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**WATER CULTURE OF MUONG PEOPLE  
IN HOA BINH PROVINCE**

**Major: Cultural Studies**

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1. Le Thanh Hoa (2014), “Some anthropological perspectives on the current conservation policy of ecological culture”. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (16), pp.59-65.

2. Le Thanh Hoa (2015), “Knowledge, customs and rituals relating to water of Muong people in Hoa Binh”. *Journal of Culture and Arts*, 367, pp.27-32.

# INTRODUCTION

## **1. Rationale**

Social sciences and humanity in which ecological anthropology is a pioneer discipline have put ecological environment in the most priority position in their research. In this academic realm, some theoretical achievements were published and become theoretical ground for many ecological and humanity researchs. In addition, many fieldwork studies have also reach some useful results for the sake of the environment protection all over the world.

This context raised an issue: if only with natural sciences, we cannot go further into the relationship between human and water. Definitely, if we could understand how our ancestors respected water, how they reasonably and well treated water,...then we would be able to make good use of those ideology in our contemporary society such as to exploit water with a sustainable manner.

In this context, the author decided to take “Water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province” as research subject for my dissertation because of its new and urgent quality in the context of current Vietnam.

## **2. Subject and scope of the study**

### ***2.1. Subject of the study***

Structure of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province

## ***2.2. Scope of the study***

Traditional and current water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province.

## ***2.3. Studied objects***

- Muong people in Tan Vinh Commune, Luong Son district, Hoa Binh province.

- Literature on ecological culture of the Muong people in Vietnam as well as in Hoa Binh province (previous research and studies).

## **4. Aims and tasks of the study**

### ***4.1. Aims of the study***

Study water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province to:

- Interpret the structure and function of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province in the old days and in current context.

- Suggest policy recommendations for the conservation of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province and other minorities in Vietnam as well.

### ***4.2. Tasks of the study***

- Study the possibility of applying new discovered theories into ecological culture studies in Vietnam

- Understand the structure of water culture, including: 1) Indigenous cosmology on water; 2) Customs and rituals relating to water; 3) Indigenous knowledge on water of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province.

- Identify the transformation of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh.

- Define a scientific ground for policy making to preserve ecological culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh.

### **5. Methods of the study**

- Adopt new theoretical/methodological achievements of ecological anthropology as a theoretical ground for the dissertation

- Utilize research outcomes of previous ethnological and folklore studies in traditional culture of the Muong people as important background information for understanding their indigenous worldview, animism as well as customs and rituals relating to water.

- Apply methodology/anthropological fieldwork methods to understand the logic of the relation between Muong people and their ecological environment and explore the meanings underlied in the expressions of their ecological culture and their transformations in current context.

In order to adopt this methodology, the author use quantitative methods including in-depth interviews, observation and secondary information analysis from ethnographic and folklore researchs of the Muong people and other Vietnamese as well as international researchs relating to ethnographic ecology and water culture.

## **6. Contribution of the study**

- Present the possibility of applying new theories on ethnic ecological culture studies in Vietnam. The study will apply a principle of “Mentality=> Knowledge=> Behavior” to interpret each phenomenon and action of the Muong people toward water.

- Systematize all expression of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh: myths and legend, animism, indigenous knowledge, customs and ritual relating to water.

- Establish a scientific foundation to conserve and promote water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh.

## **7. Structure of the study**

The dissertation consists of six parts: Introduction, Conclusion and four content chapters including:

Chapter 1. Theoretical and methodological background

Chapter 2. Indigenous knowledge in relation with cultural practices of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province

Chapter 3. Indigenous knowledge of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province

Chapter 4. Some discussions based on the results of the study

## **Chapter 1**

### **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **1.1. Water culture**

Water culture is part of ecological culture; therefore it can be understood as *a system of ideology, indigenous, manners and*

*behaviors of the people in relation with water.* According to Trinh Hieu Van, the structure of a water culture consists of: 1) Mentality: perspectives, understanding, knowledge, awareness or worshipping relating to water; 2) Institutions: social principles, rules, laws and institutions in the management and protection of water resource; 3) Social behaviors: patterns, forms and customs reflecting people's behaviors toward water; 4) Activities in protecting water environment.

