Cambodia, the migrant communities left one home in Cambodia to build another in Thailand. They traversed a border to get from one place to the other. Some of them did it legally, while others did it outside the laws, entering a system of legality that is a direct repercussion of the concept of a border.

Unsurprisingly, Cambodian migrant workers had a very different conceptual understanding of eastern Thailand as home compared to ethnic minorities living in northeastern Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam for generations. Most of the Cambodian migrants in Thailand’s Trat province we spoke to emphasised that their former lives in Cambodia were far more difficult than today in Thailand. Those who spoke about their home in Cambodia described difficulties related to earning income. They discussed the hardships they faced in trying to earn a living in Cambodia, with

some leaving directly from their hometowns. In contrast, others moved around the country first in search of other opportunities before arriving in Thailand. Nearly all Sharers that migrated from Cambodia to Thailand did so intending to improve their economic lives.

**“I came from Kampot. I previously used to work in Phnom Penh, but I couldn’t earn enough to survive. Rent and food in Phnom Penh are expensive so I decided to come work in Thailand.”**

- A 25-year-old Cambodian man in Thailand for three years after having moved around Cambodia looking for work.

For most Cambodian migrants living in Trat, there was a strong appreciation for Thailand. Sharers discussed having good healthcare, even if they did not have enough money to pay for it. One of the common themes emerging from conversations was the wish to see the children of migrant workers reaching higher education and earning more than the previous generation. The education provided in Thailand was often one of the factors that kept migrants in Thailand. Numerous Sharers with children in Thailand mentioned that they would not consider leaving Thailand until after their children had finished school. The Thai education system that provided access to their children, no matter what their status in the country, was a major contributor to the lives of Cambodian migrants in Trat.

**“Now that my grandchildren are in school in Thailand, I could never go back to Cambodia because no one will be able to look after them. If I were to take them back to Cambodia, they may not be able to go to school there. I have to stay in Thailand so, unlike me, my grandchildren can be well-educated.”**

-A 58-year-old Cambodian woman who had been living in Thailand for over 17 years.

Integration in Thailand, and specifically in Trat, was a common topic brought up by Cambodian migrant workers. The Sharers commented on the similarities between Cambodians and Thai and how that made life in Thailand relatively easy for them. They felt the similar culture, clothing, food, and way of life in Thailand and Cambodia made them feel at home. One of the major differences, however, was language. Some Sharers could speak Thai while others could not. Thai language, however, did not seem to be a major barrier for Cambodian migrants to feel less at home in Trat. Some mentioned that they tried to learn it to speak with Thai residents, while others had no interest and seemed to be able to live adequately in the migrant community speaking only Khmer.

**“Living together with the Thai is normal. I can use Khmer to communicate wherever I go. Nobody forbids me or looks down on me for speaking it. My children can also go to school with Thai students. They’ve never experienced any discrimination there. They play with Thai kids just like any others, and the teachers treat them the same as they treat the Thai students.”**

-A 33-year-old Cambodian woman who has been in Thailand for 17 years and works in a factory.

Work was a defining aspect in the lives of Cambodian migrants and had an important impact on how they viewed life in Trat. For most Sharers, it was through work that they connected with Thai people and interacted with others outside the Cambodian community. The relations with Thai co-workers - especially with their bosses - were discussed often by Sharers who had both positive and negative experiences. Sadly, there were many instances where Sharers had experienced abuse, violence, or had been cheated by their bosses. These bad experiences were often when the migrant workers first arrived in Thailand and frequently associated with having no legal status in the country. They often took place among fishermen who went in offshore vessels for months at a time. This affected how Cambodians interacted with Thai, but one common theme that emerged was that there are good and bad people everywhere. It appeared that Cambodian migrants associated negative experiences with personality rather than with culture or between Thai and Cambodians.

Of the 40 Sharers, 39 of them had been born in Cambodia. Despite the complexity of “home” and a sense of place, many Cambodian migrants’ ties to their homeland in Cambodia were strong. These ties seemed to evoke a sense of homesickness or a feeling of sadness or stress caused by the separation from loved ones for the place that one considers home. Particularly for Sharers who were born in Cambodia but had spent a significant amount of time in Thailand, the desire to “return” was heard in multiple conversations. For some, it was a sense of being tied to where one was born. A common theme that was heard in many conversations was that even though many Cambodians come to Thailand for work, Cambodia remained “home.” Unlike other groups in this study, that sense of place for Thailand was strong while the home was somewhere further away and held in the hearts and minds of Cambodian migrants in Trat.

**“Although I have been living in Thailand for a very long time, it is only because of the work opportunity. How could I ever love another country more than my very own country that I was born in?”**

-A 30-year-old Cambodian fisherman who spent 12 years in Thailand.

