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THE KHOT SET - A TOOL OF MUONG MO FATHER

***Abstract:** Among the Muong people the shaman who conducts the funeral rite is called the Mo father. He not only has the credibility of the villagers, but he also has a special ability - to communicate with the divine and deceased. It is important that he has what is called a Khot set to perform this ceremony. The Khot is a set of sacred objects containing supernatural powers conveyed by heaven. A Mo father with many Khots would be both more powerful, to expel the evil ghosts, and more reputable.*

***Keywords:** Khot set; Muong Mo father; performance of ritual; the soul; power; evil ghost.*

Introduction

The Muong population is quite large (1,268,963 people¹), ranking the third in fifty-three ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Currently, they are present in almost sixty-three provinces and cities nationwide. Most of the Muong people, over 500,000, reside in Hoa Binh with accounting for 90% population of the province. Therefore, Hoa Binh is considered “Muong province”.

In Hoa Binh, the Muong people settled their villages at the foot of mountains, on hillsides, and near rivers. The most popular and fertile areas are four counties, ranked in order: The first Bi county (Tan Lac district), the second Vang county (Lac Son district), the third Thang county (Cao Phong district) and the fourth (Kim Boi district).

* Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

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The area this study focuses on is Lam village, Phong Phu commune, Tan Lac district, formerly called Bi county, which is considered the cradle, the cultural center of the Muong people. This is a place where traditional rituals are preserved well in the daily life of the Muong people.

1. Muong people's view of the universe and people

Traditional worldview of the Muong has four sky directions and twelve earth directions for twelve animals; the universe has three floors, with five worlds as follows:

1) The sky floor is the dwelling place of the heaven King and the gods, thunder, stars, and the people of the sky. This is the virtual world, of the metaphysical.

2) The ground floor is the center, this floor has three worlds that are: The world of living people; The world of the dead is the half of the real and the virtual world and the version of the world that the Muong call dark world; Underwater world is the water world of the aquatic species, the Muong have divinized that world of demons such as snakes, turtles, crocodiles ...

3) Deep below the ground floor is the world of the tiny people.

According to the Muong people's views, every material thing has two parts: the material which is visible and the mental which is invisible. In humans, the visible part is the body and the invisible part is psyche, in Muong language called Woai or the soul. When any one human dies, the psyche becomes the soul of the ghost, it goes to the dark world, and continues to live in this world with other deceased, they also produce, work in agriculture, and support for their descendants in the living people world.

The concepts behind the Muong worldview lead to the rich, humanistic meaning behind the behaviors in their rituals. This is especially evident in rituals where a Mo Muong father uses a Khot set to send the dead to the dark world in a funeral rite and in the health ceremony for the sick person.

For the Muong people, the funeral serves to restore the inherent balance and to prevent the living from the risks that may come from the dark world. The funeral is held for those who die at thirteen years and older. The deceased is placed in a coffin made from a tree trunk, the coffin is covered by Muong cloth with the pattern of dragon scale and underneath the clothes shelt provided by relatives for the deceased. The deceased's sons and daughters wear white mourning clothes and the daughter-in-law wears a red ready to "serve" the father or mother who just died. The descendants worship chickens, ducks, pigs, even buffalo or cows for the dead to eat and also to raise livestock for his or her possession. So that the living people are relatives of the deceased can have a peaceful and wealthy life. At the funeral, Mo fathers play a very important role because they are able to communicate with the spirit gods and the dead. Only a Mo father could comfort, advise, and bring the dead to the dark world. He is also a spiritual support for living people, encouraging and helping them to carry out procedures well to send the dead back to their ancestors.

2. Muong Mo shaman and Muong Mo father

2.1. Muong Mo shaman

The shamans of the Muong people are called Mo, in Muong language Mo means worship. To become a Mo shaman, according to the criteria of the Muong, first he must be a male of 16 years or older. Females cannot become shamans because they are not agile and they menstruate every month making them impure. Second, the man must be taught the knowledge of shaman by a Mo shaman, whose lineage has a Mo shaman in at least three generations. Third, he must have the capacity to perform rituals and must be acknowledged and trusted by villagers. In addition to the three main criteria, Mo shamans also need to be healthy, and have been born in a special year such as Dinh, Nham, or Quy. His speech must be clear, his family must have harmony, and his well-being must be good.

