

## THE MUONG HABITAT SPACE

(THE CASE STUDY IN KHU VILLAGE, NGOC SON COMMUNE, LAC SON DISTRICT, HOA BINH PROVINCE)

TA HUU DUC

### INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has a varied natural setting, which has certainly gone under dramatic changes caused by human residents as they struggle to best adapt to natural conditions. The impacts of natural habitat on human life have been broadly recognized among ethnographers. Tu Chi<sup>1</sup> stated that the two pivotal elements of a people's culture are its natural habitat and cultural origins. Le Ba Thao<sup>2</sup> claimed that natural setting is the spatial reflection that bears the stamps of a community's working and cultural activities.

Vietnam is home to 54 ethnic groups living intermingled all over the country. Each ethnic group's cultural identity is however well conserved and can clearly be noticed through habitat pattern, housing architecture, customs and production methods<sup>3</sup>. The Reserve project shall necessarily take into account the Muong's characteristic cultural features.

This paper is aimed at providing the answer to these following questions: What are the characteristics of the organization

of habitation space of the Muong community in question? What has been the historical process of settling down in this area of the community? What are the community's conceptions of living space's boundaries? What are the possible impacts of such conceptions on the setting up of a reserve and vice-versa?

### THEORY BACKGROUND

Amos H. Hawley<sup>4</sup> considers space as the systemized structure of concrete physical objects generated in social processes for specific purposes, predicting the consequences of social actions and fixing them physically. These objects shall be regarded therefore as materialized social standards, carriers of social experiences. Space study is a multidisciplinary study of natural territorial setting (geography, geology, climate, and ecological condition), habitat structure, population structure, economic structure and space's lower layer structure<sup>5</sup>.

The combination of socio-anthropological research on space organization and socio-geographical theories on the interaction between space organization and community pattern will provide arguments for this research

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<sup>1</sup> Tu Chi, *Gop phan nghien cuu van hoa va toc nguoi (Contributing to Cultural and Ethnic Group Research)*. Ha Noi: Information and Culture Publishing House. , 1996. p.414

<sup>2</sup> Le Ba Thao, *Vietnam lanh tho va cac vung dia ly*. Ha Noi: World Publishing House, 1998. p17

<sup>3</sup> Le Ba Thao, *Vietnam lanh tho va cac vung dia ly (Vietnam's territory and geographical areas)*. Ha Noi: World Publishing House, 1998. p18

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<sup>4</sup> G. Endruwiet and G. Trommsdor. *Dictionary of Sociology*. HaNoi: World Publishing House, 2002. p 240

<sup>5</sup> G. Endruwiet and G. Trommsdor. 2002 *Dictionary of Sociology*. World Publishing House (Hanoi), p. 310

paper. The above-mentioned theory background, along with observation, mapping and interviews will help clarify the practical conditions of the space organization of the Muong village in question, as well as its people's perception of possible changes in space organization caused by the projected Reserve. This research deals exclusively with natural territorial setting and habitat structure and therefore can't be considered as a complete space study.

The Vietnamese village has long been regarded as a social entity, a subject of scientific researches and a matter of concern for Vietnamese and foreign scholars. There have been multiple publications on the Vietnamese, especially the Kinh village and its space organization. Most of these publications focus on such issues as concepts of space, space patterns, and socio-politic or socio-economic features of the Vietnamese village in its hierarchical system (commune, district, village, and hamlet). Olivier Tessier<sup>6</sup> showed the characteristic cultural features of the Vietnamese village by analyzing its interaction with other social units and with the central government. Pierre Gourou noticed that a Northern village was, in terms of space, not an assemblage of houses but first and foremost a green bloc. Nguyen Tung<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, argued that a Vietnamese village was a habitat space before being seen as a community with rich politico-

cultural life. However, important changes in the traditional space organization of the Vietnamese village have recently been noticed. The strict separation between living space and working space no longer exists in many midland villages<sup>8</sup>. Jeanne Cuisinier<sup>9</sup>, while describing the space organization of the Muong village in "*The Muong Geography Human and Sociology*", also mentioned this feature, though not really in details, (probably because this work covers a too large issue to provide details for everything). Jeanne Cuisinier's remarks called for a comparison of two ethnic communities with distinctive cultural features and natural settings (Kinh and Muong). Muong people are likely to settle down on limestone highlands and hillsides, and prefer swift-flowing streams to large rivers<sup>10</sup>. Anyway, it can clearly be seen that researches on village space organization are mostly conducted in Kinh villages (plain areas). Researches on the space organization of the Muong village (situated mainly in valleys) still remain quite modest. Jeanne Cuisinier, Tran Tu<sup>11</sup> and a few other scholars have introduced in their works overview features of the Muong village's space organization, but none have so far provided a detailed explanation of the issue.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Papin, Olivier Tessier and other. *The village in question*. Ha Noi: Labour Publishing House, 2002. p139

