

## **BLACK THAI WOMEN IN VIETNAM AND PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY DURING THE DOI MOI PERIOD**

*(The Case Study in Thanh Luong commune, Dien Bien district, Lai Chau province)\**

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### **Preface**

One of the most pertinent social issues today is the cultural identity of different ethnic groups. The cultural conservation and integration is a challenge to each nation and each ethnic group in the development of the modern world.

Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups in its cultural diversity. At present the conservation and promotion of each cultural identity is a precondition to the sustainable development of the nation. So what has been happening to the traditional cultural elements if these ethnic groups and how have they received cultural material from outside their group ?

This report helps find an answer to that big question and analyses the role of Black Thai women in the conservation of traditional Thai culture in Vietnamese heritage.

The study has been conducted in Thanh Luong commune, Dien Bien district, Lai Chau province. This site, in Northwest Vietnam has been inhabited by Black Thai people for many years. It has been heavily influenced by urbanization, due to its proximity to Dien Bien town and communication with ethnic Kinh people and Laos people.

### **1. Some traits of the studied site**

#### ***1.1 Physical conditions***

Thanh Luong is both a low-land and border commune of Dien Bien district, about 5 km from the district and provincial centre. It borders Dien Bien town to the East, Lao to the West for about

10 km, Thanh Nua to the North and Thanh Hung commune, to the South.

Thanh Luong lies in the monsoon region. Every year the weather is divided into two distinct seasons: dry season (from the previous November to the following April) and rainy season (from May to October). Its topography stretches on a slope of 16<sup>o</sup> to 20<sup>o</sup>. The total area of the commune is 4,010ha, of which agricultural and tenure land represent 842ha, and forest and water cover the remaining 3,168ha.

Thanh Luong has a mountain, valley topography, which is typical of Thai landscape and different to the middle and high mountain topography of Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Dao and Tang-Mien regions. The topography of Thanh Luong commune has been influential in the formation and development of Thai culture as will be discussed later.

The intention here is not to discuss Thanh Luong's physical conditions in detail, but to suggest that the natural environment of a geographical area is a factor which influences an ethnic group's culture. It is not surprising that the recent earthquakes in Thanh Luong have resulted in heavy destruction of Kinh people's houses, but caused little damage to Thai people's stilt houses. Most cultural elements have been influenced by humans but their houses and inhabited sites are typical of Thai culture.

#### ***1.2 Population***

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Muong Thanh is one of *xip hoc chau tay*, one of the 16 administrative units of Thai people (Muong) in the XIII century. Muong Thanh formerly known as Muong Then (Muong of Heaven in Thai language). Many Thai people in Northwest Vietnam, Laos and a portion of Thailand believe that their ancestors inhabited<sup>1</sup>.

Thanh Luong lies within Muong Then, where Black Thai have long inhabited. Old people in Pe Luong village, a pure Thai village in the communal centre have spoken about *Pau Pu* (their ancestors) of Thanh Luong. They said that Thai have lived here for a very long time. They could not say exactly for how many generations, but recalled that it must have been at least 4 generations. In the past only Black Thai inhabited Pe Luong (Pe village) and the neighbouring villages. Pe village has 5 clans, of which Lo is the biggest, being divided into three branches: Lo Huong (formerly Bac Cam), Lo Noi and Lo Nuong. About 2 generations ago Pe village was composed of only 7 Thai households dwelling around the present Muong Thanh bridge. Since 1950 the Thai population has increased rapidly. The mechanical: the mechanical increase brought about by Kinh people and others has changed the population structure and the ethnic profile, which is a precondition to cultural change.

At present Thanh Luong's population is nearly 8,000 comprising 5 ethnic groups, of which Black Thai represent about 40%, Kinh 35%, and Tay, Hmong, Khomu the remaining 25%. The entire commune is composed of 41 villages, of which 21 are Thai villages. Between 1954 and 1960, besides a Khomu village called Hua Pe of nearly ten households, there were 9 Thai villages in Thanh Luong: Pe Luong, Pe Noi, Hong Hin, Long Tong, Lo, Banh, Nong, Le, Nguu. Among these 9 villages, Pe Luong was regarded as the central village and the farthest was Nguu, lying 3 km from the commune centre on the border of Laos. So far they have remained pure Thai villages. However, the move of population from

elsewhere has resulted in Kinh villages and half-Thai, half-Kinh villages intermingling with pure Thai villages. Villages inhabited by Kinh people are called *thon* (hamlet), therefore in the commune's administrative documents the term *thon ban* (hamlet-village) refers to both Thai and Kinh villages within the commune.

Mixed habitation is characteristic of ethnic groups in Northwest Vietnam. The population distribution in Thanh Luong is no exception. What is interesting here is how mixed habitation has influenced the cultural identity of each ethnic group, and how the cultural relations among these groups have been conducted. Specifically in Thanh Luong, how has Thai cultural identity been conserved in the mixed habitation among Thai, Kinh, and Khomu people? How will Thai culture change with the integration of modern urbanization in Muong Thanh basin valley? And furthermore, how will Thai culture change when Muong Thanh airport (located inside Thanh Luong) become an international airport, and when Muong Thanh valley, thanks to tourism, become the meeting point of many cultures in the world?