## **Chan's Story** Feeling at home on either side

Chan is a 29-year-old woman who was born to Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. From the age of four, she studied in a Thai school until grade 4, when she had to drop out due to not having enough money to continue. During her school days, she loved Thai dance, even more than studying.



Her mother took her to live in Cambodia at a young age, where she had great difficulties adjusting since she could not speak Khmer well. After a year, she became fluent in Khmer and lost her ability to speak Thai altogether. She continued school in Cambodia until 13 years old. After that, she started working but she could not survive on such a low salary. She soon moved back to Thailand for a job that paid her well over double what she made in Cambodia.

At 18 years old, Chan got engaged and went back to Cambodia to get married. She eventually returned to Thailand to continue her work. For her, living on either side of the border felt like home. The only difference was about status and citizenship.

“Thailand and Cambodia are the same for me,” she told Listeners. “The only difference is that I need a document to stay in Thailand, but not in Cambodia.”

## Identity and seeing ‘Us’

### Status, preservation, and integration

Any person that has moved from one place to another tends to connect to some geographical or national aspect of their identity. That movement from one home to another impacts how someone identifies themselves to different people. For migrants, integration into a new country involves a shift in identity. For example, a Cambodian living in Cambodia will not necessarily identify themselves as a Cambodian to others who share the same nationality. They may instead choose their ethnic background, their village, their occupation, or other aspects of their lives to identify themselves. Migrating to a new land, and particularly crossing over a border, migrants suddenly look at their nationality as a major marker of their identity with others.

Sharers in the study largely identified themselves as Cambodian, focusing their identities in Thailand around being Cambodian. Many discussed feeling comfortable to speak the Khmer language, wear Khmer clothing and about feeling proud to express their Cambodian identity in Trat.

**"I don't think I need to adapt myself in order to live in Thailand. I still wear Khmer clothing here. I am also not shy about speaking Khmer with my friends and relatives... My father is Chinese. My mother is Cambodian. I was born and raised in Cambodia. And I solely self-identify myself as Cambodian... And I won't change myself for others to see me as Thai."**

-A 33-year-old Cambodian woman working in a factory that had been in Thailand for over 17 years.

The Khmer language was important and very much connected to how Cambodian migrants saw their community and related to each other. Some mentioned feeling proud to be able to speak Khmer among their friends and even in the food markets. There were several comments by Sharers that they felt no shame speaking Khmer in Trat and that there were no negative feelings in expressing their identity through language.

Although speaking Khmer was a major part of the perceived identity among Cambodian migrants in Trat, learning Thai language was important to some. When discussing integration among the Sharers, a theme revealed that many migrant workers felt they worked hard to learn and speak fluent Thai for daily communication and better job opportunities in Thailand. Speaking Thai was not so much of an issue of identity but rather practical. Some felt that speaking Thai allowed them to live much easier in the country and provided more access to services like healthcare and hospitals. For the most part, however, those who revealed they could speak Thai always preferred to speak Khmer when possible.

In terms of integration and identity, many Cambodian migrants felt that Thai culture was not so different from their own. A common theme from the research revealed that many Sharers felt that it was not difficult to adapt to life in Thailand because they saw Cambodians and Thais coming from a similar culture and holding the same basic Buddhist beliefs. Many discussed sharing similar religious practices and celebrating together for religious ceremonies. They also mentioned that food, clothing, and general culture were not so different. This connection

between the migrant worker and the destination country tended to reinforce the feeling among Cambodians that they could express their cultural identity comfortably and with pride.

**“I feel that there is no difference between Cambodia and Thailand. I have never needed to adapt myself to being in Thailand because it is very similar to Cambodia.”**

-A 57-year-old Cambodian woman who had been living in Thailand for 14 years.

One of the unique identity factors was being labelled as a migrant, particularly among those who had lived in Thailand without legal status. Being a migrant was normally perceived as a negative aspect of identity among the Cambodian migrants. This identity was something discussed both from a self-perception dimension and how others perceived them. In terms of being Cambodian, there were references to facing discrimination by Thai residents and being seen as different. Particularly during times of political tension between Thailand and Cambodia, some Sharers felt their Cambodian identity caused them issues in everyday life.

**“I have been living here for a very long time. During the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, I was a migrant worker and could rarely go anywhere without being cursed at. But there was nothing I could do because we were in their home. I didn’t need to act brave, but be humble and keep doing my job to raise my family.**

-A 44-year-old Cambodian man living in Thailand for over 18 years.

## Bopha's Story

### Holding onto identity while living on the other side

Bopha is a 32-year-old woman originally from Koh Kong province in Cambodia. She moved to Thailand with her family when she was young. By the time she was 13 she started working to support her family, usually processing fish or shrimp or whatever jobs she came across. When she turned 18, her employer helped her to get a Cambodian passport and a Thai work permit so she could have more legal security. Since then, she has remained with the same employer.