2.2. Muong Mo father

However to perform the funeral or health ceremony rituals, a Mo shaman must also be a Mo father or the main Mo. Mo father is the

name given from local people for the Muong Mo shaman. In a commune, even in a district, there are few Muong shaman who could be recognized as Mo father. In addition to the general criteria for becoming a Mo shaman, that Mo shaman must also understand, remember, and transmit all of Muong's epics. His family must have been a long tradition of Mo shamans, at least 5 generations, and has many generations living happily together. He must also have a general appearance of a calm temperament and an inspirational voice. It is important that he has what is called a Khot set to perform the ceremonies.

3. The Khot set - the functions and forms to use

3.1. The role and functions

The Khot, according to Muong language means strength. A Khot set has many Khot members, mainly belonging to three groups of materials: stone, bronze, and horn. As explained by Muong people and the Mo shaman, the Khot is a set of sacred objects containing supernatural powers conveyed by heaven, it is the treasure for the work of a Mo father. *Having a Khot set, the Mo father has the ability to command leaders and elite troops to bring the dead to the ancestors of the Muong in the afterlife and help the Mo father protect living people, the relative of the dead are not harmed or abducted by the evil ghosts* (Mo shaman Bui Van Eu, born in 1953, Lam village, Phong Phu commune, Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province).

Each of Khot has a certain origin, meaning, and effect. The bronze thunder blade, the small stone ax, and the meteorite from the prehistoric period are the power of the gods used to help a Mo father has the power of the gods in heaven. The teeth and claws of a tiger, the fangs of a pig, and the deer's horns represent the strength of the elite troops to guard Mo father to prevent the harm of devil anywhere. The teeth of an otter, stalactites or quartz rocks, help a Mo father to easily get into the caves, go under the river bed, and under the sea floor. Pebbles, round stones, smooth or shaped, special traces such as a tiger's head or a bear's feet, meaning solid, hard as stone. All of them are sacred objects, rare, containing extraordinary strength that can

cause the sky to vibrate, make landslides to occur. This creation of strength and can make a Mo father more confident and healthy.

For the Muong, the Khot set is very sacred and precious. The Muong phrase “valuable as Khot” means nothing is as precious as the Khot. Because of that, the Khot set has been passed from generation to generation by family line, never sold. A Mo father can give or donate the set to his disciples or someone, but the set cannot be sold otherwise the Khot will not be sacred and the Mo father who sold it also loses his power (see: Fig 1).

A Mo father can also add a new Khot member to his Khot set, but these are rare objects, for example, the stone with the shape of a spear found in the ancient cave, bear claws, or deer horn ... those animals were eaten by a tiger and their claws or horns fell in the forest, they were not died because old age or sickness. In these cases, the Mo father gets the fangs, the claws of the tiger, the leopard, or the pig from hunting, he has to take that things on the left for the sacred (Mo father Bui Van Lung, born in 1957, Lam village, Phong Phu commune, Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province). Objects which will become part of the Khot must be soaked, washed for cleaning by wine, then placing them on the Thien thu² altar to worship, burn incense, and ask for permission to use them as Khot. When the incense burns out, the objects become official members of the Khot.

Every Mo father usually has two Khot bags, one small and one big bag. The precious Khot, including objects such as the teeth and claws of a tiger, the fangs of a pig, otter teeth, and a small bronze dog statue, are kept in the small bags. These are the oldest Khot members, containing the most power, such as: The teeth, claws of tiger; the fangs of pig; teeth otter, a small bronze dog statue, which a Mo father carries when going any ceremony whether big or small. The big Khot bag contains the remaining Khot members, which a Mo father only has to bring when going to a funeral or praying for the health ceremony of the sick.