### 1.3 Production and Life

In the renovation of the whole country, the economic life of Thanh Luong people has changed a lot. In the pre-renovation period, their major source of income came from traditional wet-rice cultivation. With the strains of rice like Bao Thai, Moc Tuyen and Short Tran Chau, the crop yield was rather low, only 1 to 2.5 ton/ha. Since after 1986, Thanh Luong has adopted the technique of rice planting without transplanting. This technique originated in the Cuu Long river delta, and has been popularized in Dien Bien since 1988. This was when the renovation policy of the government was issued. Thanh Luong conducted the product-based contract system to farmers, in which farm land was allocated to each household according to the number of dwellers. The farmers were active in their production and handed over the quota output to the state. At the same time various new rice strains were used by Thai people, for example CR203, IR45, and in the

<sup>1</sup> Dang Nghiem Van. *Ethnicity, Culture, Religion*. The Social Sciences Publishing House, H.2001, page 400.

early 1990s, several others were added such as Chinese cross-breed, Khang Dan, IR64, etc. By adopting new rice strains and advanced cultivation techniques, the crop yield increased quickly, with the summer crop producing 6 ton/ha and the winter crop 4 ton/ha. Benefiting from the restructuring policy in agricultural management, Thanh Luong also enjoyed other advantages in the comprehensive development program on mountainous areas and ethnic groups, complying with Resolution 22/CT, approved by the Political Bureau, and Decision 72-CP by the government in 1989. Following these programs, agro forestry households in Thanh Luong have been granted loans to do business at preferential interest rates of about 9.6%/year. In 2000, 128 households in the commune were granted a loan totaling 337 million VND from the poverty elimination and hunger alleviation program. The farm model has the potential to develop, with only 6 cattle and a goat per household. According to government program 327 "waste land and barren hill afforestation" 246.8ha of barren forest land and 1226.9 ha under protection have been allocated to households in the commune.

The renovation policies have been a turning point for Thai people economically. The market economy is taking the place of the traditional subsistence agriculture. In the 1980s the number of rich households could be counted on one hand, but in 2000 it amounted to 129 households, accounting for 7.05%. The number of fairly rich households, average households, poor households, very poor households were 548 (31.42%), 783 (44.90%), 113 (6.47%) and 177 (10.16%) respectively. The average amount of rice was 380kg/person, the average income was 920,000dong/person/year (Source: The People's Committee of Thanh Luong, 2000). In the past, the temporary move to town or sub-towns for seasonal jobs was very rare, especially among Thai people. Over the past 5-7 years, this phenomenon has occurred more frequently in Thanh Luong. There are about 15 men in Pe Luong village and 10 men in Nguu village who often do temporary jobs during off-crop time in Dien Bien town. Most of them are men, and their

jobs are mainly assisting builders, carrying soil and stone, and loading goods. Also in two pure Thai villages, trading across the border into Laos is quite popular, especially in Nguu village, which borders Laos. It occurs in almost every household of which 60% of the traders are women. Mixed with the traditional houses on stilts of Thai people are 2 two-storey flat-roof houses, 13 bungalows with walls and tile roofs and similar to the Kinh people's homes. Both Pe Luong and Nguu village have grinding and husking services and tea shops. Motorbikes, televisions, radios and other modern facilities have appeared in many households.

Influenced by social economic conditions in the renovation period, Thai people's life in Thanh Luong is greatly different from the past. Modern life elements have penetrated each village, each household and each individual of the Thai community. It is also one of the reasons for their cultural change.

## 2. The concept of culture and some traits of Thai culture

### 2.1 The concept of culture

So far there have been many in depth studies into culture and different ways of understanding culture. Culture is a system of material social and spiritual values devised and accumulated by humans.

Together with the general concept of culture ethnic *group culture*, which is one of the basic concepts of anthropology. It is *a combination of various elements of language, script, material and spiritual cultural activities, psychological and emotional shades, customs and formalities, and distinguishes one ethnic group from another group*<sup>2</sup>.

Ethnic group's culture covers a large area, indeed all aspects of life. However, each culture encompasses its own identity. "*Cultural identity is the integrity of cultural qualities,*

<sup>2</sup> Scientific Report KX.06-05. *Local and ethnic cultural nuance in the country's development strategies. The Social Science Publishing House, H.1998, page 25.*

characteristics, nuances of each people, which has come into being and developed sustainably in the course of history, helping to maintain the uniqueness and uniformity of ethnic group's culture, distinguishing its culture with another group's"<sup>3</sup>.

The definitions are tools to be used in this report and are not intended to be discussed in detail. They provide a background to study further into Thai cultural identity and the role of Thai women in conserving, diversifying and promoting the group's cultural identity.

## 2.2 Some traits of Thai culture

Thai people live in wooden or bamboo, thatch-roofed houses on stilts. Each house represents a patriarchal family. These families gather in a residential unit called 'ban' (mountainous village). A village on average has about 30-40 families, some big villages like Pe Luong, Nguu have 106 and 60 families respectively.

