

RESEARCH ON CULTURE OF KHMU PEOPLE

*CASE STUDY OF HUOI CANG 2 VILLAGE, BAC LY
COMMUNE, KY SON DISTRICT, NGHE AN PROVINCE,
VIETNAM*

THE RESEARCH TEAM

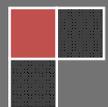
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HANOI, MARCH 2009



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“DEVELOPMENT is double-sided as INTEGRATING can be DISOLVING”

SAID AN KHMU-ETHNIC STAFF OF KY SON DISTRICT



A KHMU-ETHNIC INFORMANT IN HUOI CANG 2 VILLAGE

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

The objective of this research is to identify key cultural aspects of Khmu ethnic people in Huoi Cang 2 village, Ky Son district, Nghe An province – one of many EM project sites of Oxfam Hong Kong (OHK) in Vietnam. The research findings are expected to (i) provide OHK a culturally appropriate working approach for Khmu ethnic people and (ii) sensitize the OHK's partners about the cultural differences of the people. *The Institute for Study of Society, Economy and Environment* (iSEE) is the selected partner to conduct this research. The research findings show that Culture of Khmu people is dynamic, changing overtime in response to the altering natural, demographic, and political conditions in the locality. Impacts not only come from the Kinh / Central State as expected, but also the Thai and H'mong. At the present changes happen mostly at the *material* domain, rather than *spiritual* and *intellectual* ones of their culture. The people's self definition of Khmu identity lies mostly in the spriritual and intellectual domains rather than the material one. At the present, the people's most concern now is the change in the traditional mode of livelihoods – shifting cultivation (material domain). Out of the existing conditions, intensification of husbandry is the research recommended culturally appropriate intervention for the people. The matrix below summaries the status of the researched spiritual, material and intellectual domains in Khmu culture.

MATRIX ON CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF KHMU PEOPLE IN HUOI CANG 2 VILALGE

No .	Sampled elements of Khmu culture in the research site	Status		Reason	The people's feeling	Recom - mendation
		1985	Now			
	Spiritual				The people is most worried about 11 and 17 They do realize that shifting cultivation will no longer secure the livelihood of their children, grandchildren in the future. They are now not confident in defining their future.	Intervention is recommended to focus on securing their livelihood by in the direction of intensification based on existing capitals (nature, human...). Particularly, Intensification of husbandry is the most recommended
1	Buffalo sacrifice	Active	Active	Highly concentrated residence of Khmu and remoteness		
2	Good luck ritual	Active	Active			
3	Planting ritual	Active	Active			
4	New rice ritual	Active	Active			
5	Ancestral worship apartment in each house	Active	Active			
6	New year festival	Active	Active			
7	Marriage custom	Active	Active			
8	Traditional institution: elder headman	Active	Active			
9	New Institution: village head	Not active	Adapted			
	Material					
10	House architecture	Existing	Disappeared			
11	Cultivation land / water source	Existing	Narrow	State's stricter control over forest land		
12	Costumes	Disappeared		Estimated around 40 years ago		
13	Husbandry	Active	More intensified	Starting to grow grass to feeding cows rather than feeding them wildly as ever		
14	TV / CD player	Not available	Adopted			
15	Production tool	Adopted				
	Intellectual					
16	Hunting practice	Active	Banned			
17	Shifting cultivation practice	Active	Active but not supported			

Research rationale

Cultural stigmatization and marginalization are now more and more blamed factor, partially contributing to higher poverty rate among ethnic minority groups in comparison with Kinh and Hoa groups. Moreover, externally driven development interventions for ethnic minority communities often fail if they do not take into account the cultural differences. A culturally facilitating environment in intervention projects are more likely to encourages the active participation of EM communities – the key of projects’ success - as their culture and identity are respected and recuperated. Learning about this from its 30 years of experience fighting against poverty worldwide, Oxfam Hong Kong currently fosters a working approach that embed cultures of respective ethnic minority communities, the primary target group of its work, in its programmes worldwide.

