

Looking for the origin of the word Yuon

Shut your mouth, I
order you to stop using
the word Yuon !



The word *Yuon* is commonly used by the Cambodians for many hundred years until to the present time. But since the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in January 1979, the Cambodians have been accused of being racist for using this word. Recently, the controversy is once again raised by Ou Virak, the President of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

For this reason, we wish to shed light on the origin of this word. Due to this recurrent controversy, some of authors have provided us some of explanations through their article. We wish to ask the authorization to publish their article in our December issue.

Kith Chamroeun and Chhum Daravuddh

Editors of *Cambodian Perspective Review*

The origin of the word *Yuon*

Prak Vincent, December 15, 2013

Following the open letter of Ou Virak – the substitute of Kem Sokha as Director of the Centre for Human Rights - criticizing the use of the word “*Yuon*” by Sam Rainsy, we wish to understand and analyze the origins of this word.

It is not the first time that the Vietnamese are trying to ban us from calling them *Yuon*. The Vietnamese willingness to prevent the Khmer people from using the word *Yuon* was expressed during the elections 1991-1993 through Yasushi Akashi’s mouth, the representative of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). This willingness comes back with the person of Ou Virak, for whom this word is supposedly derogatory and racist against the Vietnamese people.

Why such an obstinacy to ban us from using this word and what are its etymological origins?

For Frederic Loerung, according to his research, the word *Yuon* could come from an altered pronunciation by times of a kingdom called the Nanyue (in Chinese: 南越; pinyin: Nányuè). In mandarin Chinese, Nanyue means 南 Nán=South, 越 yuè = the Yue).

Thanks to the map below provided by Roshane Saidnattar, we can see that this kingdom covered the current territory of the Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan, as well as a Northern part of current Vietnam. This kingdom was therefore ruled by the Southern Yue Dynasty. At that time, the Khmer empire and the kingdom Nanyue had no territorial connection. It is seemingly said that the Khmers had no direct relationship with the *Yue*.

It is through the contact with the Chams, people of Champa kingdom of (center of current Vietnam), that the Khmers have kept in mind this word. According to Professor Thach Toan, the Chams could not pronounce the word Nan and then they only use *Yue*, that turned into *Yuon*.