Basically, the traditional costumes of Thai groups are similar. The women's costumes are typical of Thai culture: *Xua com* (blouse), *Xin* (skirt), *Xai eo* (belt), *Pieu* (headscarf, only in Black Thai), jewels like *Pua sooi* (a kind of silver chain worn round the hip, also called key chain), and *May khat cau* (metal hair-pin for married women, only in Black Thai). The men's costumes are simpler, hand-loomed and indigo-dyed including headscarf, round-necked, side-split shirt, bell-bottom, ankle-length trousers.

Traditionally Thai people eat sticky rice, garden and forest vegetables and cook mainly by steaming or grilling. The savoured drink for reception of guests at traditional festivals is wine cooked from rice, cassava and corn.

Thai people believe that in heaven there is *Then Luong* who supervises the heaven, the earth, humans and all creatures. On earth there are *Phi* (ghosts) who are in charge of supervising, *Phi huon* (family ghost), *Phi dam* (relative ghost), *Pu pau* (ancestors). They are regarded as protective

forces to humans. On the occasion of early spring, Thai people hold the festivities of *xen muong*, *xen ban*, *xen huon* on the honour of natural genies and their ancestors. During the festivities they perform *khap* (singing) and *xoe* (dancing), which is the creative folklore music of Thai people.

So Thai culture is reflected in many aspects of life: eating habits, dress style, dwelling, custom, formality, art activities, psychology and life style, which distinguish Thai culture from that of other ethnic groups.

## 3. Black Thai with the conservation of the ethnic group's cultural identity

### 3.1. Changes in Black Thai culture

At present, some research findings in Vietnam have raised a concern of the declination in ethnic group's culture<sup>4</sup>. This study is intended to discuss this proposition. However, I find that in Thanh Luong there is now a combination of traditional and modern Thai cultural elements in some aspects of life.

In the relationship between tradition and modern culture, the young generation - as the inheritors of their ancestors' cultural legacy - plays an important part. It is quite difficult to infer cultural identity through young Thai men's costumes in Pe Luong and Nguu village. Men over 35 years old in the two villages hardly ever wear Thai traditional costumes but put on shirts and trousers like Kinh people. Only elderly people wear traditional clothes, but the young find these clothes unpleasant and inconvenient for going to work, to school or going out. Moreover, making Thai traditional costumes involves a lot of time and energy, which is also discouraging for tailors. It is easier to identify Thai people through the costumes of elderly people and women. Particularly for young Thai girls nowadays, their costumes are not *com* with shining silver buttons, but modern blouses

<sup>3</sup> Like 2, page 8.

<sup>4</sup> Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas. *Actual state and socio-economic development move for ethnic and mountainous areas after 15-year implementation of renovation strategies (1986 - 2000)*. Hanoi 1999, page 24.

instead. Any young girl in Pe Luong village now has at least 2 Thai traditional dresses, but they only wear them in traditional festivals, or on reception of guests to their house. Even in a wedding in Pe Luong village, the bridegroom does not wear traditional Thai clothes and the groom wears a blouse and Thai dress. Also in the wedding, besides the very typical Thai formalities - the rituals performed by the bridegroom and the groom's families, and the formality of *tang cau* for the bride - boys and girls dance to modern disco music. Obviously in Pe Luong nowadays, there are some differences between adults and adolescents in terms of fashion, lifestyle and aesthetic values. Is it a sign of cultural integration gathering of cultural changes and a narrowing of the gap between different cultures?<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2. The role of women in Thai society

In the current development period, there have been some changes in the role and function of Black Thai women in economic, social and cultural fields. In Thanh Luong, Black Thai women confront the challenge of urbanization in Dien Bien town. How do they perform their cultural functions in that renovation background? Before going further into this matter, it is important to study the folklore of conception in traditional Thai society.

A Thai legend : *Once upon a time there were only women on earth. One day there was a strange gourd floating along the stream. The women picked up the gourd, sharing and drinking the water inside it. Then all of them were pregnant and gave birth to sons and daughters, who are later regarded as human ancestors.* The association of women's image with the origin of human life exists not only in Thai culture, but also in other Vietnamese wet-rice agricultural communities, as found in the legend of "*Ba Mu*" (Midwife) of Kinh people.

For Thai people, who regard wet rice agriculture as their main source of income, the

element of *water-female-mother* takes a lead role in their culture. In a Thai family, the man is considered as the master of the house, the pillar who manages big affairs, and whose power is asserted by *xau chau xua* (master's pillar), and the woman is thought to bring wealth and prosperity to the family. Therefore, in a new house erection ceremony, *xau he* (female's pillar) - the symbol of the woman's power must be placed in front of *xau chau xua* (master's pillar). Many important rituals are carried out with the erection of female's pillar by *Lung ta* (the wife's relatives), while no relevant rituals are carried out for the erection of the master's pillar, which is put up afterwards.

Similarly, in kitchen and new house erection ceremonies, the master of ceremony is either the wife's father or mother. The prayers in the ceremony are always for good health, wealth and prosperity of the whole family<sup>6</sup>.