In Nghe An province, OHK currently is working with Khmu and Thai ethnic groups (in Ky Son and Tuong Duong districts respectively). Being an organization that has long experience working with minority groups in Vietnam, OHK wishes to use culture as an entry point for its program interventions in order to better gain trust, participation and empowerment.

To achieve this goal, OHK partners with iSEE to conduct a pilot research on culture of Khmu ethnic minority. The findings of this pilot study will be used to inform OHK’s program design and implementation. In addition, this study will be utilized to sensitize the local government regarding the cultural differences so they can better work with ethnic minorities and making policies. In the long run, it is expected that the ethnic minority people will benefit from the follow-up culture empowerment activities, and OHK’s working approach will be scaled up.

Research objective

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- To Identify key culture aspects of Khmu ethnic people by reviewing available documents (studies, researches, article...) on culture, focusing on traditional collective activities.

- To identify which tangible and intangible cultural characteristics, including Khmu identity, and traditional collective activities remain active and which are being faded within the community.
- To identify which cultural activities that local people wishes to recuperate.
- To make recommendations for OHK programme regarding
 - Specific culture empowerment interventions for Khmu people
 - Culturally appropriate livelihood options that build the people's confidence.
 - Working approach with Khmu while implementing recommended interventions

Research site

Lao-bordered commune of Bac Ly is 42 km, or 2 hours of traveling in dry season, from Ky Son district town. Its total natural area is 6,000 ha in which agricultural land, including fallow area, account for 1,200 ha. Out of the 1,200 ha, one-crop paddy composes of 30 ha, which are mostly abandoned for *Khmu people are not paddy-grower*¹. The commune population is as follow:

Table 1 – Bac Ly commune's demography

Ethnicity	No. of households	No. of village(s)	Population	%
H'mong	46	1	280	6%
Khmu	492	11	3,320	82%
Thai	80	1	472	12%
Total population			4,072	

Source: From commune's report

At the nation / province / district level, Khmu ethnic people are minority. However, in Bac Ly commune they are the numerical majority accounting for 82% of the commune population. This commune is reported to be the most difficult of Ky Son district with the reported poverty rate of 68%².

¹ Source: interview with commune officer.

² Source: interview with commune Chairman

NOW	25 households excluding 6 migrated ones
2008	OHK's support of 14 cows
2006	Two house supports from 134 program
2005	One house support from 134 program
2003	- Three more households migrated - 135 program school constructed
2002	Official enforcement of forest law
1996	- Motorbike-accessible road from Ky Sen district town constructed - The first Thai-style wooden house of Lo Xan Bun constructed
1991 - 1992	Three households including that of the village headman / founder migrated
1985	Huoi Cang 2 village established, including 20 households

Illustration 1– Huoi Cang 2 village’s timeline of key events since 1985

Huoi Cang 2 village is located near the commune center. The village composes of 25 households of Khmu ethnicity. The total population is 134 people (67 men and 67 women). The total number of illiterate villagers is 44 or 32,8%, in which men account for 14 or 21%; women 30 or 44,7%³.

The village is established in 1985 by self-separation of 20 households from Hoi Cang 1 village. It is reported that Mr. Cụt Pho Chơ is the founder of the village. Land pressure is the reported reason for the separation / establishment of this village. This has been strengthened with the reported migration of six households, including the founder’s, in either 1991 or 2003.

The village and the commune had been not motorbike-accessible until 1996 as the road was constructed. In the same year, the first Thai-style wooden house was constructed in the village. From the moment onwards Khmu traditional thatch bamboo tilt-houses were gradually replaced. At the

present, the Khmu house style in 1985 can not be found in the village as well as the surrounding areas.

The village’s economy still depends on shifting cultivation, husbandry. However, the productivity is lower and lower because of population increase and stricter state’s control over natural resources. Besides traditional source of livelihoods, the people started to join in the market economy, however at very low level by either selling forest products or purchasing necessities from market.

