

Muong Territories in North Vietnam

CHAPTER 13. THE MUONG

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

The Muong, one of the largest tribal groups in the Indochinese region, are located primarily in North Vietnam on the southwestern fringe of the Red River Delta. There are, however, a few Muong groups in Laos and some resettled refugee Muong in the Darlac Plateau area of the Republic of Vietnam. Although the tribe numbers between 250,000 and 360,000, only about 10,000 tribesmen live in the Republic of Vietnam.¹

Despite a few common features, the Muong are distinct from the other Montagnard peoples of the Republic of Vietnam in language, culture, and social structure. While the exact historical relationship between the Muong and the lowland Vietnamese has never been established, the Muong language is more closely related to that of the Vietnamese than to the Mon-Khmer or Malayo-Polynesian languages of the Montagnard tribes.

The patrilineal culture of the Muong, in many ways more sophisticated than that of the other tribes, has been more responsive to outside influences. Their economy is mainly agrarian. They cultivate dry rice and a variety of other crops, raise animals, and engage in numerous crafts. In many ways their religion is similar to that of the lowland Vietnamese, including ancestor worship and belief in village guardian spirits. Their religion also involves, however, many animistic practices similar to those of the Montagnard tribal groups.

Politically, the tribe retains remnants of a hierarchic political structure of hereditary elite families and dependent nonlandowning peasants. Since 1954, many Muong have emigrated from North Vietnam to Laos and the Republic of Vietnam.

Name and Size of Tribe

Because the name Muong has been loosely used and has a variety of current connotations, classification of the Muong is especially difficult. The word Muong derives from the Thai word meaning a territorial division. In the vicinity of Vinh, Muong is used to identify a Thai-speaking group, while a completely different term

—Nha Lang—is used for the tribe referred to in this study as Muong. The Muong themselves use a variety of names, including Mwal, Mwan, Mon, and corruptions of the Vietnamese word *nguoi* (people), such as Nguoe and Ngue. These terms are all synonyms, not names of subgroups. However, other names are used to designate the Muong of specific localities. These areas, with the Muong name used in that area, are:

<i>Area</i>	<i>Name</i>
Nghe An	Nha Lang
Quang Binh	Nguon or Sach
Mai Da	Ao-Ta
Fourth Zone	Tho

Location

The largest Muong group inhabits the area south of the Red River in the Province of Ho Binh and comprises the majority of the provincial population.² This group also extends into Thanh Hoa, Quang Binh, and Phu Tho Provinces. There are also smaller separate groups located around Quang Binh, Phu Qui, Yen Bay, Son La, and Moc Chau.