In applying this approach, water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province is studied as a comprehensive structure consisting of three fundamental elements: indigenous cosmology, indigenous knowledge (experience, rules,...) and cultural practices such as customs, rituals... relating to water.

### **1.2. *Emic* approach**

Marking a new tendency in ethnographic/anthropological studies, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) described the methodological principles underpinning the main goal of ethnography is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world".

Applying this approach, many ecological anthropologists reaffirmed that study ecological cultures need to be *emic*, meaning that their describing or interpreting need to be of insiders or based on the understanding the mentality of those cultures' subjects.

### **1.3. Attempt in detaching from dualism**

Ontological dualism and the dichotomous detachment between nature and culture, human and environment had been

strongly criticized and gradually replaced and neglected in many contemporary anthropological studies. In the realm of modern anthropology, this perspective had been censured in many aspects by some anthropologists such as of Nurit Bird-David or Philippe Descola with the concept of *symbolic ecology* approving that nature (by means of symbols) is considered persons; the revision of animism as a complete break with dualism in the field of ecological anthropology: Alfred Irving Hallowell with the concept of *personhood*, Kaj Århem with a perspective on a world of *interperson* and *intersubjectivity* or Tim Ingold with *other-than-human person* concept.

Those theories can be applied as a theoretical and methodological basis for the dissertation: Human behaviors in relation with ecological environment cannot only be explained by the law of causality or common logicism but by “participatory law” (Levi Bruhl).

In Vietnam, within the context of indigenous ethnic cultural studies, researchers need to be detached from the culture of their own society and their fundamental knowledge background in order to get closer and understand more other cultures. Those theories created methodological basis for this study: Human behaviors in relation with their ecological environment is neither possibly explained by cause-effect law nor common logical principles (such as paradox principle) or naturalism.

This dissertation can approach the advantage of those mentioned methodologies in terms of:

1) To understand and interpret water culture of the Muong people, we should first understand their indigenous worldview and its relationship with other elements of water culture such as indigenous knowledge and behavior patterns.

2) In term of methodology, emic approach is the best approach for researchers to be able to understand and interpret different expressions of Muong's culture.

3) According to cognitive model suggested by R.Rappaport, this dissertation probably recommends cognitive and operating model corresponding to specific context of water culture of Muong people nowadays. Those might be new findings which are useful for the protection of ecological environment in current society of Vietnam.

## **Chapter 2**

### **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN RELATION WITH CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE MUONG PEOPLE IN HOA BINH PROVINCE**

#### **2.1. Ethnic myths**

In Muong community, the myth of ethnic origin is clearly reflected in a great mythological epic named “De Dat – De nuoc” (Creation of Land and Nation). According to De Dat – De Nuoc, the world was created from an original Si tree. That tree then created all things, species and Muong people.

## **2.2. Cosmology**

Previous studies and research about Muong people of some anthropologists and ethnologists in Vietnam have shown a cosmology of a leveled and multi-world universe in Muong's indigenous worldview.

Study in Tan Vinh commune shows that Muong people are still believe in the co-existence of different world/*muong* (in Muong language): spirit world governed by Quan Lang Cua Dong; heaven world governed by God and water world controlled by *Khu King* (Snake King). Today, Muong people still tell stories about *Khu King* or believe that people after dying will go back to live in the Spirit World.