At the present, the village is heavily subsidized by the state. Totally the village has got 15 house supports from government in which two are of *Temporary*

³ Interview with Huoi Cang 2 village staff

bamboo house elimination program (valuing 2 millions each); 13 are of 134 program, worth 5 million and 7 million in the period of 2005 – 2006 and 2007 – 2009 respectively⁴.

Research methodologies and fieldtrip detail

To reach the aforementioned objectives, the following research techniques are utilized: *Literature review*: The researcher have made extensive reading of documents relating to either Khmu ethnic group or the research sites. The detailed list of the documents can be seen in the List of reference at the end of this report. *Key informant interviews* (KII) were conducted with staff officers (district / commune / village) and traditional figures (clan heads, village elder man) are *Focus Group Discussion* (FGD) using PRA techniques (social mapping, historical timeline, pair ranking, problem tree, and seasonal calendar) were conducted with three representative informant groups of the Khmu community, namely *Participant observation*: The researcher spent most of the fieldtrip time with the community, participating in the daily activities. This maximizes the chance of having a native view of the local context as well as their culture.

Table 2 - Fieldtrip detail

WHEN		WHAT	WHOM	
Day	1	am	<i>Traveling from Vinh to Ky Son</i>	
		pm	KII	Staff of District culture department
			KII	My Ly Commune chairman
	2	am	KII	Party unit head of Huoi Cang 2 village
			FGD	Hamlet staff
		pm	FGD	Elderly informant group of five peoples
	3	am	KII	Traditional village leader
			FGD	Elderly informant group of five peoples
	4	pm	FGD	Youth informants
		am	FGD	Female informants
	5	pm	KII	Previous Commune Chairman
			KII	Vice manager of the district investment panel
		am	KII	Visiting hamlet
		pm		<i>Traveling back to Vinh and Hanoi</i>

The research team

The research team composes of four members:

⁴ Source: interview with village staff

- M.A. in Cultural Anthropology Nguyen Van Tung - Researcher
- B.A. in Cultural Reservation Moong Thai Nhi - Local Assistant / key informant
- M.A. in Public Policy Le Quang Binh – Livelihood Advisor
- PH.D. in Ethnography Mai Thanh Son – EM Advisor

Tung Nguyen will take charge of designing research frame, collecting data in the field, writing report. Mr. Nhi – Khmu ethic – plays the role in local arrangement being ice breaker as he is native to the local community. In addition, he helps justify research findings from a native view. Mr. Son and Mr. Binh will give advices relating to their respective fields in research design and report finalization. Beside the research team receive generous support from OHK staff.

Limitations of the research

Time budget is the most limitation of this research as the fieldwork is bound to just five days including travel. However, this is lessened by extensive reading of related documents and narrowing research topics to important aspects of Khmu culture in the field.

7. Research approach & analytical framework

7.1. Research approach

Out of around 200 academically recognized definitions of culture the research utilizes the definition approved by the *World Conference on Cultural Policies*⁵ for the fact that “the celebrated broad definition of culture that linked culture so irrevocably to development⁶”. It states that

“Culture... is ... the whole complex of distinctive *spiritual, material, intellectual* and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of

⁵ Organized in Mexico City, 06 August 1982

⁶ http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12762&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs."⁷

Within the context of this research, the most obvious *spiritual, material, and intellectual* aspects of Khmu culture in the research village are studied (See Research analytical framework for more detail.)