<sup>7</sup> Nguyen Tung and other (2003), *Mong Phu mot lang o dong bang chau tho song Hong (Mong Phu, a village in the Red River Delta)*. Ha Noi: Information and Culture Publishing House.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Papin and other. *The village in question*. Ha Noi: Labour Publishing House, 2002. p140

<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Cuisinier. *Nguoi Muong (The Muong people)*. Ha Noi: Labour Publishing House, 1995. p 128.

<sup>10</sup> Jeanne Cruisnier, *The Muong human*, Labour Publisher, hanoi, 1995, pg 59

<sup>11</sup> Tran Tu, *The Muong ethnic and Muong Bi traditional culture*, Hoa Binh Culture and Information Agency Publisher

In conclusion, the existence and development of a society is in permanent evolution and dependant on space and time (E.R Leach). Such knowledge suggests us that a thorough study of the Muong village shall be necessary for the setting up of the Reserve area.

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON RESEARCH AREAS**

Ngoc Son is one of the three mountainous communes of Lac Son district, Hoa Binh province that is 500m above the sea level and enjoys semi-monsoon tropical climate. There are two seasons in a year, the rainy season from May to October and the dry season from November to April. The Khu hamlet, 5km far from the center of the commune, lying in a limestone valley with long and narrow terrain, is one of eight hamlets of Ngoc Son commune. Its terrain stretches more than 3km sloping regularly in the North- South direction (exclusive the 5km forest area sharing the same border with Ngo Luong commune Tan Lac district). The Khu hamlet's area is the largest in the commune. Its forest is covered with a diversified ecological system with many kinds of rare wood, herbs and animals. Some forest areas are quite far from the residential area, which makes the protection and preservation more difficult. Although there is a main road from the commune center to the hamlet, people finds traveling so difficult in rainy season and they mostly have to go on foot. Located on sloped and rough area, the terrain of the hamlet is made up of many different hills. Because of the sloped terrain, cultivated area often suffers

floods, sweeping away fertile soil. Besides, due to the terrace form of most rice fields, the large number of fertilizer from higher fields is often swept away to lower ones and to streams by huge amount of water falling from the higher areas.

Total area of natural soil is 1697.7 ha and consists of different kinds of soil, which are described in the Table 1

*Table 1. The area of Khu hamlet's soil*

Types of soil	Hecta
Natural	1697.7
Agricultural	40.2
Rice	10.6
Forestry	1631.57
Natural forest	1627.77
Cultivated forest	3.8

The population of Khu hamlet is 312 people divided into 52 households and most of them are Muong (6/2003). Currently, agriculture is the main source of income of the villagers. However, the agricultural productivity still remains low and there is a big shortage of cultivated area. Cultivating area per head is only 0.13 ha while average total land per head is 5.8 ha, rice- growing land is even less with 0.034 ha each. Besides, the people here almost have no support business and they raise animals mostly for pulling-power purpose, which brings about a lot of difficulties for them to make ends meet. Most of them have not sufficient capital and experience for production and investment in long term forestry

activities. Only some of the peasants have combined agriculture and forestry together and they have obtained certain achievements so far. Nevertheless, these achievements remain quite unremarkable and their income is still rather low. There is a primary-junior secondary school in the commune and the children have to walk 5km to school everyday. If they wish to attend senior secondary school, they have to go to Vu Ban town. At present, the commune has 6 people graduating from senior secondary school, 32 from junior secondary school but nobody from neither university nor college.

## RESULT OF THE STUDY

### 1. Foundation history of Khu hamlet

The Khu hamlet today was made up of three small hamlets namely Dong, Dien and former Khu. In 2001, 25 households separated living in former Dien to become Dien again under a local authority decision. The Khu was formed about 100 years ago with first settlers coming from the Khop and Den hamlet in Ngoc Lau commune, the Boi in Ngoc Son commune.