Bopha's three children all study in Thai schools in Trat and she dreams that they will get a higher education so they can be independent and take care of themselves in the future.

Usually travelling back to Cambodia every year for the Water Festival, Bopha said that when she is not able to return, she visits the local Klong Makam temple, a popular Buddhist place of worship for Cambodians in the area. She only wears Cambodian clothing because she feels it is beautiful and part of her identity. She sees herself as a Cambodian living in Thailand, with the ability to integrate yet still retain her cultural background.

“When I go to a Thai market I speak Thai. I speak Khmer among Khmer people and am not ashamed to be Khmer,” she told the Listeners.

For the most part, Bopha feels that she has never had a problem living as a Cambodian in Thailand. There are, however, some stereotypes that she faces. She especially does not like it when people call her “Ka Men”, a term associated with the Khmer Rouge genocide period in Cambodia.





Bopha does hope to one day go back to Cambodia but does not imagine that happening until after her children graduate from school. Although her identity as a Cambodian national is substantial, her connection to Thailand is part of her life and will certainly impact the identity of her children as they grow up in a different country than where their mother came from.

## Through their own eyes

### One border, Two Lives

Beyond the research of this study, there were several other dimensions that the team used to better understand the lives of people across borders. After listening to the depth and richness of so many stories across the region, participants were trained in human-centred storytelling, a process that focuses on the common space between storytellers, audiences, and people who are filmed. All Listeners were trained in this methodology through the School for Slow Media and went back to their communities to plan a short film after having listened to stories during FLD. Five short films were produced and screened throughout the region.

The film in Trat province told the story of Neoun, a Cambodian migrant who talked about having two lives, one in his adopted country of Thailand, and another in his homeland in Cambodia. Like many migrant workers, Neoun discussed his appreciation for his life in Thailand but also the nostalgia he felt for Cambodia. Through his story on camera, we get a deeper understanding about the real lives of Cambodian migrants living across the border in Thailand.

## One Border, Two Lives

My name is Neoun. I am 44 years old.

In Cambodia, I live in Tonle Bet village Tonle Bet commune Tbong Khmum district of Kampong Cham province.

I've been here for over 10 years now.

At first, I couldn't secure a job. There were few jobs and the cost of living was quite high. In my village, there were no jobs. I had to move to Phnom Penh and other provinces, like Battambang, to work as a labourer. Or I would work as a construction worker.

Then I had my relatives working in Thailand. They helped me to come here.

I can live here without any worries about finding work because there are so many jobs available. Only those who are lazy won't get a job.

When I first came here, I didn't have any legal documents because I didn't have enough money. We came from Cambodia to Thailand with guides, otherwise it's not possible to cross the border. If we don't know the right route, we can't get across because there are landmines everywhere. It was so risky to come here to work.

When I arrived here I was an illegal migrant so I had to work on a fishing boat. Working on a fishing boat, we have to work like machines. We have to finish work on time no matter what happens. We can't rest or ask for sick leave. We have to work as long as we can get out of bed. We can't work like we do when we are on land.

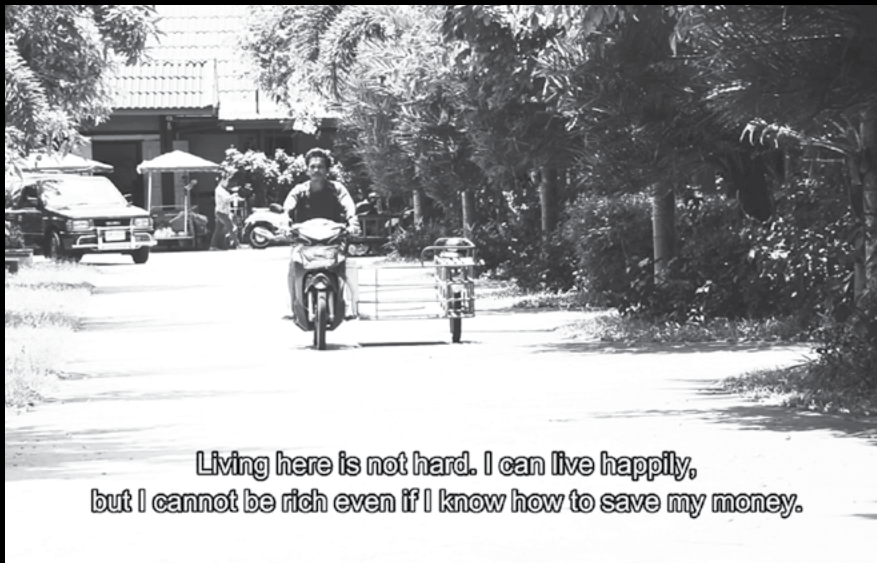
In the past, it depended if you had a good boss who paid you on time. But others had bad bosses who got them caught and deported after reporting them to the police.