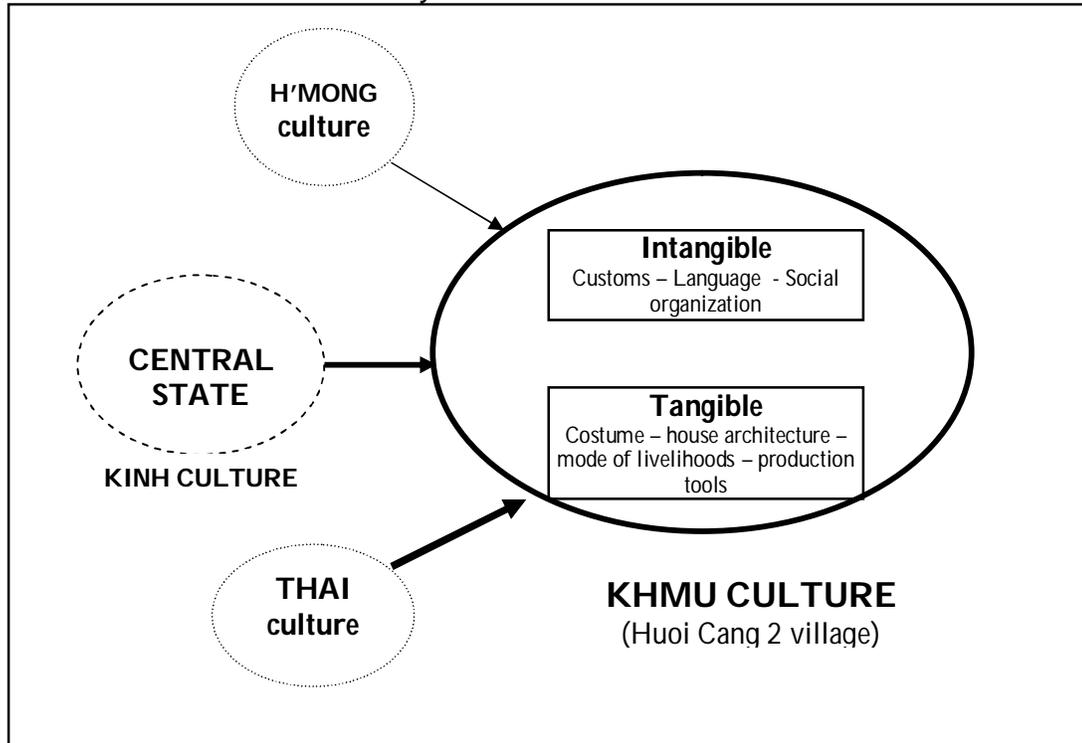
Second, the research approaches culture as a *process* rather than a *concept*. Put it differently, culture is seen dynamic rather than static. Voluntarily or forcibly, it changes over time by either internal or external causes. In short, culture is human adaptation to host surrounding. Accordingly, any change in the host could lead to corresponding adjustments of culture.

Third, Cultural relativism, the direct opposition of Evolutionary approach, is used in this research. Cultural unlikeness is recommended to be seen and recommended to respect as it forms the identity of ethnic minorities rather than be seen as being "backward or uncivilized."

⁷ http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12762&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

7.2. Analytical framework

Illustration 2– The research’s analytical framework



This analytical framework is developed based on collecting, analyzing and verifying data at the field. This framework is a little bit different from the initially proposed framework presented to OHK which emphasis the impact of the government's policies / programs as well as the Kinh culture on the culture of Khmu people in the research site. Data collected during the fieldtrip shows that Thai culture exerts the most impact on the research community, then followed by the Kinh / central state and the H'mong. The research of Morna Macleod⁸ argues that EM groups have to be bi-cultural to survive. It is the researcher's finding that Khmu people in the field are tetra-cultural. Elements of four cultures *Khmu culture itself, Thai, Kinh and H'mong cultures respectively* are found to co-exist in the community. The three variables have generated impact on Khmu culture at different levels. For instance, impact of Thai, Kinh / Central state and H'mong cultures can be exemplified with (i) house architecture, language, costumes; (ii) fixed cultivation, new lifestyle; and (iii) language capacity respectively.

⁸ OHK 's consultant who conducted research on Khmu and Odu in Tuong Duong in 2007

Literature review shows that the interaction among Khmu culture and others has happened century ago. Within the context of this research, the year 1985 – the establishment year of the research village is selected to be the milestone for analysis. In the coming section, the research describes the progress of Khmu culture in Huoi Cang 2 village over the period from 1985 to now.