A Thai family is a congregation of people of the same blood, living under the same roof, together with the women coming from outside the family after marriage. Girls are born in the family, grow up and become a member of another family. Therefore, a marriage is an important event, marking changes in status and role of a woman in a family. In each stage her status and role are established in different way.

A girl's status is established right at the moment of birth "*Nhinh toi hai, Chai toi dam*" (women depend on her husband, men depend on his clan)<sup>7</sup>. According to this notion, a newly-born girl is not considered a member of the clan. Thai people even believe that girls are born to be sold and become a member of another family "*Nhinh khong lai, Chai khong lieng*" (daughters are for sale, sons are for rearing). The girl's gender is established by the new birth rites : the practice of *au luc long khuong* (carrying the baby in arm down to the floor), *oc phay* (moving the

<sup>6</sup> Hoang Nam, Le Ngoc Thang. *Thai Houses on Stilts.* The Culture Publishing House, H.1994, page 38.

<sup>7</sup> Ha Van Nam. *Thai Sayings.* The Ethnic Cultural Publishing House, H.1978.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Barfield (Executive Editor). *The Dictionary of Anthropology.* Publishers, Blackwell Inc, 1997.

fireplace) to present her to Lady *Me Bau* the name-giving ceremony. The baby girl is given a name representing beauty, gentleness with the wish that she will be hardworking, versatile and good at weaving and embroidery.

Puberty is a stage in which a Thai girl prepares herself thoroughly - both physically and mentally - to enter a new role in life that of a wife. As a Thai saying goes: *Chai xip xam hu thi bu, Ninh xip xi hu kheo xau chi xon xao* (a thirteen-year-old boy knows how to catch gobi, a fourteen-year-old girl knows how to dye her teeth to make her more charming). At this age, parents teach their children the skills that they need to know. Sons are taught by their father how to cast nets, daughters are taught by their mother the skills of cooking, weaving and embroidery. Not considered as a member of the clan, girls are not entitled to inherit the family's property; however, they are allowed by parents to accumulate their own funds.

Besides working in fields and cooking, Thai girls make and embroider clothes, bags, scarfs, blankets and mattresses, they also grow cotton, weave fabric and raise pigs and chickens in order to accumulate a dowry for their marriage. A Thai man is judged by his capability to weave and cast nets, and a Thai woman is judged by her fabric-weaving and embroidery skills.

In traditional Thai society, children's marriages are arranged by their parents. Thai people believe that girls are not considered as members of their family, only after a marriage, they are entitled to join *dam* of their husband's family, this is reflected in the *nguồn phuon phai* ceremony changing the family name) at the wedding. The groom's family chooses a good day to go to the bride's house to ask to bring the *ho* of the bride's home and hang it at the wing *tang chan* of their house. And from that moment, the girl is officially considered as a member of the family. According to Thai custom, when a child is born in a family, a *tay* is hung at the wing *tang quan* if it is a boy or a *ho* at the wing *tang chan* if it is a girl. *Tay* is a bamboo-woven basket

containing a talisman which is a bow and a small bamboo fan. *Ho* consists of two small bamboo baskets, one representing womb, the other containing sacred objects, which are a cotton-carding machine, a fan and a cloth bag of betel and areca. When the owner of a *tay* or *ho* dies, these objects are thrown away into the forest of ghosts. Coming to a Thai family home, you will know the number of men and women in the household by counting the *tay* and *ho*. When the *ho* of a girl is brought to her husband's house, she will then begin a very important role in her husband's family.

After marriage, the woman officially becomes a member in *dam* of the husband's family, which is marked by the practice of *tang cau* (coiling hair in a topknot) applied to married women. In Thai custom, the notion of respecting men and despising women is expressed clearly in the practice of marriage. For instance, Thai people have the tradition of mourning for a husband: if a husband dies, his wife should abstain for three years from remarrying (female abstinence). For childless couples having lived together for 3 years, a widow must be in mourning for her husband for 3 years, or having lived together for 3 months, she must be in mourning for 1 year. By convention, if the wife does not refrain from remarrying, she will be punished 3 teals of silver supplemented by wine, buffaloes, etc. However, there are no rules regarding mourning for a wife. Inequality between men and women is also reflected in the divorce rule: *Women have to compensate twice for a divorce, men just lose property in a divorce (Ninh thieng chai, mot phang xong, chai thieng ninh, xia khong dai doc)*<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps because of buying-and-selling nature of patriarchal marriages, after a marriage, Thai women depend entirely on their husband's family, i.e. exist as a member in *dam* and die as a ghost of her husband's family. Women treated differently even at their death, which is reflected clearly in the mourning rituals of Black Thai.

<sup>8</sup> Ngo Duc Thinh, Cam Trong. *Thai convention in Vietnam*. The Ethnic Cultural Publishing House, H.1999. page 281.

As mentioned above, the status of women in traditional Thai society is much lower than that of men. In their family and in their marriage, they are not entitled to get involved in important matters and cannot make decisions by themselves. Black Thai women have almost no right to make decisions about communal activities.