The Dong first comers were those who from the Boi, Ngoc Son (Boi is originated from Den, Ngoc Lau). The first residential family has 3 sons, the eldest inherited their parents' wealth and lived there, one moved to the Roc, Ngoc Son and the other went to break fresh land in Dong. Mr. Bui Thanh Man, the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of the youngest son is living in Dong, all his brothers and sisters moved to LamDong province (a province in the central highland of Vietnam).

The Boi was also the first to reside and establish Dien hamlet. It should be noted that the whole first settler's family of this commune died for a terrible epidemic. And the Dong leader (*xa chom*) owned the land and recruited nearby villagers Ngo Luong, Dinh Cu, Huong Nhuong people.

First habitat family of the Khu hamlet was from Khop village, Ngoc Lau commune (Mr. Bui van Su, 4<sup>th</sup> generation of the first settler is living in Khu). Local people often leave their homeland for two main reasons. The first reason is younger sons have to find his own living area. Traditionally, the eldest son in a family has the superlative right to inherit their parents' asset, he gets half of the total estate and two thirds of cultivating land. He is responsible for ancestor worship. The rest of all fortune is evenly divided to younger sons. Every daughter can inherit nothing from their parents' fortune even when there no son in their family, in this case all the fortune is given to the leader of the hamlet (*langtao*) then it may be divided to other families in hamlet. The second reason is run away crimes. Those who committed thieving or fighting have to run away from his commune leaving entire asset to avoid being captured. They are accepted to live in other villages. The foundation history of all 4 researched villages is owing to the first reason.

After try living a long time in new region, realizing favorable living condition, the first settlers may comeback to bring their relatives or recruit their

villagers to live and work there. By this way, a new village gradually set. The first comer may become the leader of that newly formed village if he has the ability to administer.

In 1945, the Khu hamlet has the population of 80, 18 households (3 Dong, 10 Khu and 15 Dien). In 1949 the French colonists set up camp in Ngoc Lau, all people of Khu did not submit, and then they moved to deep forest to join resistance movement. By 1950 the French colonists withdrew, they came back to their villages. In 1957, Ngoc Lau commune is divided into three small communes namely Ngoc Lau, Ngoc Son, Tu Do. In 1959, according to a democracy reform program, every people's property was collected and evenly divided to everyone, established an experimental cooperative in Vang hamlet. In 1962, the three small hamlets were joined again to become a cooperative namely Khu.

In 1963, the state government carried out a cutting timber program; people were paid to work there. Therefore the local residents had a relatively comfortable life owing to the state's food and foodstuff supply. Although local people still did their farming work, food supply from state remained major pole. In 1965, Nhu Xuan afforestation yard with more than 600 hundreds workers from Thanh Hoa province came to Lac Son district to cut timber. Each hamlet has a group of 20 working as ox- Carter transporters to get food. In 1968 the three small hamlets were unified to become a cooperative but

one year later it was divided as previous again. In 1969, the Nhu Xuan afforestation yard was forced to despair as their activities caused water resource shortage, soil erosion and badly affected on cultivating land. Moreover, this group banned local people doing farming or cutting tree in the restricted areas posed by the group themselves.

In the early 1980s, there was a serious trend in villages that people rushed to move to LamDong province, as it is a promising land. At first, 3 households from the Khu (1 in Dien, 2 in Dong), 5 Roc and 20 in Vang left for Lam Dong. Then the number increased too sharp (200 households) that the local authority had to issue measure to limit the trend.

By 1989, cultivating land was assigned to individual household. Local authorities carried out this program. Farm- land was evenly divided per head. The Khu cooperative was despaired in 1990, households have to cultivate on their own, and farming land plays an important role in their living. Since then, the people's life is gradually stable and improved in a line with the whole commune development.

## **2. The organization of residential area**

### ***2.1. Residential situation***

All people in the Khu reside along the main road, forming an image of a fishbone. The two first hamlets (Dong and Khu) are the most populated hamlets. It can be seen clearly on the residential map that people live together in a small group on the basis of geographical feature or

family relation. Members of an extended family usually live together in a same hamlet. There are 17 families who are of the same blood reside close together out of the total of 52 households in the Khu hamlet. The number in the Xom hamlet is 15 out of 32. These indicators show that family relation is not decisive factor in their residence way.