Research findings and recommendations

8.1. Research finding

Key cultural aspects of Khmu people from literature

Khmu ethnic people belong to lingual group of Mon-Khmer. They are believed to original inhabitants of today northern Lao for four centuries ago. Today there are about 900,000 Khmu people worldwide: 600,000 in Laos (second-largest ethnic group of the country), 73,000 in Vietnam, 20,000 in Thailand, 20,000 in China and 10,000 in the United States⁹. In Laos, they mostly dwell in Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang provinces. Traditionally, Khmu are swiddeners practicing upland rice culture. Slash and burn is technique used to clear and fertilize the rice field. Fallow period is reportedly around 15 years in the past and from three to five years now. In addition to rice culture, fishing, hunting and gathering play a role in household's economy. They are well known for weaving basket-ware (mostly done by men) that can be for either domestic use or exchange with other ethnic groups. *Culturally, Khmu animism puts emphasis on the concept of taboo as villagers belief that violations of taboo result in vengeance of spirit*¹⁰

⁹ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khmu_people

¹⁰ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khmu_people



Illustration 3 – Traditional residential region of Khmu ethnic people¹¹

In Vietnam, the nationwide population census in 1999 reports that 56,542 Khmu ethnic people dwelling on the territory of Vietnam, mainly in six border provinces northwest of Vietnam (Chinh, 2008). In terms of numerical ranking in 1989, they are the 23rd among officially recognized ethnic groups of Vietnam (Son et al, 2003).

Khmu ethnic population in Nghe An province, dwelling mostly in Tuong Dong and Ky Son districts, accounts for 48% of the total number of Khmu in Vietnam. For that reason, many Vietnamese researchers claim that the culture of Khmu people here is more authentic than that of who dwell in northwest provinces. Khmu ethnic community in Ky Son district accounts for 70% and 38% the Khmu ethnic people

¹¹ Source: <http://www.infomekong.com/khumap.htm>

of the province and the country respectively. At Ky Son district, they are the second-largest ethnic group accounting for 32% of the district population following the H'mong with 38% (Chinh, 2008). The Khmu in Vietnam is reported to closely link to the Thai in terms of dwelling location and culture (Chinh, 2008; Chung, 2005; Son et al., 2003). Regarding their origin in Vietnam, there is controversy. Some Vietnamese scholars argue that they migrated to today Vietnam around 200 years ago as their original land in Lao was conquered by people from today Thailand or Yunnan China. However, other scholars believe that they are original inhabitants of northwest Vietnam. However, both sides come to consensus on their relation to Thai culture. Before 1954, they reportedly had dependent position to neighboring Thai communities for the fact that they had to hire cultivation land from neighboring Thai communities. Both Thai and Khmu legends mention that Thai and Khmu were born from the same cucurbit (Chung, 2005; Son et al., 2003).

The traditional livelihood of Khmu people in Vietnam depends much on natural resources: shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, fishing and, to some extent, making basket ware, which can be traded with other ethnic groups. Individual households are basic economic units. However, collective economic activities happen at the beginning and the end of crops in form of labor exchange. Within household, there is a clear division of labor based on gender and age. Male members are often in charge of hard work: clearing rice field, hunting.. and ritual practice, whereas female members are responsible for domestic works; cooking, harvesting...

The traditional tilt house of Khmu people is mostly made of bamboo and thatch-roofed. However, it is now very hard to find for such house. For Khmu people in Vietnam, weaving craft is either not developed or faded long ago. Their costumes are often purchased from surrounding ethnic groups, especially Thai people.

In terms of social organization, village – “cung” in Khmu language – is highest level of their social organization. One village are often made up of several clans. Households of the same totemic clan tend to dwell near one another. Internal and external social affairs are managed by elders, kinheads. Temporary matrilineal residence which require the husband has to dwell in the wife house for a period

of time following the marriage, and one-way marriage¹² are the people's traditional practice.