## **2.3. Animism**

From that ancient cosmology of a multi-level universe, we can understand the worldview of the Muong people about the world, about the relationship between human and nature: animistic worldview. This perspective is best reflected through the view of the Muong people on spirits as well as through customs or rituals relating to funeral, spiritual rituals and other folklore beliefs in the past and today such as: beliefs in *wai* and *ma*; Mo telling at Muong funerals and animistic beliefs

## **2.4. Customs and rituals as expression of water culture of the Muong people**

As one of ethnic people that has the most long-standing history and profound culture in Vietnam, Muong people in general and Muong people living in Hoa Binh province in

particular have established and preserved a huge system of customs, traditions, rituals, traditional festivals. Among those values, customs and rituals relating to water and water source are distinctive cultural features of the Muong people. Some of them are Khu King-worshipping rituals, *mó nước/vó nước* worshippings, praying rituals for rain, ricefield-edge reenforcing ceremony, irrigating-canal fixing ceremony or fish catching festival of the Muong people. Those cultural practices are clearest expression of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province.

### **2.5. Context affecting the transformation of worldview of the Muong people currently living in Hoa Binh province**

After August Revolution (1945), some *muong* regions, particularly *muong* in the northern part of Vietnam such as Hoa Binh province, underwent significant changes in term of economic, social, cultural aspects as well as in people's spiritual and belief life. Those changes were clearest reflected in the decreased practice of some traditional activities associated with wet rice agriculture such as Gong beating ceremony for good crops or *khuống mùa* (wishing for abundant crops) festival, in the change of their indigenous cosmology (their belief in spirits and worshipping practice) or the cultural influence of other people such as Kinh and Thai on Muong people.

In this context, it is no use of the attempt to preserve and promote those cultural practices and customs or to revitalize environmental indigenous knowledge if the underlying mentality

that creates those values are not recognized and praised. This raises an issue that how to dissolve ideological conflict between dialectic materialism (dominant one) and indigenous cosmology of the Muong people (marginalized one)?

This study will present some accounts for the raised issue in Chapter 4 and suggest for some recommendations that can explore the significances of indigenous worldview in the protection of ecological environment of some ethnic groups in Vietnam. Apparently, only if we understand their cosmology and worldview and praise their human values and significances, we can alter human behaviors toward nature and environment.

### **Chapter 3**

## **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OF THE MUONG PEOPLE IN HOA BINH PROVINCE**

### **3.1. Scientific perspectives on indigenous knowledge studies**

Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge that people in a given community has developed over time, and continues to develop. It is based on experience, often tested over centuries of use, adapted to local culture and environment and is dynamic and changing.

Since 80s – 90s of XX century, role and value of indigenous knowledge and technique had been revisited. Based on the achievements that this knowledge system had brought to many corners of the world, many development practitioners and theorists have considered indigenous knowledge new and effective means

for many hunger and poor relief, environmental protection programs and sustainable development programs. Some studies conducted in Vietnam and in the other countries have provided rather clear information about the development of “indigenous knowledge” concept as well as rational explanation for the booming of indigenous knowledge studies and the trend of highly praising the practical role of this knowledge system in many places in the world.

### **3.2. Indigenous knowledge of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province**

In the field of ecological anthropology, indigenous knowledge is one of three fundamental elements that construct an ecological culture: indigenous cosmology, indigenous knowledge and indigenous cultural practices. In some water culture studies as part of ethnic ecological culture studies or ecological anthropology, indigenous knowledge about water has been placed in close relation with indigenous worldview (animism) which relates to water and water source of indigenous communities and their traditional and contemporary cultural practices (rituals, festival, traditions, customs) (animism). In this relationship, indigenous worldview defines consciousness and knowledge of an ethnic people about water and consequently, creates corresponding water-related cultural practices.

To be able to survive until now, Muong community has endeavoured to preserve water indigenous knowledge on the basis of their strong belief in water. Water-related local knowledge of

the Muong people in Hoa Binh province has been shown in their experience on using sacred water in rituals, daily water (water source, well digging), water protection, water utilization in agriculture (*murong, phai, hạnh, tạng*) or river/stream food resource exploitation.

Knowledge underlied indigenous practices of the Muong people presents its correspondence with current popular science knowledge. Therefore, it was certain that indigenous knowledge and social experiences (in working, producing and living) of Muong people, especially their knowledge of water, could be effectively applied for the protection of ecological environment and sustainable development of ethnic economic livelihood.