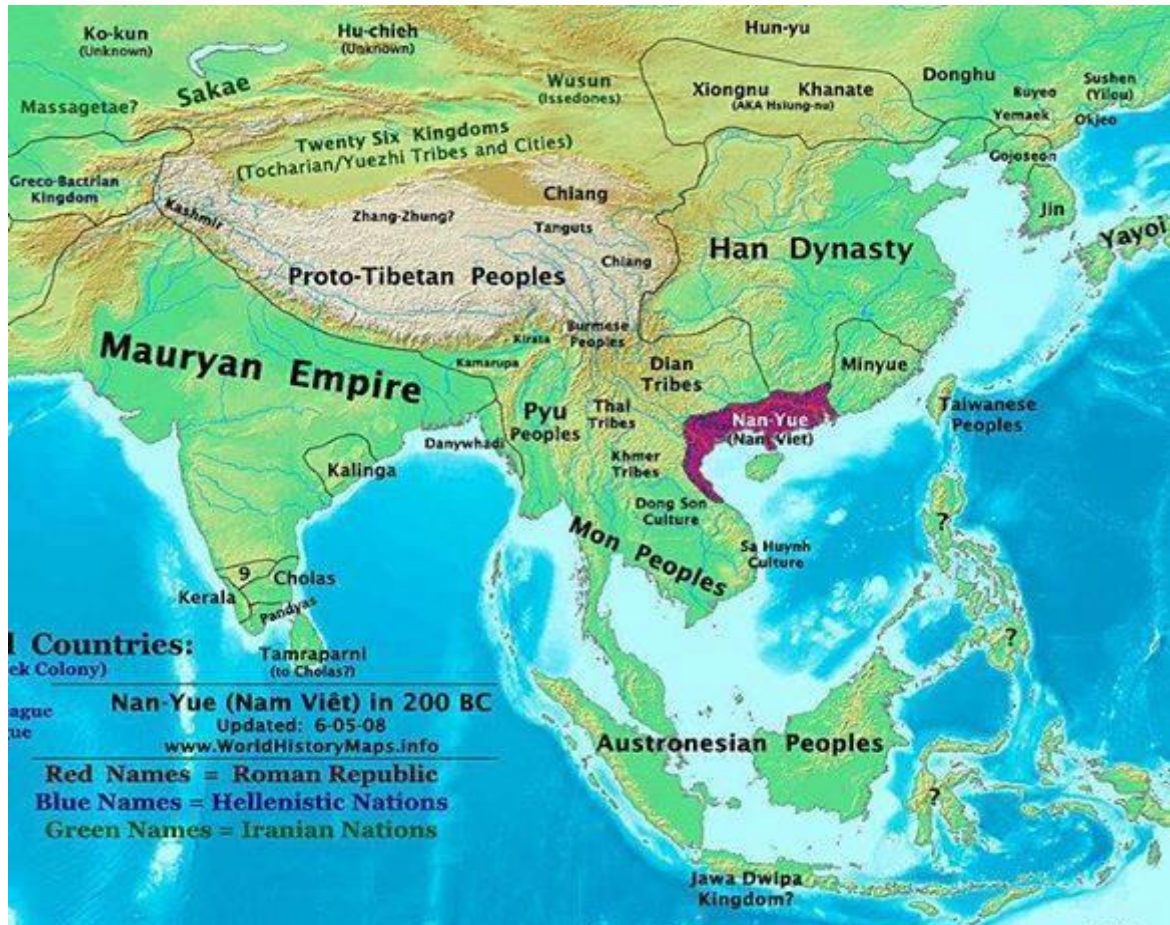
According to Dora Hem-Reun, the explanations of Professor Thach Toan are similar to those provided by Professor Keng Vannsak, a famous historian and specialist in Khmer literature, who has been interviewed just before he died by Sam Borin, a journalist from Radio Free Asia (RFA), about the origin of the word *Yuon*.

So the term “*Yuon*” does exist since the dawn of time. The Khmer people have always used this term while talking about the Vietnamese, because the word “Vietnamese”, having a

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Latin origin, does not exist in the Khmer language. In all research done by these people, this term has no derogative connotation and not racist either. According to Dy Kareth, his Vietnamese neighbors called themselves *Yuon* 60 years ago. Even Sin Sisamuth used this word in his beautiful and popular songs.

Nan Yue Kingdom



Source : <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=566315653450614&set=a.488440787904768.1073741826.488430697905777&type=1&theater>

In addition, the Khmers are not the only ones who use the word “*Yuon*”. According to Charles Keyes*, the Thai (*Siem*) do as well. The word *Youn* is even commonly used in administrative purposes. For example, the ID card below uses this mention “Race / Nationality: *Yuon*”.

* Charles Keyes, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and International Studies, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington.

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According to Roshane Saidnattar, who has attended Professor POU Saveros class during her studies, the word « *Yuon* » even exists in old Khmer dictionaries. For her professor, the word “*Yuon*” does exist and has always been used by the Khmers for long time. We call the Vietnamese “*Yuon*” just in the same way we call “*Siem*” while referring to Thai. This term has no derogatory or racist meaning. The word “Vietnamese” has appeared recently in the same way as the word “Cambodian”. In Cambodia, we call ourselves Khmer and never Cambodian. Moreover, the *Yuons* have also their own word to call the Khmer people. This word is “*Cao Miên*”.