I can make 400 THB (\$13 USD) per day. My workday is from 8am to 5pm with a one-hour break at lunchtime. For construction workers, there is a maximum workday schedule but for prawn peelers, there are no time regulations. Sometimes the day starts at 4am and doesn't finish until 11pm depending on the amount of work to do. There's no overtime pay. When I work in construction, I can go home at 5pm and take a shower which feels much better.

Living here is not hard. I can live happily but I cannot be rich even if I know how to save my money. So I decided to work in construction. During the dry season there is a lot of work but I have more free time during the rainy season.

I wouldn't live here if I had a good job in Cambodia. I also miss my relatives, and my dad. My mom passed away. I just want to live with him and see all my relatives. I do want to go back to my province but I don't know what I can do there for work except labour. But I'm getting old now and my energy is also low, unlike before when I was young.

# ONE BORDER, TWO LIVES - AN EXHIBITION



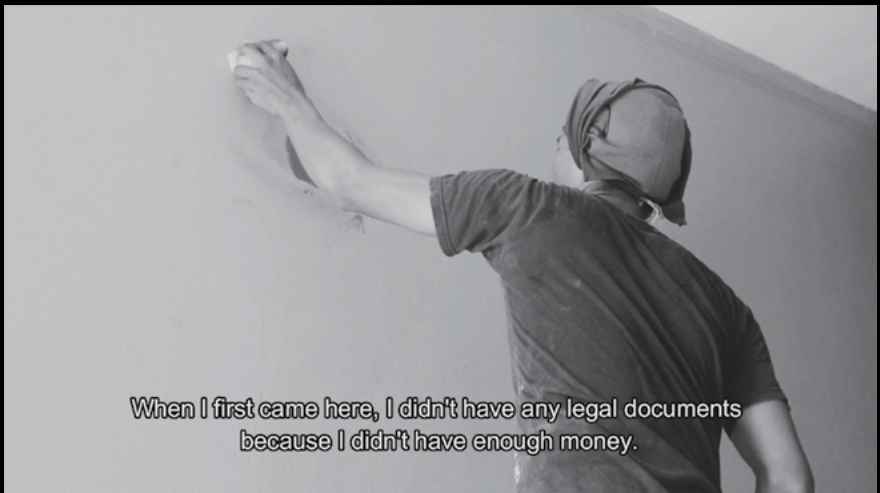
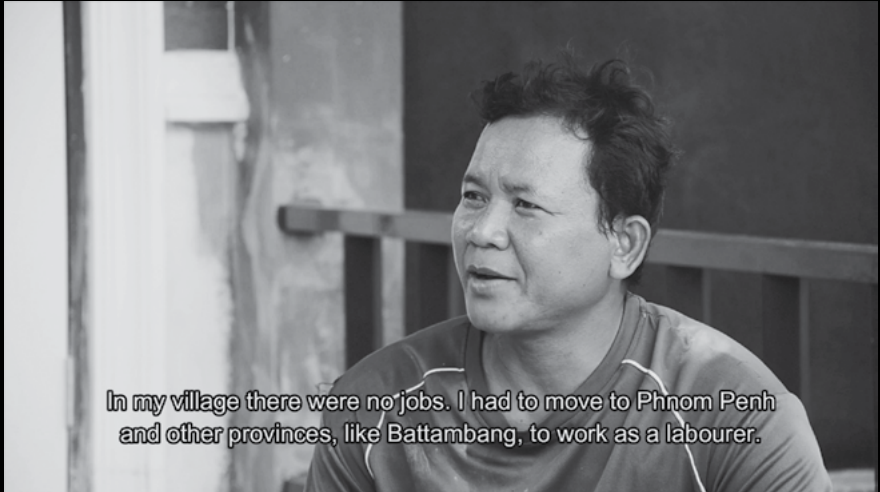
ONE BORDER, TWO LIVES - AN EXHIBITION



# ONE BORDER, TWO LIVES - AN EXHIBITION



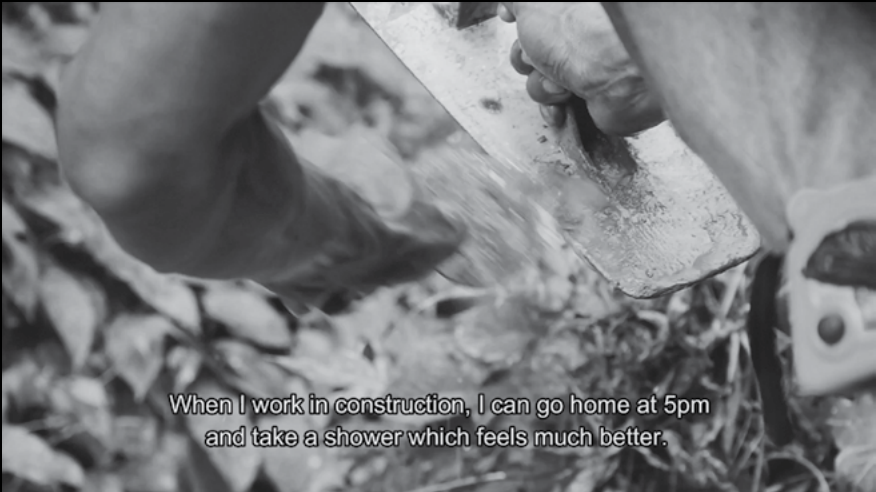
## ONE BORDER, TWO LIVES - AN EXHIBITION