Today, due to several objective factors, many practices, knowledge, customs and traditions that relating to agriculture and water of Muong people were no longer used or practiced within contemporary society. However, it does not mean that we can not effectively apply values of cultural water and its components within current society. The most important elements lie deeply within their existing knowledge, experiences, customs, traditions, traditional rituals. In their animism which is still practiced today, Muong people believe that all entities in the world have souls and abilities to help or to punish human for their contributions or sins. Other elements, cultural patterns reflected through many ongoing customs and traditions (rain ritual, fishing on the stream, water source worshipping,...). If we respectfully acknowledge those truly-advanced cosmology and worldview (treat nature

with harmony) , it is definitaly that Muong people will be able to continuously maintain their high awareness in protecting their environment and spread those way of life nationwide.

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Indigenouse knowledge or experience gained in working, producing and living of the Muong people and their knowledge associated with water could be usefully applied in the protection of ecological environment and sustainable development of Muong's society.

## **Chapter 4**

### **SOME DISCUSSIONS BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

#### **4.1. Two worldviews result in two behaviors and two types of ecological culture**

We can see clearly those two different ontologies (dualism ontology/detachment ontology and animistic ontology) and two different cosmology resulted in two different ecological cultures with different models operating differently in response to nature and environment. Practically, ecological culture created from

dialectic materialism cosmology had revealed its weakness and mistakes during the development of many societies because of the ideology that considered human as central of universe and their motives and behaviors in relation to environment are to serve their own material interests. Other ecological culture, Muong culture as an example, originated from animism which do not separate human from nature, respectfully and harmonyly treat nature and its water.

Thanks to their respect to water, Muong people created customs and traditions that clearly reflected their mentality. If we can understand their indigenous worldview, then we can comprehend how they could have that distinctive consciousness about water environment and unique cultural practices relating to water.

#### **4.2. Preserve customs and rituals relating to water cultural in the new context**

Muong people living in Hoa Binh province nowadays have to face constant changes in their contemporary material and spiritual life.

Changes in material life lead to transformation in spiritual life. Their belief in spirits has gradually affected by the pressure of modern society. There is no longer suitable environment for traditional knowledge to flourish. Particularly, water-related customs and rituals have continuously disappeared. Considered as underlying elements of a culture, traditional customs and rituals are important elements that can create positive impacts on the

environment protection of many communities and societies. Revitalization, preservation and recognition of those traditional values in this current social context is one of effective methods for environment protection and sustainable development.

### **4.3. Anthropological perspective in policy making**

One conflict commonly existed is the conflict between governmental policy and citizen's interest: Many environment protection policies neglected the bond between people and their naturing ecological environment which for a long time gave them livelihood. This resulted in negative response from people and made them unmindful toward those policy or inactive participation.

Today, many developed countries considered anthropological perspective into their their policy making: Instead of top-down policies, they always respect practical context and try to understand people "from their own view". Those type of policies are not only for the benefit of their nation but also their local communities because they are compatible with traditional culture of those indigenous people as well as collective social interest: environment protection.

Therefore, policy makers always well understand what the government wants yet if they are armed with anthropological perspective then they will be able to understand the deepest desire of local people and communities and to revise for more satisfied policies for both sides.

#### **4.4. From cultural conflict to cultural tolerance**

In any society, ideological conflict is the most basic and severe conflict that affects the decisions of other social areas such as economy, religion and culture. Today, however, in modern democratic societies, those types of conflict are being peacefully handled under a philosophy of *cultural tolerance*. The difference in ideology and culture is accepted and respected according to one rule: mutual respect, not ostracizing each other, not criticizing each other and not confronting as two ideologically-conflicted sides.

Issues raised in Vietnam nowadays are how to resolve the ideological conflict between atheism and animism; whether there is a cultural tolerance between those two ideologies in order for the societies to be able to move forward to a common benefit which is to protect the increasingly degrading environment?