These etymological aspects of the word *Yuon* were also analyzed by some of scholars in October 2009 during a debate at the University of Washington. The outcome of this debate is in line with the one of our Khmer specialists. For Therese Guyot and Oscar Saleminck, the word *Yuon*, found in the Cham archives, is not derogative. The Chams use the word *Yuon klap* while talking about the people from Tonkin, the birthplace of current Vietnam. For Steve Heder, a specialist of Cambodia, the use of the word *Yuon*, *Siem*, *Khloeng* (Indian) has no pejorative and no racist connotation. The use of these terms dates from the pre-colonial era.

As the word “*Yuon*” is in the recurrent use in the Khmer language for long time, why the Khmer people must stop using it now?

As not being a specialist of history or politico-strategic analysis of Vietnam, we think that the reasons for which the Vietnamese want the Khmers to stop using that word should certainly have something related to a strategic calculation to hide their initial home base

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from Nanyue kingdom.

They certainly do not want the new generation of Khmers to understand that the land of today's Vietnam has been built with successive persecution and annexations of indigenous people land (Cham, the Montagnard and Khmer Krom).

Today, these people are considered as a second-class citizen and have no cultural or racial identity anymore. Their basic rights are systematically abused. For example the last names of the Khmer Krom people have been changed to Thach Son, Kim, etc, to facilitate discrimination and persecution until today.

Recently not later than September 27, 2013, two Khmer Krom monks are wrongfully convicted by the court of Soc Trang Province from four to six years imprisonment. Their only crime is just related to the fact that they wanted to teach the Khmer language to other Khmer Krom people.

At the time of the ongoing move of the border lines inside the Khmer territory and the colonization of Cambodia through politically organized settlement of Vietnamese settlers on the Khmer peasants land and the control over all Cambodian economic resources (tourism, hotels, fishing, oil, wood, rubber, etc.) the Vietnamese certainly want to hide their expansionist and especially *absorptionist* nature vis-à-vis the young generations of Cambodians in Cambodia, this remaining piece of land and seas from the Khmer empire after centuries of encroachment and subsequent annexations (refer to the maps in annex).

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Cambodia at the time of Khmer empire



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Today's Cambodia



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Khmer Language and the Term “Yuon”

By Bora Touch, Sydney, Australia

<http://www.khmerinstitute.org/musings/mu4.html>

Note: The position taken by Mr. Bora Touch is also endorsed by the Khmer Institute.

Although Cambodians have used the term "yuon" for centuries to refer to their Vietnamese neighbors, in the early 1990s under UNTAC, use of the term suddenly became taboo. Foreign academics dubbed it racist and unjustly condemned Cambodian usage of the word; all the while, they fail to point out that there is no other word in the Khmer language for Vietnamese. One of the most recent examples of the continued ignorance on the part of foreign academics concerning this term appeared in a Washington Times editorial dated 13 September 02 ([see below](#)). In his commentary regarding Cambodia's current political environment, an academic named David Roberts chastises democratic politician Sam Rainsy, calling him a "virulent racist" and "a disappointed authoritarian in the Cambodian tradition". Nothing is mentioned of Mr. Rainsy's record of promoting human and labor rights, democratic principles, transparency in government, environmental protection, and the rule of law in Cambodia. Nothing is mentioned about the fact that he is internationally recognized for his efforts to bring freedom, democracy, and justice to Cambodia. Simply because Mr. Rainsy chooses to use the Khmer word for Vietnamese, Roberts labels him a "racist manipulator who [has] little or no interest in [his] country".

To these foreign "experts" on Cambodia, the term "yuon" is considered to be contemptible and derogatory. According to Roberts, it has a savage connotation. Not only has Roberts fallen victim to his ignorance of the Khmer language, but others have as well. Mr. Yasushi Akashi, the head of UNTAC, was reportedly disturbed to the extent of speechlessness when a Cambodian journalist used the word "yuon" in his questions.