# ONE BORDER, TWO LIVES - AN EXHIBITION



I can make 400 THB (\$13 USD) per day.



When I work in construction, I can go home at 5pm  
and take a shower which feels much better.



# 5

## Conclusion



# Diversity, connection, and a borderless imagination

Each country in Southeast Asia is considered home by a variety of people who are often categorised by what separates them from one another: different ethnic and religious groups, use of different languages, cultural heritage, familial or clan affiliations, socio-economic class, level of education, whether they live in urban or rural areas, (which often also determines access to services and familiarity with technology), or their political ideology and affiliation.

All of these countries also face multiple challenges in dealing with this diversity, particularly when it comes to providing sufficient legal and institutional protection to enable communities to flourish and grow on their own terms. As noted in the foreword, ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities have often been marginalised, neglected, and deprived of equal opportunities for advancement. Many governments in the region have discriminated against, oppressed, and in some instances, committed horrific violence against their ethnic, religious, and indigenous communities who oftentimes have merely asked that they be treated equally and be recognised like everyone else. In some cases, violence against these communities has been normalised - if not justified - by the majority population through deliberate omission or effective demonisation of minorities.

Even those who seek to help members of Indigenous or minority communities often do so with condescending and disempowering approaches that assume that Indigenous and ethnic minorities are powerless, voiceless, and helpless. By reframing the way we see each other and connecting people across borders through shared cultural links, we can celebrate diversity and differences and come closer to truly understanding how we connect to one another.

As a region, we need to do better to recognise and embrace diversity as a strength and come up with ways to draw attention to diverse stories. What we actually need to do is to recognise the power that already lives in these communities - in their traditions, practices, and beliefs. What remains for those of us working in solidarity with these groups is by acknowledging existing platforms and opportunities and how they can be accessed, and prioritising some voices over others. The hard work thereafter lies in figuring out how to adapt and modify these platforms so they can effectively amplify the voices and stories of diverse communities that have not been appropriately recognised, believed or respected.

This project is a start. By utilising the power of stories, we are able to draw attention to the similarities in our definitions of home, regardless of the artificial concepts such as citizenship and borders that divide us. In particular, the four snapshots of minority and migrant communities across the region show various narratives, but also highlight shared stories. Identity and sense of place or home play a strong role in perceiving oneself within a community as well as the direct relationship with another.

All four groups have a deep sense of place and a strong identification with home. Unsurprisingly, members from the three ethnic minority groups, most of whom have lived in their areas for generations, feel the strongest attachment to their homeland. The Khmer Surin of Thailand and the ethnic Khmer of Vietnam often express a sense of indigeneity to where they live. It is the place where ancestors have been for many generations; where they preserve their cultures and ways of life and celebrate their traditional festivals and ceremonies. The ethnic Vietnamese in floating villages in Cambodia express a profound sense of place on the water, where there is no question that home is along the river where they were born and where generations before them have made their lives. Everything about their home revolves around water, fish, and now, the dramatic changes taking place from outside efforts to relocate them. Unlike the other ethnic minority groups, the Cambodian migrants in Thailand often spoke about Cambodia as home, where most were born. They hold onto the memories of their Cambodian hometowns yet the same time see Trat as their home - a place where they are able to prosper more, benefit from services such as healthcare and education, live in relative harmony with other communities, and where they can carry out their lives without drastic change from their Cambodian upbringing.

Identity is complex for all minority groups. Nationality is particularly important for the Khmer Surin of Thailand and the Khmer Krom of Vietnam. Most see themselves as nationals of the country in which they are geographically located, where nationality plays a strong part in their sense of identity and how they perceive others outside their borders. They blur the sense of connected identity with Cambodian nationals, for example, and at times, Cambodians are “they,” but the Khmer are “us.” The ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia live in a very different situation. Most of them have been rendered stateless, living without any nationality because of their ethnic identity and where they were born. Most are not nationals of Cambodia because they cannot prove a line of citizenship, likely due to bureaucratic complexity, mainstream discrimination, and a vicious cycle of not being able to obtain documents over generations. They do not hold the same “Cambodian” identity that the Khmer minorities in the neighbouring countries have of their nationality. This leads to further isolation and fewer opportunities for integration or connection to other communities within their geographical borders. Cambodian migrants in Thailand tend to hold onto the national identity which they were afforded by the neighbouring country where they live. They mainly identify as Cambodian, living in Thailand, and continue to see their Cambodian nationality, and often Khmer ethnicity, as a part of their identity and connection to the community. Given that so many are undocumented, nationality is not so central in how they see themselves.