Residence location here is strictly regulated by geographical feature (area, location). It is really difficult to extend residential space as narrow and sloped terrain. Therefore, the local habitants have to live on their ancestor already resided area. Whenever having a chance to get a new living place they do not take living close to their relatives' factor into consideration. Though all members of an extended family really want to live close together, they still have to live far away due to limited residential area. " I really want to live close to my relatives but living area can not be extended while the population keep growing", Mr. Bui Van Dang said "Besides, our living condition now is much better than previous (in the past we must live close together to fight against dangerous wild animals and to help each other in case of hard luck. Living apart does not mean relatives relation is of less important in our living" he added. In 2002, some people in Ngoc Lau commune violated tomb of the Bui ancestor's tomb family when they dug dam. Mr. Bui Thanh Man (in Khu hamlet) and his relatives came back to stop the violation and people in Ngoc Lau had to give 1.500.000 VND fine and give up a dam.

Garden can be seen in every house of all visited hamlets and villages. Garden is often called *cha* or *chau*. It is a very important part of their residence, various in size (from tens metres to hundreds metres). Green herbal fences to separate from house surround garden. Lane into house is often on the side of the garden. Garden is considered a link between house and field. It is also of great important in providing food, creating extra income to family. Mr. Ha Van Dung in the Khu hamlet gets about 300.000 VND (20\$) from edible canna per year without spending much care.

Cultivating and living space can be divided into three main forms in term of location and terrain. The first form is **milpa** where corn, cassava and other plants are grown. Nowadays, corn play key factor in stabilizing and improving local people life, it is even more important than rice. Rice is traditionally regarded as the most important one. According to local habitants, corn is easy to grow as less water (this is of huge meaning to this high hill and mountainous area), less laboured spending is needed, moreover, its productivity is very high even 2 times higher than that of rice. Therefore, the area of cultivating corn is sharply increased in Ngoc Lau and Ngoc Son commune and especially in Vang hamlet, Ngoc Son. The area of corn is 2.5 times higher than that of rice in the Khu and 3 times higher in the Vang. Corn undoubtedly contributes to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty there.

The second type is the fields where rice is cultivated including *na chiem* (plant 2 crops a year), *na ron* (plant 1 crop). Due to sloped terrain, most fields are in terrace forms with small area making it unable to use machine to cultivate. These fields require much fertilizer, which are easily swept away whenever hard rain occurs. The changes especially in environment and climate have turned irrigation for rice fields very challenging. Besides, the area for rice cultivation remains rather little (0.034ha/person in the Khu hamlet), therefore, rice still is the main food plant but could hardly be the plant which can eliminate hunger and reduce poverty.

The third type is pond area. With the sloped terrain, most ponds here are in small shape (their area is no more than 100sq.m) and they are not popular type in the Muong people residential area. In the case which the residential and cultivated area are in a mixture with no clear division, the identification of milestones and the location become very significant factors.

## **2.2. The location**

The first question may come up to us is why these people intentionally choose certain place to live. The common answer probably focuses on several factors such as terrain, climate, land, water resource, demography, cultivation techniques, cattle breeding system, territory... Barth<sup>12</sup> says that groups of people having beliefs and values in common will certainly pursue

different patterns of life and generalize different types of behavior when faced up with different influence in different environment. The selection of a certain place is the combination of economic advantages and cultural factors and symbols. The habitants will not set up the lives in places, which are not advantageous to them or lack natural resources, unless those places have brought about significant meanings to them for a long time. In this case, the disadvantages will be neglected.

In the Xom hamlet (Nam Son commune, Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province), 1963, a dangerous flood occurred sweeping away 16 houses and caused 3 deaths. After that, the whole hamlet moved to a new higher place although the new terrain was more sloped, narrower, further from the fields and not as advantageous as the old one but safer and free from flood. The selection of those locations could be explained as the result of reasonable combination of some or all above-mentioned factors.

The Muong people here all share the same belief of considering geographical features through terrain and terrain features through specific objects". It means that when building houses or doing something, they always take first consideration of specific objects surrounding and then look through the terrain and take geographical features (direction, the age of the house owner...) at the least. Despite the similarities in

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<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. Illinois, Waveland Press, 1969

choosing and selecting the location (for building houses as an example), I find the flexibility in establishing house at different hamlets with their terrain variety. With wide area and quite flat terrain of the Khu and the Vang hamlet, the location of houses is in accordance with terrain features and taboos on the direction and the age of the house owner. Particularly, in the Khu hamlet I did not find any house which has the backward just in front of the behind one). Meanwhile, in the Xom hamlet, due to high density (the result of compulsory moving in orders to avoid flood), many houses are only 10m far from each other and their backs are inevitable just in front of the others.