To say that "yuon" means "savages", critics of the term are likely reliant on the Khmer Rouge's definition from KR Black Book (1978) p.9, a definition that is incorrect and baseless and was included by the KR for the purpose of propaganda. Some Khmer, including Khmer Krom, believe that "yuon" actually derives from "Yuonan", the Chinese word for Vietnam. Others believe it comes from the Yaun (Khan) dynasty, against whose armies both the Khmer and Cham did battle. Regardless of its origin, Khmers have used the term since the early stages of our history. The word "yuon" appears in Khmer inscriptions dating back to the reign of King Suryavarman I (1002-1050), when it was used in the context of trade and commerce to refer to the Vietnamese people and in no way suggested contempt (see Inscription K105; Coedes, Inscriptions du Cambodge; K. Hall, Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia (1985)).

The term "yuon" was later also used by early European travelers and officials; for instance, by the British linguist Lt-Col. James Low in his "On the Ancient Connection Between Kenah and Siam", Journal Indian Arch. Vol v. (1851) p.513; by famous French naturalist Henri Mouhot in his "Notes on Cambodia, Lao Country," Journal Royal Geog. Soc. London, Vol. 32 (1862) p.157; and by famous Thai King Mongkut (1851-68) in his official correspondence,

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Pharatchahatthalekha prahatsomdet phrachomklaochauyuhau (114-116). Even after the independence of Indochina, "yuon" was still in use by some French writers; for instance, by a French Sgt. Resen Riesen, *Jungle Mission* (1957). In writings, the term "yuon" was not used as a racist slur or to indicate contempt, but simply to refer to what since World War II has been known as the Vietnamese people. In Cambodian-English language dictionaries, "yuon" is defined as "Vietnamese" and vice versa.

The term "yuon" has made it into other aspects of Khmer culture and society as well. A very popular Khmer dish is "samlor mchu yuon", meaning Vietnamese sour soup. It would be incredibly odd to call this particular dish "samlor mchu Vietnam" because it is not the traditional name, and even Vietnamese-Cambodians refer to it using the word "yuon". Since the early 1900s, in Battambang and other provinces, there are pagodas called "Wat Lok Yuon" or Temple of Vietnamese Monks. If "yuon" were a term of contempt or derogatory in any way, the Buddhist Khmer would not refer to the monks or the temples with the word "yuon" because doing so would be considered sinful. The term "lok" that precedes "yuon" is in fact a title conveying sentiments of great respect and deference. If the word "yuon" were truly depreciatory, it would not be preceded by a title of such esteem.

Khmer language has been under attack for centuries. In the 18th century, the Vietnamese imperialists who oversaw Cambodia attempted to force Khmers to change our customs and language. They renamed all of Cambodia's provinces and even the country itself, as they have done in what is today Southern Vietnam (formerly Kampuchea Krom or Lower Cambodia). In the 20th century, French imperialists attempted to force Khmers to change our script to a Romanic writing style, as they had done to the Vietnamese language. Now, we are again under pressure to change our language: this time under the guise of political correctness. And again it is a function of ignorance and racism: ignorance of the Khmer language and racist to try to impose outside will on the Khmer people. Those who attempt to impose this incorrect standard of political correctness on the Khmer language and people are badly misguided.

The term "yuon" is an ancient/traditional word in the Khmer language and a legitimate part of Khmer linguistic heritage. Khmers such as Mr. Sam Rainsy should be given the freedom to speak the language of our forefathers without being subject to defamatory accusations that fly in the face of all his many noble efforts. Academics such as David Roberts who incorrectly associate the word with racism should refrain from their imprudent judgmentalism.

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Is Using the Word "Yuon" Justified and Beneficial for Khmer?

By Kenneth So

The issue of Westerners objecting to Khmers for calling a Vietnamese "Yuon" has come up over and over again since UNTAC came to Cambodia. We have been called racists for using this word.

I have written many articles responding to those accusations and even sent a letter to The Washington Times defending Mr. Sam Rainsy when this newspaper published a letter from Dr. David Roberts (Lecture from the school of History and International Affairs, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland) accusing Mr. Sam Rainsy as racist. Attached please see my letter that I wrote to the newspaper on September 20, 2002.