These stories demonstrate the importance of families: a shared love and appreciation for good food, and the ever-present yearning for and preserving of the familiar - whether that is by speaking the language we associate with home, carrying treasured photos, or practising rites and ceremonies we were taught as children. Other familiar themes in this book include the importance of having a source of livelihood and pride in our ability to create or make ourselves useful, as well as the willingness of people to sacrifice themselves by leaving their homes and their families in the hope that their efforts will improve the lives of their loved ones. Through these stories, we are able to subtly challenge the artificial use of borders to determine who belongs and who does not, who is worthy and who is not, and draw attention to the primary factor that brings us all together: that we are all humans with similar feelings, needs, and desires.

# Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them': Participatory action for the region?

*It was a scorching afternoon in Phnom Penh. We were sitting in a circle to talk about research ethics. A bag of objects (buttons and markers) of all different sizes, colours, and textures were poured out on the floor. We were asked to look at each one and note their shape, size, colour, and anything that distinguishes each from the other. We then organised them. A red button was moved to the side where there were more red objects. Then another black button was pushed to the other side. People moved the buttons or markers that matched similar shape and colour. We engaged in discussions of why they were put in certain places. Some people disagreed. While others wanted them not to move. Then we discussed our biases, beliefs, and what informs us in organising these objects this way (e.g. why lump all the blue objects even though they are different shapes?). Throughout this activity, we addressed the ethics of why sorting these out this way could be beneficial and harmful.*

-A reflection by a researcher holding a workshop with Women Peace Makers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

We finish off with this true story in practice because, at the heart of participatory research, it is a process involving many, many people. When communities lead their own research, there are always drivers and motivations, just as professional researchers and academics choose their own research paths for innumerable personal reasons. When the eight Listeners came together from three countries to explore their minority communities and those on other sides of their borders, an engine of knowledge generation and co-creation began to unfold.

Research is a systematic investigation to reinforce knowledge and/or produce new knowledge. It is intended to benefit the impacted community. In the case of participatory action research methodologies like FLD and Speaking for Ourselves

Action Research,<sup>50</sup> research is *not on* communities; rather research is done *with* the community. Often when this approach is applied, “the traditional hierarchy between research and participant-as-researcher [for example, co-researcher or Listener] can be dismantled and revised into a space where all knowledge is valued and heard.”<sup>51</sup> The FLD approach is a prime example of co-creating that space of knowledge that involves standardised steps in developing an intervention that leverages inquiry as both an information-gathering activity and a transformational process.

We started this work in communities and with communities to explore some outside understanding into the background, perceptions, and any issues people were dealing with. We also offered perspectives from the Listeners to provide a firsthand account of their journeys so that we could contextualise and ground our work in the community. We then drew on a sense of place and identity - two themes that strongly emerged in the unstructured conversations across the region.

Positioning research in the sense of place could have profound effects on meaning, memories, cultures, and people. We have shown this the transformation of how communities see themselves and others. We have found that it is not a binary of stories (Listener and Sharer), but rather a continuum of stories that can transform each other, offer spaces to hope together, and collaboratively build a foundation for critical reflection and understanding. Place identity exists strongly in minority communities in the region. Whether they are descendants of those who have been at the location over uncountable generations, or migrated at some point in a memorable moment, Listeners and Sharers see themselves or identify themselves in relation to their community and ecosystem. Through these layers of identity, we often find similarities and connections, regardless of which side of a border they happen to reside.

FLD continues to be a process in which communities can come together to better understand each other, find connection, celebrate difference, and build upon the

