

Individual and Structural Determinants of Marital Stability:
Matchmaking, Gender Ratio, and Modernization in Cambodia

Patrick Heuveline and Bunnak Poch

Population Research Center, NORC & The University of Chicago

In Cambodia, marriage traditionally follows an extended spouse selection process, negotiated primarily by the parents of the potential spouses. Like in many other societies (e.g., Bourdieu 1972), the parents' foremost concern, or strategy, is to ensure that their offspring marriage associates them with a family of satisfactory social status, they also seek to ensure the stability of the future union by matching persons with compatible traits. Shared beliefs about what contributes to marital harmony and to a proper husband-and-wife relationship are embodied in compatibility norms whose efficiency in improving marital stability can hardly be assessed. Even if marriages that deviate from those norms are found to be less stable over time, individuals entering least-favored marriage arrangements are likely to be selected based on other potentially disruptive characteristics; and moreover, they might be subjected to self-fulfilling-prophecy behaviors from their immediate surroundings. These concerns are reduced when historical events affect spousal selection for entire marriage cohorts. In the U.S., for instance, researchers have linked the greater likelihood of divorce experienced by cohorts married during World War II (Preston and McDonald 1979) or during the Vietnam War (South 1985) to hastened marriages. Cambodia's traditional marriage system was much more profoundly disrupted by the tragic events of the late 1970s, however.

Upon seizing power in April 1975, the Khmers Rouges (KR) swiftly attempted to sever all individual ties other than those linked to the political hierarchy by sweeping away fundamental bases of traditional Cambodian society such as private land ownership, religious rituals, and kinship responsibilities (Carney 1989; Ebihara 1993; Kiernan 1996). To reflect the new collective social organization, the KR organized group marriages often without consideration for the families' preferences and traditional matching criteria. While not all marriages contracted during the KR regime were arbitrarily arranged, the period conditions prevented most marriages from adhering to the traditional, careful matching process of previous marriages cohorts.

While traditional marriage practices resumed after the KR regime's fall in January 1979, its short-lived attempt to radically transform Cambodian society left indelible marks, perhaps most conspicuously the distorted demographic structure. Between 1975 and 1979, executions, epidemics, exhaustion, and starvation killed an estimated 1.5 to 2.0 million people, that is, nearly one quarter of Cambodia's 1975 population (Kiernan 1996; Heuveline 1998). As male adult mortality largely exceeded female adult mortality during these years, the population sex ratio was estimated at only 75 men per 100 women over the age of 15 years in 1980 (Huguet 1992). If criteria of eligibility are too rigid, a low gender ratio in the adult population yields a shortage of eligible men respective to the number of eligible women, and thus lowers women's probabilities of ever marrying, as Wilson (1987) has argued is the case for African American women, for instance (see Bennett, Bloom, and Craig 1989 and Lichter et al. 1992 for empirical evaluation). A low sex ratio might also affect the stability of extant marriages by increasing the remarriage prospects for married men were they to end their marriage, and Trent and South (1989)

indeed found an association between low sex ratios and high divorces rates across 66 countries.

While Cambodia's population sex ratio gradually returned to normal with successive balanced birth cohorts, the next challenge to the stability of its traditional marriage system may arise from the end of its political, economic, and cultural isolation. Contrary to the oft-expressed view that modernization destabilizes the institution of marriage and increases divorce and separation rates that were traditionally low, Jones (1997) and Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan (2003) found that marital disruption actually declined in the Islamic countries of Southeast Asia. Even in Thailand, a country whose social traditions more closely resembles that of Cambodia, Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan estimate that the probability of divorce or separation during the first five years of marriage has not declined but instead has remained at the moderately-high level of ten percent for the first marriage cohorts of 1945 to 1969 (2003:223).

The Cambodian marriage system has therefore experienced three major changes -- found elsewhere to affect marital stability, but perhaps nowhere experienced as brutally as in Cambodia since 1975: (1) the conditions under which the spouses of the 1975-1978 marriage cohorts were matched, (2) the potentially destabilizing context of a gender imbalance in the marriage market in the post-KR period, and (3) the swift opening of Cambodian society in the most recent period. In this paper, we use retrospective questions from the nationally representative 2000 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS 2000) and from the Mekong Island Population Laboratory (MIPopLab), a demographic surveillance system launched the same year, to analyze divorce or separation trends over time and across marriage cohorts. In particular, we attempt to

isolate the respective impact of these three major changes on the risk of marital disruption.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1972. "Les strategies matrimoniales dans le système de reproduction." *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 27(4-5):1105-27.
- Carney, Timothy. 1989. "The Unexpected Victory." *Cambodia, 1975-1978: Rendezvous With Death*, edited by K. D. Jackson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ebihara, May. 1993. "A Cambodian Village Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979." Pp. 51-63 in *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations and the International Community*, edited by B. Kiernan. New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies.
- Heuveline, Patrick. 1998. "Between One and Three Million': Towards the Demographic Reconstruction of a Decade of Cambodian History (1970-79)." *Population Studies* 52(1):49-65.
- Hirschman, Charles, and Bussarawan Teerawitchitchainan. 2003. "Cultural and Socioeconomic Influences on Divorce During Modernization: Southeast Asia, 1940s to 1970s." *Population and Development Review* 29(2):215-53.
- Huguet, Jerold. 1992. "The Demographic Situation in Cambodia." *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 6(4):79-91.
- Jones, Gavin W. 1997. "Modernization and Divorce: Contrasting Trends in Islamic Southeast Asia and the West." *Population and Development Review* 23(1):95-114.
- Kiernan, Benedict. 1996. *The Pol Pot Regime*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Preston, Samuel H., and John McDonald. 1979. "The Incidence of Divorce Within Cohorts of American Marriages Contracted Since the Civil War." *Demography* 16(1):1-25.
- South, Scott J. 1985. "Economic Conditions and the Divorce Rate: a Time Series Analysis of the Postwar United States." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47(1):31-41.
- Trent, Katherine, and Scott J. South. 1989. "Structural Determinants of the Divorce Rates: A Cross-Societal Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51(2):391-404.
- Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.