3.2. The former of use the Khot

The Khot set of Muong Mo father is mainly used in two types of rituals: the funeral and the health ceremony for a sick person.

3.2.1. Using Khot in the funeral

When the family of someone who has died comes to ask a Mo father's help to conduct the funeral rite, they bring offerings such as betel nuts, rice, wine and money. The Mo father will put the offerings on the ancestral shamans' altar, burn incense, pray, and ask his ancestor shaman for permission to use the Khot and blessings for him to perform the funeral well. He not only prays, he also promises that when the rites are finished he will go back home with the offerings for ancestral shamans.

When Mo father comes to the house of the dead family the Khot set is in a bag; it is placed near the offering tray of the ancestral shaman, along with the sword. Before performing the ritual for the dead Mo father must make a rite to wake up the Khot set so that the Khot could transmit powers and supernatural abilities for Mo father to conduct the funeral rite.

The rite to wake the Khot set up consists of three parts. The first part, the Mo father says is about the source of the Khot and it is an arduous process. The vow is like telling a story from an ancient time, when heaven and earth were just born and the natives set up a place to live. At that time having Mo shaman, but there were no sacred objects, so there was no power to protect the souls of the dead. So, Mrs. Mu Da³ told to Hai Dang⁴ about the Khot sacred cave deep in the high mountains in the deep cave on the high mountains and asked him to get money, to bring the hoes to dig, the ax to cut the Khot and then carry it to his home. Hai Dang prepared an ax to cut trees for making a boat and sailed up the river for 10 days and nights to reach the mountain of Khot. He climbed up the mountain, went into the cave and hewn the Khot from its place to get it. Hai Dang rowed the boat back but he just as he stepped on the shore, the boat was flooded, and because the Khot was not brought up it fell into the river. Hai Dang was so sad that he cried,

and hearing him Mu Da appeared and asked why he was upset. After hearing Hai Dang's story, she asked when if he had worshiped the local god of the land and the local god of the rivers and streams that he traveled on. Hai Dang replied he had not worshiped those gods, leading Mu Da to conclude that those gods did not allow him to bring the Khot home.

Mu Da instructed Hai Dang to go home and catch a chicken under the floor. Then take a rice basket, cloth, and silver ingots from the house floor and bring everything to the river. At the river he was to read the mantra as follows: On the mountain worship god of the earth, under the river worship god of water, in the rice field worship god of land. As Hai Dang finished saying the mantra, the Khot rose up and he brought it to his home. Though when he put the Khot on the ground it made the water god die, when he put it on the hill it killed the god of land, and when he put it in the rice field all the crops died. Everywhere he placed the Khot, it caused the place to die. Seeing the Khot was too strong and sacred, Hai Dang concealed the Khot to the cave, in order to protect people from it. He prayed to the gods to reduce the strength of the Khot by carving it: he cut into three sides, four corners, and made the Khot small, compact, and beautiful. Having the Khot, Hai Dang gave Khot away selling it to Mo shamans in many places, from Hom county, Thang county, Vang county, and Vo county. Wherever Hai Dang went to sell the Khot he demanded a big buffalo under the floor and took 5 tons of rice paddies on the house floor, but the people complained it was too expensive and no one would buy the Khot. When Hai Dang went to Bi county, he asked for only a pair of chickens under the floor, and took one rice basket, a cloth, and a silver bar on the house floor. The Mo shaman in Bi county agreed and invited Hai Dang to his home to kill chickens for the meal and drink wine. Then Mo shaman's wife gave all offerings as Hai Dang ordered. Receiving the offerings, Hai Dang went back his home. The Mo shaman took the Khot on the ancestral shamans' altar to pray and asked for permission to use Khot, ever after he has had specially abilities that make him a Mo father.