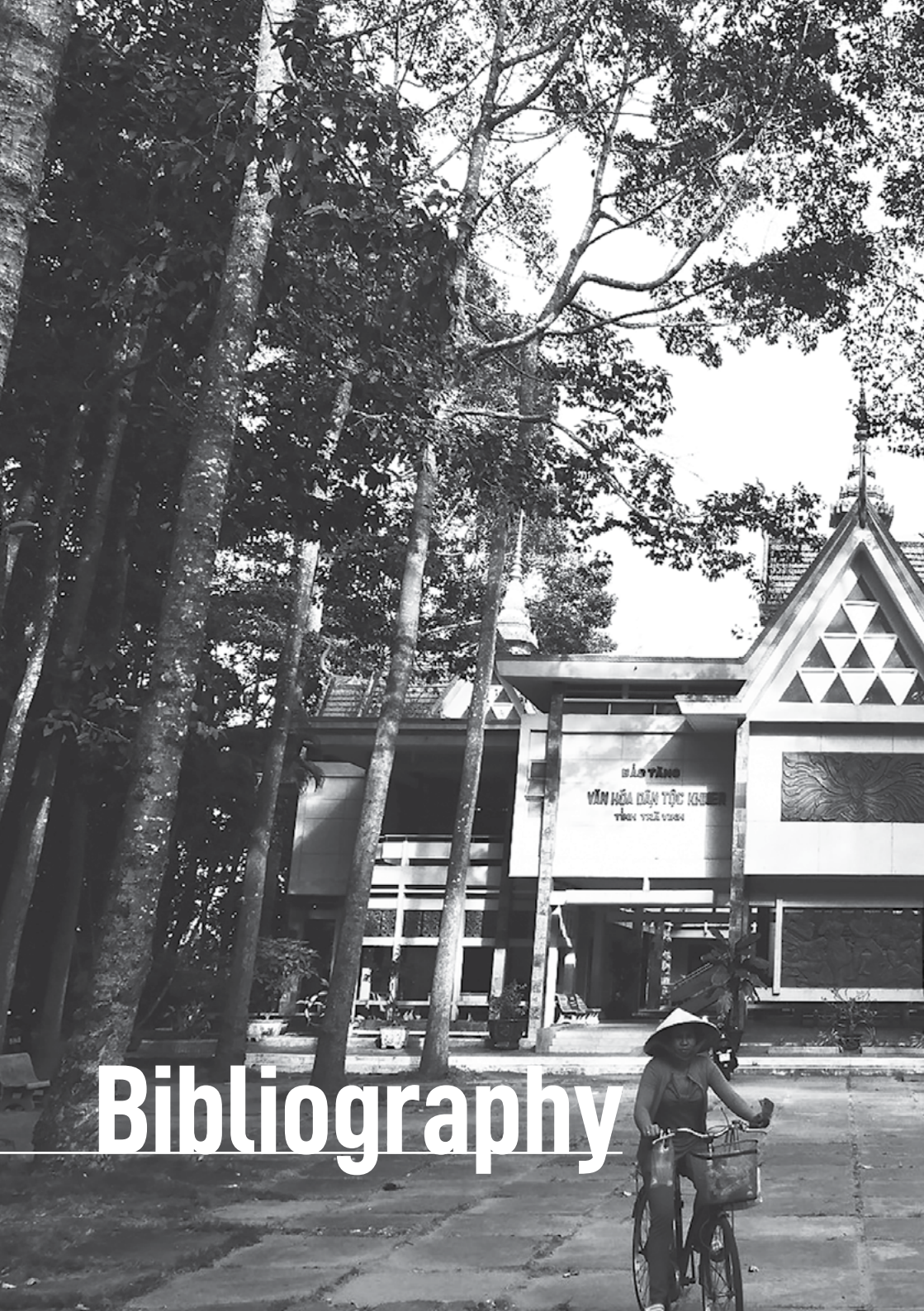
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<sup>50</sup> Staci B. Martin et al., “EdD Graduate Perspectives: Uplifting Our Own Voices,” *Impacting Education* 6, no. 1 (2021): pp. 45-52, <https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2021.124>.

<sup>51</sup> Staci B. Martin et al., “Participatory Action Research and Co-Researching as a Tool for Situating Youth Knowledge at the Centre of Research,” *London Review of Education* 17, no. 3 (2019): pp. 297-313, <https://doi.org/10.18546/lre.17.3.05,298>.

findings that emerge from their collective efforts. Unlike many other FLD initiatives, this regional work involved less focus on research questions or specific points of inquiry. Instead, it opened up possibilities for conversations with Sharers, touching on aspects of their lives, homes, thoughts about their neighbours, and beyond their borders. It allowed stories to materialise more naturally, in which sense of place and identity came to be how Listeners could begin to conceptualise and frame what they heard in the scope of a context that transcended borders. It provided an audience, to begin to step away from the *Who's Listening?* question and start instead to think *What Did You Hear?* It provided the space to not only gather information from others, but to imagine, together, how to relate to one another in a space where borders no longer matter.

Beyond our minority Listeners who courageously engaged their communities and connected to others, our research coordination team, composed of members from the mainstream groups of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, engaged in community fieldwork in minority communities of their own countries in accompaniment to the Listeners. They explored places within their borders that often felt unfamiliar and different from what they knew about their nations. This exploration into the lives of minority groups in their own countries broadened their understanding of the complex fabric making up their multicultural societies. During reflection with the regional minority Listeners, the coordinators of mainstream groups commented that they suddenly felt like minorities themselves, being the odd ones out around a group that shared common languages, dual cultures, and historical narratives. It is only when we try to understand the perspectives of others or find a way to relate to them that we can start to understand 'us' to know 'them.'