In term of religion, Khmu people are animistic. Ritual practice is closely related to their mode of living: planting ritual, harvesting ritual...(See illustration 05 for more information) The most collective religious activity , *which requires the participation of every household in the village*, is *village ghost ritual (hroi cung)* praying good luck for the coming year (Son et la, 2003).

Tangible and intangible cultural characteristics and traditional collective activities remain active and which are being faded within the community in Huoi Cang 2 village

Tangible cultural characteristics of Khmu people in Huoi Cang 2 village



Illustration 4 - Left: Khmu traditional rice mortar Right: Thai-styled rice mortar. Both co-exist in Huoi Cang 2 village.

As aforementioned in the analytical framework, this section describes about the following (i) Costumes, (ii) House architecture, (iii) Mode of livelihoods, (iii)

Production tools. In general, data

collected in the field show that Thai culture exerts strong impact in Huoi Cang 2 village and surrounding area. For instance, the name of the village - Huoi Cang 2 – is Thai language rather than of Khmu language (the word Huoi means stream in Thai language) *Costume*: It is reported and observed that weaving craft does not exist in the research village and nearby Khmu communities. Their costumes, especially of women, are reportedly purchased from Thai people or from the market in Huoi Tu. The traditional weaving craft of Khmu people in locality seems to have faded away long time ago. *House architecture*: The traditional house of

¹² Men of clan A get married to clan B. So men of can B can not get married to women of clan A but clan C. And so on, men of clan C will get married to women of clan rather than B. Soviet ethnographer mentioned to this as three-clan alliance marriage.

Khmu people is made up of bamboo and thatch. However, this has ceased to exist for two reasons. First, locally abundant bamboo resources were depleted¹³. Second, Khmu's traditional house, which can easily lead to fire, is the target of the state program named "temporary bamboo house elimination". The combined factors gradually lead to the replacement of Khmu traditional house with more concrete ones under the support of state program. From 2005 onwards, the program has provided the village with 15 house supports (60% of the households in the village), ranging either 2, 6 or 7 million each. Currently, all house in the village are reportedly Thai-styled. *Mode of livelihoods*: Shifting cultivation remains the main source of living for Khmu people in Huoi Cang 2 village. They grow one crop of rice, cassava, maize... per year. However, The practice of swidden has been narrowed by the official enforcement of forest law in 2002. Combined with population increase, reported around 100% since the 1980s¹⁴, it forced the people to shorten the fallow period from seven or eight years in the past to just two or three years now. This is the main reason for low productivity of farming here, leading to chronic poverty in the village. The state program assisted people in the village as well as in the commune in paddy farming (three households in the village possess totally 0.6 ha). However, paddy farming does not work well here as the people are not familiar with the way of farming. *Production tools*: It is reported that production tool or household utensils like rice mortar, machete... are of Thai style or H'mong

Tangible cultural characteristics of Khmu people in Huoi Cang 2 village

This section describes the (i) language, (ii) customs, and (iii) social organization of Huoi Cang 2 village. In terms language, Khmu language is reported to be the daily used one. However, local informants also report that they can use Thai language and H'mong at different level. In terms of religion, the people are animistic. Their custom practice reflects closely their mode of livelihood.

¹³ One Kinh informant, who has been in the commune for 13 or 14 years, reported that bamboo were abundant in the past.

¹⁴ Source: Interview with former Thai ethnic commune officer.

SOLAR CALENDER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
KHMU CALENDER	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1
CLIMATE PATTERN												
CROP OF RICE					Clear – Dry	Burn	Planting	First weeding	Second weeding	Early havest	Late havest	
CROPS OF CASSAVA, MAIZE, PEANUT			Clear – dry – burn – plant					Havest				
RITUALS	New year festival					Luck praying	Planting			New rice	Thank shaman	
LEVEL OF BUSYNESS	Not busy			Busy			Very busy			Busy		
ACTIVITIES	New year festival; Making house; Marriage; Making basketware											