### **3.3 Black Thai women and traditional costume conservation**

Clothes for men in Pe Luong has changed, most of them now wear clothes of similar design and material to those worn by Kinh people. The self-made cotton clothes of Thai design are rarely seen and only on the elderly. Although affected by external elements, women's traditional-style clothes in Pe Luong and Ngu village are still worn. In particular, a blouse, skirt, belt, headscarf and metal hair pin are all essential for married women. However, the blouse is not always worn. Women say that these traditional clothes make them very hot and uncomfortable during summer days. Therefore, they only wear traditional clothes on festival days, otherwise they wear modern –style clothes. The family member in charge of all weaving and tailoring products, the Black Thai women play a very important role in the preservation of Black Thai traditional costume. Today, acknowledging the need for forest protection, the Thai in Ngu village no longer slash and burn forest for agriculture. As a result, the area for growing cotton has been considerably reduced in Ngu village and cotton growing has hardly exists in Pe Luong. As a result, there is little weaving of cotton fabric today. Most of their weaving products are made from fabric available at the market (nylon mixed fabric produced by factories or private producers). Most of the handicrafts made by the villagers are Pieu handkerchiefs, face towels, blankets for weddings, clothes and cloth for funerals. Black Thai women use modern material to weave their traditional ethnic costumes. Blouses (*Com*) are made from industrial fabric which is both soft and colourful. Blouses worn by

old women are round-collar and those worn by young ladies are modernized with round or heart-shape collars. Along with *Com*, the Pieu handkerchief is part of the Black Thai costume that strongly reflects their cultural identity, passed down from generation to generation, mother to child, grand mother to grand child. Every Black Thai woman knows how to weave and embroider Pieu handkerchiefs. The Pieu's decorations at two ends has changed. The PeLuong women's Pieu is woven more colourfully and young people weave *Cut pua* (5-8 petal flowers) instead of 1-3 petal flowers to decorate 2 ends of the Pieu, which makes it brighter and more vivid. Black Thai people used to use self-made worn-silk thread (*may lai*) as embroidery thread (*xeo*) and the decorations were simply *mac cuom* (<>), and *xum booc* (bunch of flowers). Now they use Vietnamese and Chinese coloured threads for embroidery and different decorations such as gourd flowers, elephants and birds. Women and girls make use of any free time to weave and make things for their families. Today Black Thai women from Ngu and Pe Luong not only produce weaving products for their families but also for trading. They sell their products to tourists in Dien Bien town or exchange with Khomu people, Hmong or Lao. It is not uncommon to see a Hmong woman or girl wearing a Pieu on their head or Khomu clothes which are mostly made by Thai people.

Through making, using and selling woven products, Black Thai women not only preserve their traditional costume but also promote it and it impacts on other ethnic groups in Dien Bien. In other words, the traditional cultural elements are not only preserved within the Thai community but become regional cultural features.

### **4. Black Thai women with the preservation of custom and religious belief**

The patriarchal society of Thai people often highlights the role and status of men, while women's role in the family and community is downplayed. In Pe Luong today, if the husband

has the family name of Lo, his wife and children will also take that name and similarly in other families, wives and children are under the husband's *dam*. With such status, what role do women play in the custom and religious belief of Thai people? Research shows that Black Thai women not only play a role in preserving their traditional costume, but also maintain the customs and religious beliefs of Thai people.

#### 4.1 Women and wedding customs

During my fieldwork, I had a chance to attend a Black Thai wedding ceremony in Peluong, between Lo Van Tien (21 years old) and Luong Thi Thoa (18 years old). This wedding highlighted the mixture of traditional and modern features. It is not difficult to distinguish between the traditional and the modern features but it is not easy to evaluate which one dominates and this needs further investigation.

According to the Black Thai rules<sup>10</sup>, the wedding of *phia tao* class (village heads) must follow 7 steps: open engagement parcel; official request for wedding; bringing their son for *o quan*; entering the wedding room up; down, picking up the bride; presenting name, seeing off. The wedding of ordinary people has to follow 6 steps: open engagement parcel; presenting name; bringing their son for *o quan*; entering the wedding room up; down, picking up the bride; and presenting shirt. Accompanying these 6 steps are many formalities.

According to old people in Pe Luong, wedding ceremonies nowadays do not follow all the steps but only the major ones:

Step 1. *Om*: Groom's family choose a good day to send 2 marriage brokers to the bride's home and ask for permission for the girl to get married to the boy, this is regarded as the 1<sup>st</sup> talk between the brokers and the girl's parents.

Step 2. *Pay*: Can be regarded as the engagement of the couple.

Step 3. *Xu pha*: It takes for 2 days. During the 1<sup>st</sup> day, the groom side brings donations to the bride side for a *tang cau* service for the bride and

have a meal. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day, the bride side takes her to visit the groom's parent.

Step 4. *Loong luong*: It is the service of taking the girl to her husband's house and finalizing the procedure of getting the daughter in law to become the groom's family member.

In the wedding, the female broker plays a very important role (there used to be male broker but now most of them are female). She is the intermediary between the two families. She must be a person who understands customs, practice and must be good at communication. In many cases, whether the bride's side accepts the wedding depends on this person. If steps 1 and 2 are complete, the preparation for the wedding day is mainly done by women- the broker, bride's grandmother, mother, herself and her aunt.