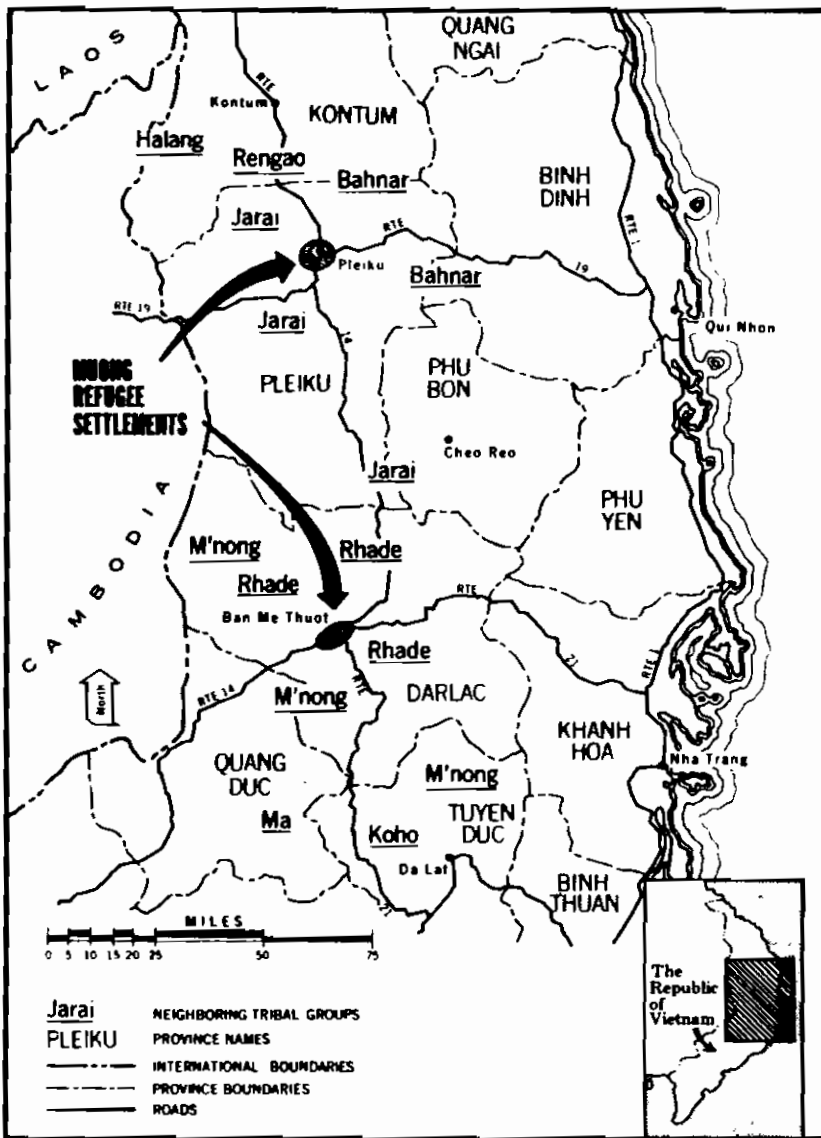
Two groups of Muong refugees have been resettled in the Republic of Vietnam: one group of about 5,000, near Ban Me Thuot; and a second group of about 3,000, near the Pleiku airport.¹ Because all available information refers to the Muong in North Vietnam, the degree to which the Muong refugees retain their traditional culture is unknown. At the very least, however, their relocation to the Rhade and Jarai area is likely to have modified some of their traditional customs.

It is possible that additional Muong refugees have fled to the south, or that the two groups originally resettled near Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku have expanded into other areas; but no further information is available. A 1961 study estimated the Muong population in the Republic of Vietnam to be 10,000 at that time.⁴

The Muong are unevenly distributed, and the shifting locations of their settlements are imprecisely known. On the whole, they are concentrated in the Ho Binh region. Farther away from this central area, their number grows fewer as they mingle with other tribes. There is a slow but constant westward migration, particularly in the Quang Binh region. Although there now are two small, known groups in Laos, more may well have drifted across the border.³

Terrain Analysis

The area inhabited by the refugee Muong groups in the Republic of Vietnam is the eastern part of the Darlac Plateau, about 1,500



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feet above sea level and separated from the coastal plains by the mountains of Binh Dinh. The Ayounh River, a tributary of the Song Ba, drains the extreme eastern part of the plateau; the remainder is drained westward into Cambodia by numerous tributaries of the Srepok River.

The climate of the Darlac Plateau is influenced by both the sun ner (April through October) and winter (mid-September to

March) monsoon winds. In summer these winds come from the southwest, and in winter from the northeast. Successful agriculture in the area depends upon the rains from the summer monsoons. The winter monsoons also provide rainfall, but only at unreliable intervals. Most of the 50 to 150 inches of annual precipitation in the plateau region occurs during July and August. Temperatures on the plateau are lower than those in the coastal regions, differing by as much as 15 degrees during the winter months.