Because of the expenditure (time, energy, and political) we spend defending our position on this issue and get us back to full circle, I am rethinking my position on this subject. I will always defend our right to use the word "Yuon" to refer to a Vietnamese whenever we speak or write in Khmer. However, we have the choice to use the word "Yuon" whenever we write in English or speak to a Westerner, but is it prudent or beneficial for us to do so?

Before I express my position further on this subject, allow me first to educate the Westerners who think they really understand Khmer people.

There is no doubt in my mind that some Westerners know and understand the Khmer language very well. Some of them who have been staying in Cambodia for a long time may even feel that they know how Khmer people think and behave. However, I don't believe that the understanding of a Khmer language alone and also living in Cambodia (some for a short and some for a long period of time) will truly open up the Khmer soul to Westerners. Khmerness is more than knowing the language and living in Cambodia. Khmerness is speaking the language, understanding Khmer idioms, appreciating Khmer jokes and their nuances, and enjoying Khmer musics and poetries. It is a feeling that resonates with the feelings of Khmer people living in Cambodia. A Khmer is a person that has never had the comfort and security that Westerners have in which they take it for granted. A Khmer is not synonymous with Pol Pot. The actions that Pol Pot had committed and the Western media description of his evilness have portrayed Khmer people as savage, uncivilized, and racist. A Khmer is a person who is proud of the civilization that Angkor has left as its legacy. Khmers are people that are constantly living under threat, both within and without the kingdom, who have witnessed the disappearance of Khmer territory to their powerful neighbors. If one does not have any of those feelings, one can never totally comprehend a Khmer.

Having said that, I will attempt to explain that the word "Youn" is not a racist word. The word "Youn" in a Khmer language is a neutral word. In general, when we call the Vietnamese "Youn", there is no malice intended.

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I believe most Westerners' confusion come from the fact that there is a word Vietnamese in the Western vocabulary. The misunderstanding is that for Khmer people to opt using the word "Youn" instead of the word Vietnamese give Westerners the impression that we are racists.

I think I can explain this. When we speak in Khmer, it is very awkward and does not sound right to the ear to use the word Vietnamese. However, when we speak in English or French then it is more natural to use the word Vietnamese and it would become awkward to use the word "Youn."

Let me give an example. If I want to say, "Fishermen are mostly Vietnamese" and I want to use both words, "Youn" and Vietnamese, to say that sentence in Khmer. In Khmer we would then say, "Pourk Neak Nisart Trey Keu Chreun Tè Youn" or "Pourk Neak Nisart Trey Keu Chreun Tè Choun Cheat Vietnam". It therefore requires more effort to use the word Vietnam to describe the Vietnamese because we have to say "Choun Cheat Vietnam" to describe a Vietnamese. We cannot say, "Pourk Neak Nisart Trey Keu Chreun Tè Vietnam" because Vietnam is a country. In Khmer, the word Vietnamese alone does not exist unless one uses the word "Youn."

It is rare in Khmer language to have a racist word attributed to different races. However, this does not mean that we don't have a strong vocabulary that connotes racism. If we hate or disrespect somebody we would add an adjective "A" in front of the word that we intend to use. If we say "A Youn", then it is a sign of disrespect but not necessarily a racist remark. To be racist we would have to say "A Katop", "A Gnieung", or "A Sakei Daung." Some Westerners who compare the word "Youn" that we use to call a Vietnamese to the word Nigger that the Americans use to call a Black is completely misleading and show that they do not know really understand the Khmer language.

If we were to speak in Khmer and call the Vietnamese "A Katop", then I would consider it derogatory and racist in content. If we were to say, "Pourk Youn" or simply "Youn", meaning Vietnamese people or Vietnamese, respectively, then there is no reason for Westerners to condemn us for saying so. If we were to say, "A Youn", again it does not necessarily mean racism but rather a disrespectful way of calling a Vietnamese.