Illustration 5– Local calendar of Khmu ethnic people in Huoi Cang 2 village

Local Khmu people use Lao Buddhism calendar rather than solar calendar or Vietnamese lunar calendar. The local climate is divided into two clear seasons of dry (from December to March next year) and rain (April to November). Their one-crop livelihood makes use of the climatic pattern by annually starting their crop at the beginning of the rain season. In addition to rice – the main crop, cassava, maize, peanut are the supplemented ones. In term of religious practice, they annually have a series of rituals in accordance with the mode of livelihoods as follow:

- Two-days-long luck praying ritual in June around the time of burning
- Planting ritual at the time of planting rice in July
- Nice rice ritual at the time of first rice harvest in October
- New year festival within period of December to February next year.
- Shaman thank ritual in November is not organized annually in the research village as the traditional figure does not exist in their village.

Besides the patterned rituals, the following ones are reportedly to organize periodically: buffalo sacrifice, sickness pray. Out of the rituals, *the most important and collective one is the luck praying as it requires the participation of at least one member of every household in the village.* At the present, the sequence of rituals remains active in the locality.

Table 3 - Social organization of Huoi Cang 2 village

Clan	Clan symbol	No. of hh.	Clan head	Administrative Positions that the clan holds	Note
Tà Vạ / Cụt ¹⁵	Bird	14	Cụt Phò Xúc	- Party head - Youth - Women	Cụt Phò Xúc was elected in 1990 after the former clan head - Cụt Phò Chơ migrated
Xà Loọc / Lò	Bird	1	N/A		The clan head Lò Xen Kèo died in 1986
Cắm Buar / Lin	Pangolin	5	Lin Tháo Khun	- Fatherland front - Farmer	Lin Tháo Khun is head of the village's Fatherland Front
Xim Ông / Xèo	Bird	5	Xeo Phò Lý	- Village head - Veteran - Elder People	Xeo Phò Lý is head of the village's elderly people union

There are four clan in the village. Three out of four clans have their own clan head, who is in charge of managing members of their clan in the village, solving inter-clan dispute. The position is not succeeded hereditarily but elected by clan members. The highest traditional position in the village is elderly headman held by **Cụt Phò Xúc** – clanhead of Tà Vạ clan. The position reportedly plays an important role in the village's most collective activity like luck praying, or solving inter-village or inter-ethnic disputes. The position is also elected rather than succeeded hereditarily or appointed. It is reported that the village run election of **Cụt Phò Xúc** on their own and just reported to the commune upon completion. At the present, the traditional institution (elderly headman, kinship) is more powerful than new institution. The case of appointing village head is the proof for this argument. It is reported that the current village head – member of Xim Ông clan refused the position despite the commune chairman, also of Khmu ethnicity, persuaded. He just agreed as Cụt Phò Xúc - the current traditional headman – raised his voice. The position of traditional village elderly headman is elected based on personal qualities rather than clan size, age. Put it simply, the headman-to-be does not need to be of the biggest clan in the village or the eldest one but the most knowledgeable, the most respected by the villagers. Nuclear family is the basic economic unit in which man play the dominant role over woman. Women are highly dependent on men. It is reported that wife has to consult husband on issues like purchase of a chicken. In addition, women are not allowed to travel alone in long distance. For example, they culturally have no right to travel alone to Hoi Tu commune, about 13 km from their village.

¹⁵ Every clan name has a equivalent in Thai language and the Thai clan name is more often used

Khmu identity: How the people perceive themselves? What make them different from other ethnic groups in the locality?