Step 3, The marriage is regarded as the most important step of Black Thai wedding in Pe Luong. In this step, the groom's side ( his mother, grand mother, sister and female relatives) must prepare carefully for the bride's *tang cau* service by weaving products like blankets to take to the bride's side. At this official wedding, Luong Thi Thoa will be given a *tang cau* service and be recognized by the community as a married woman. The groom Lo Van Tien will officially cohabit with the bride be a son in law and start the period of living in the bride's house. It can be said that the main role in the wedding is played by women. Leading the groom's delegation with donated gifts are 2 women, his paternal grandmother and relative grandmother. Welcoming the groom delegation at the stair path is the bride's paternal grandmother and others. The first thing women do after entering the house is to lay mats, blankets and a mosquito net in the newly married couple's room. This is followed by the *tang cau* service for the bride. Aunts of the groom and bride put hair decorations in a small flat drying basket and the bride's paternal grandmother is selected to carry out this service. The *tang cau* service is a typical of Black Thai marriages. Ms. Lo Thi Dien from Peluong said: "Today no matter what Thai wear but the hair decoration service can't be got rid of". This

seems to be imbued in their thinking. Black Thai women consider *tang cau* service as the symbol of faithfulness to their husband. The *tang cau* service is stopped when their husbands die or are divorced. Black Thai girls often keep their hair long as a precious treasure from an early age until teenage years. The *tang cau* service is followed by the groom and bride's grandparents gathering and offering wine singing a song (*ke duong dau gia*) and then moving to *quan* (the house for worshipping). At this moment, the groom and bride parents, uncles, aunts and others are allowed to gather and enjoy meals and drinking. After the service, men sit by the worshipping side and women sit by the *chan*, where the two sides enjoy meals and exchange songs.

Following this is wedding, where the bride's side brings the bride to greet the groom's side. The bride's side bring along a lot of blankets, *Pieu*, bags and face towels to be given to the groom's parents and relatives. This is a special feature of Thai costume conducted by the women. Ladies who do not know how to weave and embroider will not get married because their wedding will not be held if they have not made blankets, *Pieu* cloth, and bags as their custom requires.

Step 4, the last step in the wedding, is the setting down where the bride is taken to her husband's house and stays there permanently. Years ago the groom used to live in the bride's house for 3-5 years but now it is only a few months. In Pe Luong it is not as strict as it was, except in case where the bride's family has very few people, the groom will stay for 1 year at the most. At the wedding, the mother who prepares everything for the daughter to take to her husband's house including a hen, a parcel of breeding rice seed cotton, vegetable, fruit seed, thread and needles. This symbolizes the transfer of roles between one generation and the next. Following their mother, the new bride will act as a mother, wife, and daughter in law and continue to handle the tasks assigned to women in Thai society.

During the wedding in Pe Luong, an important and essential detail is the blouse giving service, bringing the *ho* from the bride's parent's house to hang it at her husband's house.

Transferring the *ho* used to be done after the wedding but to simplify steps this is now done when the bride is escorted to the groom's house. At the *ho* (*moving*) service, the bride's side (her mother in particular) prepare the daughter a set of traditional blouses and skirts and put them in a basket. The groom's side prepares a meal of meat and wine. At the chosen time, the blouse skirt and food are put in front of the ancestor altar and Madam *Mot* prays and initiate a welcome *ho* song. She asks the ancestor to move the bride's *ho* to the groom's house. One person, normally the bride's paternal grandmother takes her *ho* off and puts it into the basket. She then divides the food in half and lets the groom's side take it away. When the newly married couples are escorted to the groom's house, a soothsayer will initiate an ancestor praying song and Madam *Mot* will perform the service. She will initiate a welcome *ho* song and hang the *ho* on the /*chan*/ side of the house where other *ho* of husband's female family members are hung.

The welcome /*ho*/ service is the last step of the wedding ceremony. After this service, the bride starts a new life with new functions.

The above description shows clearly women's role in wedding rituals and procedures. They not only well understand their ethnic cultural custom but also directly implement them. They also play an important role in formal service preparation. The key people are the broker, bride's grandmother, mother and Madam *Mot*.

At the wedding of Thoa and Tien, the modern cultural elements appear to overwhelm the traditional elements. This is demonstrated by the dancing music, background decorations with green and red colored paper and crowds of guests giving gifts in the form of happy money - some put it in envelopes and other give it directly to the bride's parents. Some guests still give presents of rice and wine but only close relatives. The old people say that wedding customs are simplified

now the younger generation prefers singing karaoke and dancing to Western music. The younger generation like busy atmosphere, and do not sing and dance Thai songs as they did before. However the role of women in formal services ensures that many elements of traditional Thai culture are preserved.

#### 4.2 Women and funeral/mourning customs

Thai people perceive that the universe consists of 3 Muong under 3 levels: *Muong Pha* (sky level) is where saints stay, and where happy and permanent life is found, *Muong Lum* (earth level) is where human beings live, and *Muong Cong* (under earth level) where ghosts stay. Thai people believe that after dying, people will return to *Muong Pha* and enjoy a permanent life. However if someone dies without having donated things to serve as *Heo*, they will not enjoy *Muong Pha* but go to *Muong Cong* and live an isolated life. The *Heo* service in the funeral of Black Thai people is very important and complex. What role do women play in these services.