To show Westerners how a meaning is changed when we apply the adjective "A" in front of a sentence. For example, when a Khmer says, "Lombol Yo, Tveu Oy Ahgn Lours Proleung", which more or less means, "Son of a gun, you scare the hell out of me." Now, if I add "A" in front of the sentence such as, "A Lombol Yo, Tveu Oy Ahgn Lours Proleung", then the meaning is becoming more vulgar, which is equivalent to saying, "Son of a bitch, you scare the hell out of me."

I have a Khmer friend who is married to a Vietnamese woman. He calls his wife "Youn" all the time. He said, "Propaun khniom Youn", meaning my wife is Vietnamese. Is he racist then? If he is racist why would he marry a Vietnamese?

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It is very dangerous for Westerners who do not know the intricacies and the little nuances of the Khmer language to theorize on the meaning of certain words or phrases. The misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the Khmer language can harm us tremendously.

Many Khmers feel that we should not bend and accommodate to the will and whim of the Westerners because of their ignorance. The inaptitude of the Westerners on the understanding of the usage of the word "Youn" reminds me of a recent case that took place in the United States. The teacher of a high school was using the word "Niggardly" to describe a person that is very stingy about his spending. Because of this, he was reprimanded and told not to use that word again because its sounds too much like the word Nigger.

Now that I have educated the Westerners, should I feel free to use the word "Yuon" from now on? Recently, a friend of mine made a comment that Khmers have used the word "Yuon" over centuries, as recently as during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum of Norodom Sihanouk both in newspapers and over the radio air waves. He further said, there should not be any reasons for Khmers to stop using the word "Yuon" because of complains from the international community and protest from the Vietnamese government that consider the word to be derogatory.

The above comment is fair. Now, let me state my position on this subject. As a pragmatist, I am looking for what is best for Cambodia as she moves into the 21st Century and into the era of internet and globalization.

As I try to remember, I don't believe I have ever encountered the use of the word "Yuon" in French or English newspapers/magazines in Cambodia back during the era of Sangkum Reastr Niyum. I do not recall Khmers calling a Vietnamese "Yuon" when speaking in French. We, especially my family and I, always said "les vietnamiens et les chinois" and not "les yuons et les chens." However, I think it is still appropriate to us the word "Yuon" when speaking or writing in Khmer.

Having said that, I will give my reasons why it is more beneficial for us to stop using the word "Yuon" whenever we speak or write in French or English.

Reason #1

Comparing the time during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum to today is not appropriate. Cambodia was relatively independent and self-sufficient during Sangkum Reastr Niyum. However, Cambodia of today is not independent because we receive about 50% of financial aids from foreign governments and the UN. Because we are at the mercy of foreign governments and the UN for our economic survival, therefore we cannot ignore advices or suggestions from them.

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Reason #2

I believe the misunderstanding on the meaning of the word "Yuon" was caused by foreign advisors to Yasushi Akashi when he was the head of UNTAC in Cambodia. Those so-called foreign experts in Khmer language told Akashi that the word "Yuon" was a derogatory word. This misunderstanding then spread out like a wildfire. Now it is impossible to convince Westerners otherwise. We would have spent too much energy defending the usage of the word "Yuon" and reaching only a small percentage of the western population for our explanation. Do we have to defend our usage of the word "Yuon" every time a Westerner questions our intention? Can our valuable time be put to better use instead?

Reason #3

There are words in English or French for Vietnamese or Chinese. If we were to write in French or English and decide to use the word "Yuon" or "Chen" instead of the internationally recognizable words for Vietnamese and Chinese, then it is understandable that Westerners may get confused and think we are prejudiced and racist. Why do some Khmers insist on using the word "Yuon" or "Chen" when writing in French or English? What do we have to gain from using those words?