The terrain is the most decisive factor when selecting location for building houses, direction of the house, places to bury dead people... The local people are in favour of building houses on the land which has its position of leaning towards mountain and overlooking water or on the side of the hills or even on the high land with the back of the house leans on the mountain while the front overlooks the fields which are lower than the house. If there is a streamline running from the behind and surrounding the land (like a boomerang), that place is believed to be the best. They also avoid building houses overlooking any ponds or wells. All inhabitants do not live together in an area but they live scatteredly within the hamlet, which makes up smaller residential areas (called *chom*). Currently,

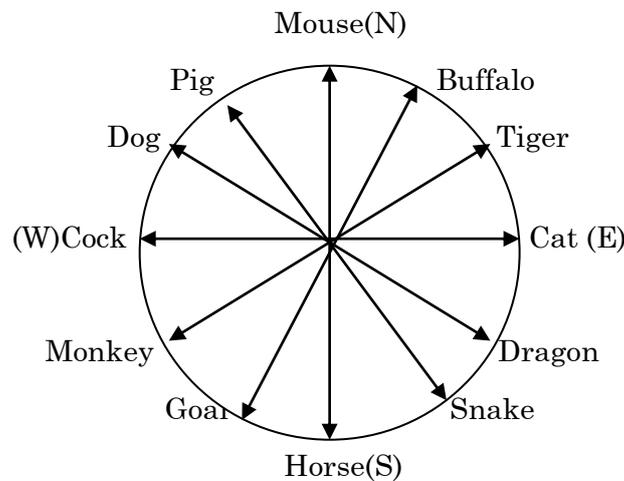
the Khu hamlet has 2 *chom* namely Dong and Khu) and at each *chom* there does 3-5 households living nearby families. The division by terrain and living in-groups of households has made residential and production areas mixed together with forest and natural ones. The people build their houses along the paths within the hamlet or inter-hamlet and located scatteredly on hillsides or near the valleys of the hills. Houses in the hamlet are often built in the same pattern because they believe that those who build houses in different pattern from the rest will suffer bad lucks. The location of the house should be near the water resource or it could have water access.

The house should not be near the places where they bury dead people or bamboo bush. They choose dry, sloped places to bury dead people (so as not to lose cultivated land). Those places must have no big tree (in case someone does not know will chop down the tree for building house and it is not good). The graves are placed in each row, follows a family generation order, from higher to lower place, their heads are towards higher place and their feet towards lower one. The oldest person's grave is on the top, the male's graves are on the East (outside) and the female's graves on the West (inside). Children, especially those who are under 12 years old, are not allowed to bury in the adults area but in special place determined by the hamlet which is far from the road and residential area, people avoid to cultivate and others

hardly pay visit. It is due to their belief that those who are under 12 are not mature enough, are not paid when they work for somebody, therefore, when they die, they become young ghosts and often disturb or cause diseases for the alive.

The inhabitants here are very careful on selecting direction. They divide the direction system into 12 directions representing by 12 animals. The East is called the Cat direction, the West the Cock, the South the Horse and the North the Mouse. It depends on the age of the house owner or the business performed to select the most suitable direction. These

people often avoid building houses directly in the North, South, East, and West, therefore, the houses in the hamlet are a little bit far from these directions. They believe that if the house is directly in the East or West, it will be hot and easily catch fire (due to the all day round sunlight). If the house is in the North, the people are likely to suffer strong wind or illnesses. The South is believed to be the most suitable direction when building house. If the terrain is available, the houses can be in the Southeast direction or Southwest is believed to be the best one.



When the residential and production areas are in such a mixture that there could hardly be any clear split or division, the place name becomes an important factor helping people to locate a certain place in the hamlet area. Moreover, the place name can also help revive or restore

historical milestones of the local community in both natural and social aspects.