The soft, powdery, basalt-based red earth of the Darlac Plateau once supported forests. Now, as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture, only small wooded areas remain on granite pegs (like Dhu Ebung near Ban Me Thuot) and along the peripheral chain of hills. With these exceptions, most of the region is a savanna-like plain of grass and bamboo. Here a large part of the undergrowth is *tranh* (*Imperata cylindrica*), a tall, coarse grass used for grazing when green and as house thatch when yellow and dry. The northern part of the plateau around Pleiku shows considerable evidence of earlier volcanic activity. Monsoon forest covers much of this area, which is generally free of dense undergrowth and easy to traverse. During the summer rains, however, travel is complicated by flooding.⁶

National Route 14 connects Ban Me Thuot with Pleiku to the north and Duc Lap (Quang Duc Province) to the south. Ban Me Thuot is linked with the coast—with Ninh Hoa in Khanh Hoa Province—by Route 21 and with Dalat by Route 20. Two airfields near Ban Me Thuot—an all-weather field north of the village and a seasonal field to the southeast—provide air accessibility. Pleiku also is the site of a major airfield. Route 19 extends from the Cambodian border and connects Pleiku with the coast at Qui Nhon.

SECTION II

TRIBAL BACKGROUND

Ethnic and Racial Origin

The Muong are closely related linguistically to the ethnic Vietnamese, but their specific racial and ethnic origins are debatable. One source believes that the close relationship between the Vietnamese and Muong languages indicates that the two groups are the northernmost members of the Mon-Khmer ethnic stock.¹ Another feels the Vietnamese-Muong and Mon-Khmer peoples form two separate but related branches of the original Austroasiatic stock.² The Muong may also represent a branch of the Vietnamese people which either moved or was pushed into the back country during the Chinese conquest.³ In addition, it is quite possible that the language similarity is due merely to proximity.

In any case, the Muong apparently arrived in Indochina at a very early date.⁴ One source theorized that the ancestors of both the Muong and the Vietnamese migrated into northern Indochina during the period that the Thai-speaking groups were moving southward through the upland valleys.⁵

The Vietnamese and Muong formed a relatively homogeneous group until the Chinese conquest of the Red River Delta. The influx of Chinese into the area resulted in a Vietnamese-Muong divergence. Present-day Muong social and religious concepts are often described as pre-Chinese replicas of early Vietnamese society.⁶

Language

The Muong language is closely related to Vietnamese and is written in Quoc Ngu script.⁷ Possibly Muong is an Annamitic or archaic Annamitic dialect, as suggested by the following comparison:⁸

<i>English</i>	<i>Annamite</i>	<i>Muong</i>
one	<i>mot</i>	<i>moc</i>
two	<i>hai</i>	<i>hal</i>
three	<i>ba</i>	<i>pa</i>

The language of the Nguon group of Muong (of the Quang Binh region) is especially similar to Annamite.⁹

There are some local variations of dialect among the Muong in North Vietnam. The speech of the Muong of Son Tay, for example, differs from that of the Muong of Hoa Binh in several articulations, accent, and certain vocabulary terms.

Nearly all the Muong can speak or understand Vietnamese.¹⁰ They probably have some knowledge of other languages as well, especially French. They have had frequent association with the French and the Thai as well as with the Vietnamese. The Muong near Nghia Lo in North Vietnam have some contact with Meo and Man tribesmen who come to that area for trade. The Nguon group of Ta Muong associate with the Sach tribespeople in the Laotian border area, and the May and Rue (or Roc) tribes.¹¹

Legendary History

The Muong myth of the origin of the world accounts for the distinction between elite and peasant in their society.

According to the legend, the sky created the first man, Ban-Co, who fathered four sons. The first, Phu-Ky, fathered the Chinese; the second, Than-Nong, sired the Annamites; the third, Gich-Rong, fathered the aristocracy; and the fourth, Loc-Tac-An, sired the common people.¹²

Another legend serves as a promise of life after death through the mediation of the great hunter Ta-Kheo-Rauh. One day while hunting on the mountain, Ta-Kheo-Rauh slew a deer which a serpent restored to life by gathering some tree bark and applying it to the wound. When this happened a second time, Ta-Kheo-Rauh followed the serpent and collected some of the magic bark. He placed the bark in the mouth of a deceased person, and from then on all deceased Muong were restored to life in this manner.