In the attempt of environment protection for last decades, we all know that: It is the very animistic cosmology that produced a type of culture in which, people respect nature and harmonically coexist with nature. This culture differs with other cultures that always over-exploit nature for its own benefits. Therefore, we can say that it is urgently needed a tolerance and cooperation to dissolve this ideological conflict in this current social context, to establish an “underlying ecological culture” for minority groups in Vietnam.

From both theoretical and fieldwork studies, this dissertation comes up with some particular comments on the preservation and

protection of water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province as below:

1) In term of awareness, ethnic ecological culture need to be perceived as a symbiotic structure of ideology (indigenous cosmology), knowledge and behavior patterns of the owner community in relation with their environment (land, water, forest, animal and plant).

2) Central government need to have some strategic programs or research projects to preserve Muong's ecological culture.

3) Disseminate useful indigenous knowledge (traditional and current one) to inspire local communities' pride and at the same time, present good examples for other communities to consider.

4) Encourage people to voluntarily revitalize traditional water sources.

5) Reactivate some traditional institutions to conserve water culture by the cooperation between government and Muong communities.

6) Understand that all policies are just well-written documents when those institutions do not associate with daily and practical benefits of local communities. For that, policies and protection interventions need to be flexibly applied in each particular object and context in such a way that people's benefits are not compromised.

## CONCLUSION

The study on water culture of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province has its main aim to interpret that culture on the perspectives of modern ecological anthropology and then discuss about a model that affects people's consciousness and behaviors in environment protection for Muong people and other ethnic groups in Vietnam. Previous studies about Muong and its ecological culture have focused on separate issues such as water – related traditional beliefs, indigenous knowledge or customs and rituals of Muong communities. In applying new theoretical achievement of modern ecological anthropology, Muong's water culture is interpreted as a whole structure consisting of three vital elements: indigenous worldview, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices relating to water. Indigenous cosmology created local knowledge and consequently, set people's behaviors in relation to water. Each water-related phenomenon or activity of the Muong people was revealed through the interacting principle of those three components.

This study was conducted by qualitative techniques including indepth interview, participatory observation and secondary data analysis. Literature review of some previous studies on Muong people, Muong culture and Muong ecological culture played an important role in providing ethnographical and cultural data for answering research questions of this study.

In reviewing some prominent achievement of ecological anthropology in last couple of years show that those new theories

and methodologies can be theoretical basis for the same discipline in Vietnam in order to replace the dominant of some approaches from folklore or ethnography. New studies with *emic* approach which interprets a culture from its own subjective views rather than *etic* (use outsiders' own worldview to explain a certain culture) has started a new trends: criticize and reject dualism of western dialectic materialism.

For many years, dualistic ontology has created an ideology in which, human asides themselves a control power over the world and over-exploited natural resources. This ideology defined development history of numerous nations all over the world. However, for last couple of decades, when the impacts of that ideology becoming worse (climate change, environmental pollution, resource depletion,...) the some scholars raised the necessary of reconsidering the way human in general and ethnologists/anthropologists in particular perceive and understand our own activities, our environment and our relationship as well as our responsibility with nature.

Culture and knowledge of indigenous communities in the world, therefore, need to be re-evaluated and praised as the end to assist the repair of those impacts because these communities live a lifestyle that respects to their nature. Instead of considering themselves as owner of the world, for generations, those communities have perceived themselves as one subject that had will, power and interest just like many other subjects coexisting in this world did.

The author concludes that: *using emic approach in studies of ethnic ecological cultures, Muong's water culture study as an example, we can understand their true perspective about the world (ethnic cosmology) and from those ground, to interpret their perception of water (indigenous knowledge) and their behaviors relating to water (customs, rituals and traditions).*

From this comprehension, we can interfere in ecological perceptive model and behaving model of some ethnic groups in order to fulfill our aims and targets.

Study in indigenous worldview of the Muong people in Hoa Binh province shows that it is animistic. This cosmology is distinctively reflected by myths of world creation and ethnic origin, the concept of multi-level universe (three levels and five worlds: middle level consists of human world and spirit world, upper level is heaven world and lower level is miniature human world and Khu (Snake) world) governed by different entities such as Heaven God, Lang Madarine, Cun Lang Dat Dong, Chin Dong Madarine, Khu King,....