The old people in Peluong say that Black Thai funerals consist of 2 parts occurring at the same time : a formal service and the material preparation for the formal service. The formal service is often done by men and the preparation by women - according to their custom. When someone dies, the first thing women do is to go and get *nat* leaves (wild mugwort), *dong det* (bamboo leaves), and *bu hom* (herb leaves) which are boiled and used to wash the body. Then the family members have to check the completeness of things for a funeral which will not be held unless everything is ready. The women have to prepare enough cloth for the whole funeral such as different types of cloth, clothes, flags, blankets, and special cloth to put in the coffin (according to individual funeral attendants relating to the dead one). When a person dies, his or her family has to do a *tuc* service with a view to inform the *Then* (sky). To do that, women use a basket containing a bunch of normal cloth a bunch of *khuyt* cloth (*khuyt* is one kind of cloth used only for funeral purpose only) and a plate of

areca and betel. One man in the family will also inform *Then*.

After the *tuc* service is finished mourning clothes for the blooded relatives and mourning cloth for other relatives are prepared. Women family members prepare *xuong xua toc* (mourning clothes) for male members such as husband and sons. These are *xuong toc* (panty) made of Thai cloth without sewing turn-ups: *xua toc* (shirt) made of 4 pieces of cloth down to the ankles, without sleeves, collars or hems 4 sided *tong tau* cloth (look like a cloth hat) also without hems. For women, the clothes are different for different people. The wife of the dead wears a *xua toc* and a white cloth on her head. The daughter in law will wear a *xua thoong hung* (rainbow blouse) made of black cloth and a colorful red, yellow, white and green cloth and a white cloth on her heads. Sisters and nieces wear a white cloth on their heads. The wife of *Khuou coc* (the son in law, brother in law or grandson in law chosen to deal with the key services of the funeral) wears a black long dress, 2 layers of cloth on her head, a white cloth under a black cloth. *Khuou coc* wears black long dress, white trousers, a long black cloth on his head (which is covered by a white cloth stuck to the black cloth's hem), a white bag and a belt made of 3 small colored bands of cloth.

This is followed by the preparation of umbrellas, paper fans, flags and hats made of cloth or paper. This is done by women. The umbrella used for funeral is made of 4 colorful pieces of cloth and different colored flowers and threads. Paper fans and hats are made of colored paper with a hem of colored cloth, hung by colored threads with a hat's strap made of color cloth. Flags are made from 2 bands of *khuyt* cloth, 400mm wide and 1.2m long, and 2 ends are sewed together then covered with colored cloth. The flag's end is cut in a V shape and supported by a round piece of wood. It is then tied into a stick. Two sides of the flag are stuck with yellow paper in a full moon shape. The two bands' ends are also the flag's and cut with V shape which is filled by yellow paper in a half moon shape. The

end of the flags is decorated with different colored threads.

One type of flag known to the Thai as *chao uon* is made of a band of white cloth, 400mm wide and folded along its length. It has a thread for hanging from a stick, and its 2 ends are joined by black threads.

Another type of flag known to the Thai as *chao pha* a bamboo tree, made with a band of white cloth and a band of *khuyt* cloth threaded together, 500mm shorter than the bamboo. They meet at one end and the white band is 500mm longer than the *khuyt* at the other end. Then the white's one side is folded with thread for hanging by stick, and its ends are stuck with different colored threads.

Another type of flag known to the Thai as *lie is* made up of 30 or a hundred cloths. Half of the total numbers are made of white cloth and the rest are made of *suyt* cloth. One *liu* is about 400mm square, the white's one side is folded with thread for hanging by stick, and its 2 ends are stuck with different colored threads.

Another type of flag known to the Thai as *teu giu* is as small as  $\frac{1}{2}$  *Liu* in terms of quantity and size but made the same way of as *liu*.

At funerals, men are responsible for preparing wooded equipment like flag hanging sticks, *choong* (bamboo, wooden container for the dead body), *noc cao*, *ho and pi* (wooden materials to build tomb).

At this time, the preparation for the funeral is considered to be finalized. It is followed by a long process including many formal services such as last seeing, burying, escorting the dead spirit home and so on. Major formal services are taken by men, showing the gender discrimination among Thai people. For example, if the dead person is female, her remains are not allowed to go by the *quan* side stair and the flags and umbrellas are not as many and various as in funerals for men.

Indeed, the preparation for a funeral strictly following the formal procedure and customs

requires both men and women to participate in. The above description shows that the women's role is very important. They not only prepare cloth but also get others tasks related to the funeral done. However, due to the perception of the society, the role played in Thai formal services by women is not respected. It is taken for granted that women must take such assignments.