VĂN HÓA  
DÂN TỘC KHU  
TỈNH VÀI THỜI

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# Annex

# Most Heard Themes

The themes presented come from the FLD work that was carried out in four communities in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The FLD Listeners collected the data during fieldwork in their respective countries and it was later analysed during the Info-Space Lab in Buriram, Thailand. Themes have also been ranked in order of frequency heard by the Listeners and each grouping represents the voices of 40 Sharers from each community. As per the FLD methodology, themes presented come directly from those who shared their views with the Listeners.

## Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia

1. Every year there is more pressure for us to leave the river and relocate to land due to environmental concerns from outside the community.
2. Fishing is the lifeline of our community because we have spent our entire lives on boats.
3. Our concern is that we do not have the necessary skills to live on land.
4. Our children are unable to be well educated because they do not have any documents.
5. We want a place to call home and live in harmony.
6. Life in our community is getting harder and harder as fish numbers dwindle.
7. Most of us wish to live in this community rather than going to Vietnam or elsewhere.
8. We live peacefully beside our Cambodian and Khmer neighbours, supporting and leaning on each other.
9. We see ourselves as ethnic Vietnamese who are born in Cambodia.

## Ethnic Khmer in Vietnam

1. Learning the Khmer language is the key to protect and preserve our Khmer identity and culture. Having another language in life also prepares us for more economic opportunities.
2. Pagodas have always been the core of Khmer culture in Tra Vinh. Monks are the centre of our culture.
3. We Khmer in Tra Vinh are known for honesty, hard-working and for strong beliefs.
4. Ethnic Khmer citizens of Vietnam receive more improved support and benefits in the country.
5. Our Khmer people in Tra Vinh used to be protective and territorial of their group. However, now they accept more of ethnic diversity.
6. We Khmer in Tra Vinh province of Vietnam practice Theravada Buddhism, like our brothers and sisters in Cambodia.
7. The older generation speaks more traditional Khmer. Younger people now speak a more mixed language of Khmer and Vietnamese though we do not consider this more modern way of speaking as a dialect.
8. All ethnic Khmer people living anywhere share the same language, culture, beliefs, food, and dress. Our Khmer blood runs deep.

## Khmer Surin in Thailand

1. We are not sure about our roots, but some of us want to learn more about our Khmer ancestry.
2. In Surin, we strongly wish our children to become Thai government officials to bring family honour and economic stability.
3. Our Khmer Surin people here continue to maintain our identity by practising Khmer traditions and culture daily.
4. Our Khmer Surin dialect has uniquely evolved through generations of contact between Khmer and Thai peoples and is constantly evolving into its modern dialect form spoken today.
5. Khmer Surin are mostly friendly, kind, caring, and hardworking.
6. Everyone respects the King (Rama the 9th).
7. We need better infrastructure in our community. We dream about a more developed region for our Khmer Surin community.



8. We mostly prefer a simple life that provides us with our basic needs.
9. We need to expand our market for our unique silk weaving methods in the community.

## Cambodian migrants in Thailand

1. We come to Thailand to seek out economic opportunities and better lives.
2. There are good and bad people everywhere, this includes both in Thailand or Cambodia.
3. We truly wish to see our children reach higher education and earn enough ourselves to survive in Thailand.
4. We plan to stay in Thailand to work but if the law makes us illegal, we have to go back to our homeland, Cambodia.
5. We try hard to speak fluent Thai for daily communication and the best job opportunities.
6. We strive to maintain our Cambodian culture even though we are in Thailand.
7. It is not difficult to adapt to life here because we Cambodians and the Thais come from a similar shared culture and hold the same Buddhist beliefs.
8. We come to Thailand for work but Cambodia is still home for many of us.
9. The legal requirements to live here are so difficult to fulfil. There are many rights we have but we also worry we will lose our jobs if we are reported.

# About the authors

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*Who's Listening?* is a question many minorities have asked themselves. The third and final edition of the *Who's Listening?* series questions assumptions on who we see as 'us' and 'them.' Like the two previous editions, storytelling is central. This edition goes beyond borders by piecing together perceptions of minority communities in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. *Understanding 'Us' to know 'Them'* is not only a framework to challenge identity and how you interact with "the Other," but it is also a journey of self-discovery and connection.

Over several years, eight young people from ethnic minority groups and migrant communities in the Mekong region came together to explore life across borders and question how nationality often divides us. By conducting participatory action peace research in their communities, they gained a wealth of new knowledge on sense of place and identity.

Beyond just the research, they raised serious questions about belonging, borders, identity, and definitions of home. Connected through shared languages, stories, and being a minority within the boundaries of the place they call home, the group demonstrated that people can transcend borders and that nationality does not need to be the first marker of one's identity. Instead, what binds people are shared experiences, love for their families and children, yearning for familiar food, and appreciation for their culture.