Reason #4

There are more Westerners and international newspapers and media in the world than in Cambodia. The international newspapers can reach a greater number of audiences in the world than we can. If western newspapers print out in their articles that we are racist because we use the word "Yuon" to label the Vietnamese, it will then reach a very large numbers of readers in the world. It is therefore impossible for us, Khmers, to target that many numbers of readers to counterbalance our view. Additionally, it is very hard to justify our usage of the word "Yuon" or "Chen" to the Westerners when there are acceptable replacements for those words in French or English that are used internationally by every country.

Reason #5

The perception and impression that we portray ourselves to the world are very important. If Westerners perceive us as racist because of our insistence of using the word "Yuon", then it is our duty to change that perception. We cannot just explain away our right of using the word "Yuon" because it has been in our vocabulary for thousands of years. For thousands of years Cambodians speak only Khmer and did not speak French or English. "Yuon" and "Chen" were the only words known to us to describe the Vietnamese and Chinese, respectively. It was then natural to call the Vietnamese "Yuon" and the Chinese "Chen" because there were no other substitutes for these words. Now that we are living in a modern era where everybody communicates in French or English, we are therefore exposed to the new international vocabularies to describe the people of Vietnamese's and China's descents. Why can't we adapt and accept the change? Why do we stubbornly cling to our old way of justifying that we are right and everybody else is wrong? We may be right but our attitude of intransigence give the perception to Westerners that we are arrogant and racist. What is the harm of replacing the word "Yuon" and "Chen" to describe the Vietnamese (or Vietnamiens) and Chinese (or

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Chinois) when we write in English or French?

Reason #6

There is no way we can win the battle of ideas in this one. We are losing the public relation's war and there is no way we can convince enough Westerners we are right on this issue. I, myself, consider the usage of the word "Yuon" and "Chen" when writing in French or English to be awkward and somewhat pejorative. However, I still believe it is acceptable to use those words when we speak or write in Khmer. It is much harder for me to say "Choun Cheat Vietnam" or "Choun Cheat Chen" than to say "Yuon" Or "Chen" in Khmer.

Conclusion

I personally feel it is in the best interest for us to stop using the words "Yuon" and "Chen" to describe the Vietnamese or Chinese when speaking or writing in French or English. There is nothing for us to gain for using those words. There are too much time and energy wasting on this subject that could have been better served helping the country. We are not living in the 10th century where we have no other options to describe the Vietnamese or Chinese. During that time we spoke only Khmer. Now that we are living in the 21st century and are being exposed to the rest of the world where the communication is conducted mostly in English, it is therefore incumbent upon us to learn and adapt to our new environment. There are internationally recognizable and acceptable words to describe people of Vietnamese's or Chinese's descents. We must use those words to communicate in French or English because it is not only the right thing to do but it is also beneficial for us. We are not living in an isolated environment but rather in an era of globalization. We cannot afford the rest of the world to portray us as intransigence and racist. We are the victim of our own intransigence because we refuse to change and allow other people to define us instead. We have to make our image of who we are. We cannot make ourselves be the victim of the whole Khmer-Vietnamese affairs by allowing others to define us as racist and spending our time to defend ourselves. If we remove the racism sticker by stopping the usage of the word "Yuon" at least in the written communication part of it, then many problems will be solved by themselves. More time can be focused on the real problems that exist between Cambodia and Vietnam.

Whenever I need to find solutions to some problems or try to improve on certain situations in life, I always go back to the story told in "La Fable de La Fontaine." There are so many favorite stories, but the one that I like the best and is very relevant to almost every situation is the story of "Le Chêne et le Roseau." The story tells of a strong oak tree (Chêne) falling down and being uprooted while the reed (Roseau) still remaining standing and alive after a strong wind. Vietnam is a powerful country like the wind and if Cambodia wants to survive we cannot be like a strong oak tree but rather like a supple reed. There is an old Khmer saying, "Kom Yauk Komheung Tol Neung Komhol."