The news spread, distressing the gods; Ta-Kheo-Rauh and his miraculous tree were summoned to heaven; henceforth men become mortal again. When the Muong die, they seek out Ta-Kheo-Rauh, who conducts them to the tribunal of the gods and pleads their case, acknowledging the Muong as his descendants. The king of heaven then permits the deceased to remain in the sky instead of undergoing the tortures of hell.¹³

A system of feudal lordship had fully developed by the time of the legendary kingdom of Van Lang. Chiefs were allegedly descendants of the first cultivator of the soil, and from him they derived their religious and judicial powers. The word for feudal lord is *quan lang*, which is the same term used for the sons of Hung, the ruler of Van Lang. Hung allegedly introduced tattooing by directing fishermen to cover themselves with sea monsters to scare away the crocodiles.¹⁴

Factual History

Although the kingdom of Van Lang is legendary, there is agreement among scholars as to the characteristics of the bronze-age Muong and Vietnamese society before it was disrupted by the Chinese conquest of about 213 B.C. The people had learned to irrigate and produce semi-annual rice crops with nothing more than hoes: the buffalo and the plow were introduced by the Chinese. At the top of the feudal hierarchy were the lords or *quan lang*, whose authority to control and distribute lands rested on supernatural sanction. The *quan lang* subdivided their domains among the lesser nobility and the chiefs (*tho lang* or *tho ti*) of villages or groups of villages. Privileges and authorities—civil, military, and religious—were hereditary.¹⁵

From 213 B.C. until 939 A.D., the area was under Chinese domination, but the Muong were apparently less influenced by the Chinese than were the Vietnamese. In 939 the Vietnamese threw off direct Chinese rule and became a tributary state; the Muong then came under Vietnamese rule.¹⁶

Although the Vietnamese had abandoned the feudal system by the 18th century, the Muong did not. French influence began in 1802; the Muong rebelled against French control of their territory in 1822, 1826–27, 1833, and again in the 1880's; each time the Muong rebellions were quelled.¹⁷

In 1923, the French issued a manifesto with the following provisions: the social structure of the various tribal groups was to be respected; trade between the tribes and the ethnic Vietnamese was to be regulated; tribal laws were to be codified and used in the administration of justice; and educational, medical, and agricultural assistance would be given to the highland groups. Since 1954, the governments in both the Republic of Vietnam and North Vietnam have followed policies designed to assimilate the tribesmen into the national fabric.¹⁸

Settlement Patterns

The Muong generally settle on plateaus or on hillsides near water; they prefer areas of limestone and torrential rivulets to large rivers. In their original locations in North Vietnam, Muong villages exist only at altitudes over 2600 feet. Settlements are located away from main lines of communication and have been moved when a highway came too close to them. Even in areas where a chief's house may stand near the highway, the other houses will be more remote and perhaps screened by trees.

A Muong village is often quite dispersed, with the houses of the *tho lang* or chief near the center, and the others scattered along the riverbank or on the slopes of hills. The Muong attach relatively little importance to the orientation of the individual houses.

Small footpaths lead to the various houses, but none lead directly from any nearby highway. On occasion there will be 3 or 4 houses as far away as 2 kilometers from the main groups; this is a settlement outpost in which the *tho lang* himself sometimes resides. In the Hoa Binh area and in scattered parts of northern Thanh Hoa Province of North Vietnam, farmsteads are surrounded by enclosures of bamboo, cactus, or other hedge growths.¹⁹

The temple of the spirit of the soil, centrally located in the village, is an important structure in any Muong settlement.*

Muong houses, which are raised on 6-foot pilings, are large, rectangular buildings divided into compartments. Houses are generally 19 to 39 feet long by 13 to 19 feet wide. Wealthy or important people have larger houses—up to 130 to 160 feet long and 48 to 65 feet wide. These larger houses are often connected by common verandas or covered walks.²⁰