Clearly, animism of the Muong people is present by the belief that each person has *hôn* (spirits) and those spirits become *via* (a spiritual entity similar to spirits when a person dies. *Via* then will find its way to go back to Spirit World (Mường Ma), an eternal place where his ancestors live. Muong animistic perspective is also reflected by their belief in the existence of spirits and their conscious ability in every entities of the nature: water, plants, animals, objects,... This type of world view differs

from existing dialectic materialism that denies the existence of supernatural entities (*hồn, vía*) and only relies on the outcomes of experimental sciences. These two worldviews results into two completely different perceptual models and consequently, two separate operating models: at one side, human is considered the world owners and always imposes their own will upon the relationship with nature while at the other side, people always respect and listen to nature.

From this animistic cosmology, Muong people created a system of knowledge and experience relating to water. Indigenous knowledge of ethnic people such as Muong people used to be considered backward and not based on any scientific ground. However, in this disseratation, indigenous knowledge of the Muong people in utilizing natural resources (underground water, rivers, streams,...), building traditional irrigating system or exploit river food resources proved that those knowledge could bring numerous practical impacts in protection water and environment. Some practices such as protection of forests to protect water sources; the forbidence of fish catching on some particular places to protect fish diversity or the prohibition of any water pollution,... show that Muong people have done those scientific and sustainable practices hundreds of year before the introduction of our modern sciences. Due to both subjective and objective reasons, these knowledge has been dissappeared and played less good role in people's life, yet their intrinsic values in term of humane ecology still remained. We can exploit, praise and

promote those values for the environment protection and sustainable development nowadays.

One of activities that exploit and promote the good values of water-related indigenous knowledge of the Muong people is to protect and promote their traditional customs and rituals on water such as the worshipping of water source (*vó nước*), Khu King worshipping, rituals for rain, fish catching festival,... Those traditional cultural practices are the clearest expressions of the existence of a Muong water culture.

In the context of constant social changes of the Muong people for last several years (water pollution, sourced forest degradation, natural water depletion or the fade of animistic cosmology,...), the protection and promotion of those traditional customs is the only way for the conservation and and utilization of those humane-ecological values of Muong water culture.

From this perspective, the author recognized that top-down approach in policy making, particularly policies relating to ecological environment, need to be positively revised.

The practical outcomes of many development program in some locals (agricultural and rural development, environment protection, hunger relief,...) did not bring good economic and social effects when adopting this top-down approach because they detached from their own social and cultural environment (needs and cultural distinctive of particular local communities). In many cases, top-down approach did underestimate, deny or even neglect

special cultural values of many ethnic peoples and caused conflicts.

Animism, traditional farming methods or traditional customs relating to environment such as water-related customs of the Muong people, in fact, presents another ideological ground in which, human treat other entities equally, respectfully and harmonily. Conflict between those two ideologies can be dissolved if there is respect and reference between them. Cultural tolerance, therefore, is suitable approach in contemporary social context to protect environment and develop sustainably. It means we need to respect and adopt those type of traditional cultural values and knowledge about environment of local communities in governmental development programs and the, encourage those people proactively protect and promote those values and knowledge for the sake of their own communities.

This approach is completely suitable for the case of Muong water culture in Hoa Binh province and urges for the necessary of preservation and promotion of that culture as a symbiotic and holistic structure of ideology, knowledge and behavior pattern relating to water of this community. Recommendations to promote values of Muong water culture, therefore, need to come along with ideas relating to each components of that structure. Together with the dynamic of international ecological anthropology, study on Muong water culture in Hoa Binh province is the initial step and suggest for similar studies in other ethnic people and in other ecological disciplines such as forest culture, land culture.... in

Vietnam in coming years. Hopefully, those studies will present good outcomes that can be adopted effectively into the environment protection and sustainable development.