In the second part of the rite, involves the retelling of the transformation from Mo shaman to Mo father. This occurred the first time the family of the dead came to pick up the Mo father to conduct the funeral rite, and the Mo father's wife did not agree to let the Mo father go because he would not be paid. After a while, the relatives promised to pay the same fee that the Mo father paid the Khot and they expressed that the Mo father had to go to the funeral for the Khot to assist in the continuation of his wellbeing and living a long life. In addition, this vow also confirms the important role of the Mo father when he got the Khot through some sayings: *nine ducks did not have a lead duck of group; nine geese did not have any male geese; nine girls do not have any girls who can perform; nine Mo shamans but only one was a smart shaman, I just want this Mo father to help to my family.*

In the last part, the Mo father calls one by one the all members of Khot by name and says their function. The Mo father begins by naming the small Khot members such as little rocks and stones which have the effect of hardening hands and making the legs firm. He then names the big Khot members such as tiger teeth, leopard claws, pig fangs, otter teeth, and deer horns which provide the power to jump through gaps, through streams, through fences. All make the members of the Khot set are super powerful resources to help a Mo father to bestow or use the strength of a female buffalo's health, the strength of a male buffalo and deer; the talent of the tiger, and the thunderlike strength of the ax.

When the rite of waking up the Khot is finished, the Mo father has the power to awaken the soul of the dead and can perform the funeral by wearing *Khau dao*⁵ on his toes. This is called stepping on the soul of the dead, and it is done in order to invite the soul to the altar so that it may listen to the stories retold by the Mo father. When it is time for the meal, the soul of the dead would be invited to eat and drink.

While a Mo father conducts the rites for a funeral at the deceased's house, the Khot set bag is kept near the ancestral shamans' altar. When the coffin is sent to the graveyard to be buried, the Mo father

takes the Khot bag to assist him and to protect the soul of dead person. After the rite, he puts it back next to the Thien thu altar (see: Fig 2).

After the ritual for the funeral is finished the Mo father brings the Khot bag back to the old place, puts the offerings⁶ from the funeral family on the Thien thu altar and burns incense to pray. The meaning of that action shows when he came returned, he reported back and presented thanks. The vows have the following content: now both the small rite and the big rite are finished as he promised. Now that the funeral rite is finished the Mo father goes back to the deceased's home and bring the offerings for the ancestral shamans. The offerings are a cup of water, toothpicks, incense stick, money, a lamp, and a wine bottle placed on the ancestral shamans' altar to communicate support for him to make the Mo father go as *Apis dorsata* bee (a bee always comes and goes fast) and as *Apidae* bee (honey bee) go straight to the place then go back home. To bless the descendants one day could help a community, one month could come to nine counties, anywhere the sun shines, the Mo father can go there, the ancestral shamans should not be angry with him, should not uncomfortable in the heart. At the end of the vows the Mo father bows three times to finish.

3.2.2. Using Khot set for the healthy ceremony

Among the Muong, the elderly is who are weak or sick and have been cured for long time but are still not fully recovered, are believed to have a weakness of the soul or that the soul has strayed. In this situation the Muong believe they need to pray to call that soul come back and make it more powerful, in order to strengthen the soul of the sick perso to perform the ritual of health, a powerful Mo father and the supernatural power of the Khot set is needed to make the soul of the weak person healthy again. This rite can be organized for a sick man or woman aged 50 years and older, who are grandparents. If there are many generations in the family only the eldest people are allowed to go through the ritual, because they are the head of the family, like a big, tall tree protecting their children and grandchildren.

The Mo father brings the Khot set to the sick person's house, where the sick person's family have prepared offerings and pure

water taken from the water source on the mountain. The water must be taken in early morning, when the sun has not risen, usually between 4 and 5 am. The family takes about 1 - 2 liters of the water poured into a small pot for the Mo father to use to soak all of the Khot members. Mo father wears a white scarf on his head, sits in front of the offering tray, brings the Khot pot on level of his mouth, and then prays in the silence with the intention of waking up the Khot set. After this rite, the Mo father has the power of Khot to help the sick person achieve a healthy recovery. The Mo father then puts the Khot pot down, gets the grains of rice and mixed with salt and throws them into the window and around the offering tray inside the house. This action is intended to imitate the soul that was strayed coming back to eat the offerings. The next rite is the praying for the soul to be healthy. In this section the Mo father says the prayer loudly asking the gods' support for the sick and to bless healing power into the offerings, such as sticky rice, chicken, and vegetable soup, for the sick to eat. He also prays the shaman ancestor will give the sacred leaves and forest wire to add strength to the thorns⁷. For the Muong, thorns symbolize strength, thorns also protect the sick from ghosts (see: Fig 3).