## 5. Black Thai with traditional medicine

Believed by Thai people, humans consist of two parts: soul and body, during their life as well as after death, therefore, they should always take care of their soul. Each body organ has its own soul, for example, *khuon hua* is the soul of the head which is in charge of controlling the whole body, *khuon ta* is the soul of the eyes, helping people to see light and everything, *khuon lin* is the soul of the tongue, helping to form human wisdom, *khuon du mu* is the soul of the hands, bringing handiness, *khuon du khanh* is the soul of the feet, bringing toughness, etc. Taking care of the soul involves two persons: *mo* and *mot*. *Mo* are wizards whose main responsibilities are taking care of the souls for the community, worshipping ancestors, worshipping the ghosts of the village, also praying for good health and prosperity for the entire population, acting as the master of ceremony for funerals. *Mot* is carried out by women, and those who perform *mot* is often referred to as Madam *mot*, they memorize ceremonial chants as well as cast spells to chase away evil spirits. Madam *mot* are those who are capable of applying magical remedies: By using their ceremonial chants, they free sick men from invisible forces called ghosts, and help sick people to get over their illness. In addition, Madam *mot* are also masters of ceremony in many daily life celebrations like name-giving for newly-born children, weddings, etc.

At present in Pe Luong and Nguu village, the number of Madam *mot* are very small, and they often act as charlatans. In Pe Luong village, there is a 67-year-old women called Lò Thị Hom, who is considered as a charlatan, who knows a lot about medical herbs, ceremonial chants and can even combine both the herbs and chants for

treating disease. Ms. Hom says that she picks up medical herbs for the treatment of infertility or asthma. The common diseases like coughs, colds

or caring of women in childbirth, most elderly women in the villages are quite good at dealing with them.



Tay Nguyen Ethnic minority young women at Cultural festival in Ha Noi capital

Photo: Van Long

Knowledge about production, communal health care and primary health care are interesting issues and closely associated with women. It is an element to help form the original cultural identity of Thai people. briefly presented is folk knowledge that Black Thai women in Thanh Luong have passed from generation to generation regarding the care of women in childbirth and the care of infants.

Around Thai houses in Pe Luong, they have small gardens where they grow all types of vegetable and some common medical herbs. When a family member gets sick or a woman begins labour, only the grandmother or mother knows how to mix and gather and administer them. For non-urgent cases, women usually go into the forest to look for medical herbs, and in urgent cases they have to use the herbs grown in

the garden. However, some medical herbs can be found in the forest.

For women who have just given birth to a child, the leaves of the herbs called *du khanh* or *mu khet* are picked and then boiled for the mother's bath. During the first 5 days after the birth, she baths 3 times a day. In addition, a creeper called *chua khau* and *to don* should be picked and boiled to make a drink for the woman during childbirth (the older the creeper the better. The old creeper produces a yellow-red colour, sweet-tasting drink which is the best). The drink should be taken when it is warm, and should not be taken when it becomes cold, as it aids the mother's good appetite, sound sleep and increases the amount of breast milk. For infants, leaves of *co chap* should be picked and boiled for the baby's bath during the first month, twice a day the morning and late afternoon.

In the case of a sunk womb after birth, leaves of *hong hom* is picked for the woman to sit on, and her womb will contract. If the woman has a small amount of milk, a deer's or pig's leg should be cooked with papaya or potatoes and then eaten by her. After giving birth, the woman should refrain from eating hot, sour spicy food and should not eat fish, fresh meat, but only dried grilled tilapia and pork for 15 days. After 15 days, the woman can eat fresh fish but it should only be grilled, and she should not eat buffalo's meat.

Unfortunately if the baby's naval does not dry, the solution is scrapping wood from *hay khau*, grinding it into powder and spreading it into the naval. *Hay khau* is a wooden part placed above a pig-iron earthenware, which is used by Thai people to steam *khau on* (sticky rice).

At present, the health centre in Thanh Luong is operating quite well; however, women still prefer to give birth at home with the assistance of midwives in the village. According to these women, the traditional Thai sitting and kneeling labour is much easier and energy saving than lying labour at the health centre.

The folk knowledge on traditional medicine has been passed on by Black Thai women in Pe Luong from generation to generation. Although birth and health care are now propagandized quite popularly in Pe Luong, the women here still apply and preserve their precious traditional knowledge of medicine.

Deep-rooted in the women's subconscious mind is that folk knowledge is a good way caring for the health and satisfy if body and soul in each member of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Through the development process and the impact of the market economy, the socio-economic appearance of Black Thai in Thanh Luong has changed dramatically. Black Thai in Thanh Luong shifted from the subsistence economy into a market economy with cattle and goat farms, and established commercial relations with the neighbouring ethnic groups.

Together with socio-economic changes, the traditional culture of Black Thai in Thanh Luong has moved forward in two directions: decline and integration with the modern culture. Maintaining and promoting the traditional cultural values of ethnic group's identity is crucial. Because of their status and functions, Black Thai women play a more important part than the men in conserving and promoting the traditional cultural values. This is reflected clearly in their weaving and the conduct of weddings, funerals and the traditional medicine. Black Thai women not only preserve their own cultural traits and pass them on from generation to generation within their family and community, but they also create strength and enable Black Thai cultural elements to impact on neighbouring ethnic groups. This should be comprehended and grasped thoroughly before planning and implementing policies to conserve and promote the traditional cultural values of Black Thai people.