**2.3. Boundary setting**

The two most popular kinds of boundaries in anthropology are real and symbolic boundaries. Real boundaries are

concrete territories circled by borderlines whereas symbolic boundaries refer to people's perception and conception of borders. These perceptions and conceptions are closely related to symbols, politics, culture, law principles and social values. Borders and boundaries permanently change over time and space.<sup>13</sup>

Back to 1968, when the Lac Son afforestation yard had to stop its activities and move elsewhere. Mr. Bui Van Cheng, from the Khu village, stated that people in the commune protested against the afforestation yard because of other reasons than economic ones. In fact, wages paid in rice for cutting timber helped local people escape from hunger. However, the afforestation yard isolated local people from the forest, its charter preventing them from growing crops inside the forest or cutting timber for domestic purposes. For local people, traditional owners of the forest space, these prohibitions were interpreted as a violation of their territory. As a result, 18/28 communes of Lac Son districts voted for the afforestation yard's closing-door.

Traditionally, in people's mind, symbolic boundaries co-exist with official ones. Symbolic boundaries and borders stem from, and are closely related to a community's living and working realities and history. These boundaries and

borders are certainly not recognized in any official text, but work well in reality through such benchmarks as streams, fountains, mountaintops, stones or big trees. River or stream currents are often used to define boundaries between villages, and to determine the water sources owners, and mulberries often mark field's borderlines. The Muong people simply use a stick to mark their possession of things they found in the forest, such as a beehive. In the case of the Khu village, its residents mark their territory with a cross even before they settled down in the village, and surprisingly, the cross-shaped borderline was respected by people from other villages also looking for a new place to live.

Nevertheless, natural benchmarks are changed over time and the setting of official boundaries without consulting local people resulted in many territorial conflicts. Excepted from the Vang village, the three others investigated villages have all experienced territorial conflicts (between villages in one commune or between villages of different communes).

Territorial conflicts generally originated from the setting of the land using map N° 364. Regardless of practical conditions, maps drawn up by French colonists were re-applied and a number of well-known sites were indifferently chosen as benchmarks. These inadequacies led to situations where residents of an area lose their traditional land use rights to people

<sup>13</sup> Wilson T. M. & Donnan H. (1998). *Border identities? And state at international frontiers*. Cambridge: University Press. p 25

who are not necessarily in need of land. Conflicts are therefore inevitable.

(e.g.: the Xom against Lung Van, Bac Son; the Khu against Phu Luong, Ngo Luong).

Another reasons for territorial conflict is the termination of cooperatives. With cooperatives, traditional boundaries are modified or even disappeared. When the cooperative are ends, villages claim rights over their former territory, resulting in conflicts (between the Xom and Chien hamlet; between the Ton and Trong hamlet...)

Efforts to split the above-mentioned territorial conflicts have so far brought about different results. In the case of conflicts between the Khu (Ngoc Son commune) and Tram hamlet (Ngo Luong commune), boundaries were set up as proposed by the Khu community, along with common grassland to feed cattle from both villages. However, the same problem of territorial conflict between the Ton and the Trong hamlet still remain unsolved. It is suggested therefore that further researches shall be focused on finding the solution for these problems, which basically are conflicts for land use rights and water source ownership.

## CONCLUSION

The Muong in Ngoc Son commune mainly reside in narrow valley locating about 500- 600m above the sea level. They live on growing rice and doing farm on fields in the mountains. Their living space is divided with limestones mountains and

short, narrow valley. This terrain characteristics heavily affects on local habitation way and creates identified residential organisation. People in each hamlet do not live concentratedly on the main road but scatters in form of a fishbone making smaller hamlet or *chom*. Living spaces and cultivating spaces is mixed creating a close-to-nature environment, especially the forest's imprint in this area.

Living in such divided and rough terrain, choosing a location to live or to cultivate is certainly a careful mixture of economic benefit, safe living condition and symbolistic culture. The Muong here shares the same concept of "geography through terrain, terrain through specific objects". Place-name, therefore, is of important factor in identifying or indicating a place in the hamlet.

There are two kinds of border, one is on administrative basis or border and one is on the people concept of living way and history of residence or boundary. Both border and boundary concept now play important role in justifying land-use right and using water resources of the local people. A number of conflicts happened due to the regardless of people's boundary concept.

On the way to establish preservation area, protecting borders foundation will be carried by related agencies including state government, local authorities, organizations, and local people). Need, demand and different culture

characteristics of the local people should be strictly taken into account when doing the preservation project. The best solution should be the target of preservation project is in coincided with the benefit of the local people.

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