The health ceremony takes about 1.5 - 2 hours to perform. During this time, the Khot are still soaked in the water pot to release their power. When the Mo father is finished, the offerings are given to the sick to eat in the rite area, so that the sick can receive the power that the gods bless into the foods of the ceremony. When the sick is finished eating, that one continues to get the strength from the Khot water by having it sprinkled on their head three times. After this ritual, the Mo father takes the Khot out of the pot. The Khot water is sprayed on the floor in the front head of the sick person's bed. This is done because the Khot water can help the sick person to expel and prevent the devil from harassing or harming them.

Those who are sick by ghost harmed, can be by crazy action and accompany stupid speech. These need to drink and be sprinkled by the Khot water. The Khot water is poured into a small bowl, each time for

drinking is also to sprinkle on the head, doing so to chase the devil out of the sick. Finally, the thorns, the leaves, and the forest wire are wrapped into a bundle of palm leaves and hung up in the window at the stair case to fortify the soul of the sick person that is stronger.

3.2.3. Using the Khot for other things

To treat and keep pregnant women safe and healthy

In addition to using the Khot set for the two rituals described above, the Khot member, otter's teeth, can be used to treat someone who had swallowed a fish bone. A Mo father soaks the teeth in a bowl for a few minutes, then the patient drinks the water three sips, turns down the bowl of water on the floor, and the bone will be easy to take or spit out.

The Mo father also has a Cang cam Khot, which can be used to ensure the safety of a Khot could keep safety for pregnant woman or hold the property for somebody. A Cang cam Khot is a heavy, smooth, black stone, like coal. Women who are worried about having a miscarriage and people who plan to travel far but fear the risk of losing money or property might come to get the help from the Mo father. Magic is performed on the Cang cam Khot by the Mo father and then put into small bags for a person to wear on their neck or the waist as a measure of protection.

I consider this to be a meteorite stone that can emit radiation to a certain degree because it has luminescence when the lamp light is shined on it, the light can penetrate because it is heavier than the rock. In folk life, this stone is also used to treat children's fevers, flu. People grind the stone into powder and then mix it into water to drink as medicine. After drinking from one to three times the flu will be cured (Muong cultural researcher, Bui Huy Vong, Muong man, born in 1966, Bung village, Hung Nhuong commune, Lac Son district, Hoa Binh province).

Helping the male and the female to love and marry

In addition, few Mo Muong fathers also have En Uong Khot, which helps a man and a woman to love each other or to divide the love of

lovers, therefore this Khot is called the love charm. En Uong Khot are two pair of white shells, the size of a coin. Using this Khot to force the love or split a couple is considered to be unethical work, the Mo father would lose his power so no one dares to do it. Usually a Mo father only uses this Khot to help couples who are at risk of losing their love, so that they might love each other again and not divorce. In some cases, the son is too poor to get married, so a Mo father also helps him to get a wife. However, after getting married, if one of that couple dies, the other has to ask Mo father to dissolve their vows in a mantra because if he does not the person who is still alive follow their spouse in death. For creating the love between a man and a woman, a Mo father will place two pairs of clam shells away 20cm apart on a piece of white paper, perform a ceremony, read the mantra, and perform some actions, and if two the pairs of shells are close together the work will be successful. This Khot is also used to separate married people if the husband or wife has a new lover. The Mo father will put two pairs of clam shells close together on a piece of white paper, perform a ceremony, read the mantra, and perform some actions, if the two pairs of shells divide two sides the work is successful too. En Uong Khot is packed separately, due to other functions with other Khot, if it is kept the same bag, the differing Khot will harm each other and the Khot set will not have function.