These are questions that the researcher raised in interview or group discussion to different type of informants; men, women, youth. The answer varies from group to group. However, they share a common thing that they does not link it to the tangible values (house style, costumes...) but intangible ones including

- Elderly people group: Language, buffalo sacrifice¹⁶, new house ceremony
- Women group: Smoking (in Ky Son only), having no weaving skills, temporary matrilineal residence following the marriage¹⁷, working harder
- Youth group: Language, temporary matrilineal residence following the marriage¹⁸, flirting culture: *Khmu culture allows boy to enter the room of the girl they chase. For the H'mong, it is not allow.*



Illustration 6– This informant claims to scarify 10 buffalos in his lifetime

8.2. Recommendations

Specific culture empowerment interventions for Khmu people

It is the researcher's argument and observation that the local people, who are labeled as *lazier, more passive, and backward than other ethnic groups in the same locality*, are very actively capable of maintaining their cultural practices (spiritual domain) based on their self-defined demand. They invited a shaman from other village to make the shaman thank ritual as there is no shaman in the village. However, the people's most concern lie in the *material*, and to some extent *intellectual* domains (See the matrix at the summary section for more information). The traditional way of cultivation is on the brink of ceasing to exist

¹⁶ Buffalo sacrifice also exists in many other ethnic groups but in form of collective activity. For the Khmu in the locality, it is individual / household-scaled activity rather than collective ones.

¹⁷ Following the marriage, the husband has to live for period of time in the wife's house

¹⁸ Following the marriage, the husband has to live for period of time in the wife's house

because of population pressure and stricter state control. They do realize that. However, they are stuck to find the solution by their own.

Any possible intervention should focus on helping them to secure the livelihoods rather than other aspects of culture. They are capable in defining the maintenance boundary of what core values to them as the Khmu ethnic people.

Culturally appropriate livelihood options that build the people's confidence

Literature review and the fieldtrip show that Khmu people in the locality, besides relying on shifting cultivation and husbandry, are known for making basket ware (often done by elderly men). They do not seek their livelihood from trading activity. Making basket ware can be a potential source of income for the people. For example, in Huoi Tho village – another Khmu village which is just 9 km from Ky Son district town, making basket ware has become an important part of their livelihood. Sixteen out of 106 households in the village has one member occupied fulltime. As Moong Vãn Phu – the informant – describes “their making of products fail to meet the demand”. However, in case of Huoi Cang 2 village, geographical location is the hindered factor for developing this work. In this case, the geographical location favors the people in terms of cultural authenticity but not in terms of economic development.

In the case of Huoi Cang 2 village, husbandry is the most recommended option for livelihood intervention for two reasons. First, it is culturally appropriate as it is also a traditional source of livelihood. Second, it is tested in reality with the OHK's funded cows. The 14 cows now become 27 ones. The people prefer more intensive husbandry by receiving training in husbandry. In addition, grassland area should be widened to meet the food demand for the cows. It is reported that they start to grow elephant grass to meet the demand of increasing herd.

Working approach with Khmu while implementing recommended interventions

This section mentions to typical aspects of Khmu culture in Huoi Cang 2 village that non-Khmu people can see it strange. However, it is strongly recommended that the unlikeness should be respected rather than judged by external standards:



Illustration 7– The sign of barring entrance of stranger, even Khmu ethnic ones, named Te le in Khmuic language

- In some rituals like Luck pray, Buffalo sacrifice, entrance of outsiders (even of Khmu ethnicity) is forbidden. They use to symbol named "te le" (bamboo basket with leaf inside) in Khmu language to signal this.

Any violation will be punished equating the scarified animal: a pig or a buffalo

- If you have chance to have chicken meal with the people, please remember that chicken's legs should be eaten in pair. Separation of chicken's legs means that you no longer want a close and trustful relation with the people.

- Woman's travel limitation: Traditionally and currently Khmu women in Huoi Cang 2 village is not allow to travel alone for a long distance (even to Huoi Tu commune 13 km from their village). Travel in such distance requires at least a companion. It is recommended that if OHK organize any activity specific for women elsewhere rather than their village, please put this in mind.

- In each Khmu house, they have a sacred apartment for worshipping their ancestors. Entrance is limited to family members only. Please do not enter this if you have chance to visit their house.



Illustration 8– Khmu informant standing in front of the sacred room in his house

- The period from December to April next year is collectively reported to be the most leisure time during the year of the Khmu people in Huoi Cang 2 village. It is also the people's recommended time for any project activities