4. Ritual and taboos with the Khot

4.1. Khot bathing ritual

Every year on New Year's Eve, the Mo father washes the Khot one time with the water boiled of a Chung cake, with the meaning of “bath,” for Khot and invites the Khot to eat Tet, otherwise the Khot will be hungry and catch his chickens, pigs, or buffalo to eat which would cause him and his family to have a lot of trouble.

The Mo father puts the Chung cake water in a pot to create a bath for Khot and says a prayer inviting the Khot to the Tet festival, as well as anywhere that the sun shines in order it may remain healthy and sacred. While praying, he washes the Khot and puts it in a tray. Then the Mo father opens the window and pours white wine on the Khot to

release the soul of Khot so that it can go and eat anywhere. The Mo father prays for the Khot to go for one day and then return the next day to guard him, forcing the devil to run away and the ghost to disappear. Then he puts the Khot on the Thien thu altar, and at the end of the first day of the New Year he can take Khot back the bag.

4.2. Taboos

The Khot sets are sacred objects, too precious that could not be stored under the bed. They must be stored in high, clean, and dry places, and are usually hanging up near the altar worship.

When the Mo father is invited to perform the funeral rite or the health ceremony others can bring many things, but only the Mo father can carry the Khot set. When carried away, the Mo father cannot go under the clothesline and through the water trough in the field. This is because the clothesline can have underwear on it, and if it is not avoided it is considered the same as going through the crotch of others. In addition, the trough in the field has been flooded by human feet, buffaloes, and even cattle's waste so it is not clean.

Anyone arbitrarily holding or touching the Khot will be punished by the spirit god, which means that something unfortunate will happen to that person or their relatives. Even with Mo father takes it only when needing to do for the rite, if not also will be punished. Therefore, people do not touch it, and if they did they would need help of the Mo father to apologize to the ancestral shamans.

Conclusion

The Muong concept of the Khot set and the Mo father shows that their spiritual cultural life is rich in variety, knowledge, and humanity. The Khot set is a group of sacred objects which a Mo father uses to perform the ceremonies that give him the confidence, power, and authority to help people. The values and the sacredness of the Khot are created by the folk knowledge of the Muong people accumulated over generations in many fields, such as the health protection and treatment disease, behavior with human; behavior the with natural environment, and behavior with plants and animals.

The Mo father is the symbol of the Muong intellectual, who practices the customs of the Muong people, and is also the fulcrum of the spiritual life of Muong, who make up the community cohesion. A Mo father with the knowledge and understanding of the forms and the use of the Khot set in the ceremonies has contributed significantly to the preservation and transmission of traditional cultural values of the Muong. A Mo father with many Khot would be more powerful, more able to expel the evil ghosts, and more reputable.

The Khot set, in the permanent exhibition of Vietnam Museum of Ethnology about Muong funeral rite, is represents a connection between the artifacts and community life, which helps the public to identify ethnicity, physical objects, and the spiritual context of Muong rituals. /.

Notes:

- 1 Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee 2010, *Official Census Population and Housing Census Report April 1st 2009*, Hanoi Statistics Publishing House. 134.
- 2 Thien thu is ancestral shamas include all Mo shamans in that family clan but they died
- 3 Mrs. Mu Da is a poor but knowledgeable woman who always appears to help people when in trouble
- 4 Hai Dang is the representative character of the grown man of the Muong
- 5 Khau dao is an iron ring between the knife body and knife handle
- 6 The offerings include: betel nut, money, bottle of wine, cup of water, toothpick
- 7 Usually they are thorns of the trees grow around the house like thorns of the grapefruit plant, thorns of the lemon plant, thorny of bamboo plant.

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APPENDIX



Fig 1: A long-standing Khot set with sacret objects for Mo father conducting the funeral rite of Muong people.



Fig 2: Bui Van Lung - Mo father was conducting a funeral and the Khot set in a bag, on the left



Fig 3: Mo Bui Van Eu was calling soul (woai) to help members of the dead's family healthy.