Structurally, the houses are generally of woven or braided bamboo over a wooden frame, with a thatched roof. The interior is divided into several areas, including one with a hole in the floor for a latrine. The main room—used for guests and most family activities—contains the altar of the ancestors and a hearth, located near a window or door so that the smoke can escape. The hearth, a wooden frame lined with clay, is sacred and may not be spat upon or approached by a naked person.²¹ The ancestral altar, across from the hearth, consists of either a bamboo vase filled with ashes, a large wooden panel against the wall, or, in the case of the poor, a piece of red paper glued to the wall. There may also be a second altar, sacred to the god of the hearth, consisting of a shelf with two vases filled with sand and incense sticks with a piece of red paper above.²²

One observer maintains that grain is stored in a corner of the Muong house, under one roof, in woven bamboo baskets kept on boards several feet off the floor.²³ Other sources report, however, that granaries are separate buildings on pilings and are located near the house.²⁴

In any case, each house has a veranda at the entrance which serves as a work area, a place to receive visitors, a clothes-drying space, and a miscellaneous storage area. A bucket of water and a dipper are kept in a corner of the veranda for washing the feet before entering the house.²⁵

Household furniture consists of a few mats and low rattan and bamboo stools.²⁶

Each house has a small yard enclosed by a bamboo fence, and some houses also have a vegetable garden.²⁷ Houses of the *tho lang* families are distinguished by a more substantial fence with a

* See "Religion," p. 547.

wooden door opening upon a second inner door; the vertical fenceposts are linked by braided bands whose numbers increase with the importance of the family.²⁸

SECTION III

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Physical Characteristics

Generally, the Muong are about the same height as the Vietnamese, averaging about 5 feet 6 inches tall; but the Muong are heavier and more robust. They are usually round faced, with straight, sometimes aquiline, noses and only slightly slanted eyes.¹

Many ethnic strains can be identified in the physical appearance of the Muong, especially among the males. The appearance of various Muong might closely resemble that of the Vietnamese, Laotians, Chinese, or Cambodians. Such divergence in physical appearance is much less common among Muong women, who, sharing the same general physical characteristics, more nearly constitute a common type. Although most young women have a slender figure and good posture, they soon lose them under the stress of continual hard work.²

When they are about 16 years old, most Muong lacquer their teeth. The lacquering is a long and disagreeable, even painful, process, and for several days hard or acidic foods cannot be eaten. After a few years, the blackened teeth turn brown, leaving a mottled appearance. To maintain an even color, the women usually have their teeth lacquered three or four times during their lifetime. About one-fourth of the men do not lacquer their teeth at all, and the rest may do so only once.³

Pierced earlobes are rare, as few Muong have the means to buy earrings. Those who do own earrings often prefer to wear them only on festive occasions. When earrings are not worn, the Muong insert a bamboo twig or rolled leaf through the holes in their lobes to keep them open.⁴

Tattooing is not widespread among the Muong; it appears almost exclusively among those groups who live near Thai villages where the art is practiced. Favorite tattoo designs among these groups are a Chinese character and a mark in the shape of an X. The men are tattooed on the back of the hand or on the forearm; the women prefer the middle joint of a finger.⁵

Health

The health of the Muong who reach adulthood may be described

as good, since they have survived in spite of a very high infant mortality rate and exposure to many endemic diseases. Village sanitation and the tribesmen's personal hygienic practices are rudimentary.

The principal disease among the Muong is malaria—most tribespeople contract it at least once during their lifetime. Two common types of malaria are found in the tribal area. One, benign tertian malaria, causes high fever with relapses over a period of time but is usually not fatal. The other, malignant tertian malaria, is fatal to both infants and adults.⁶

The three types of typhus found in the Muong areas of the Republic of Vietnam are carried by lice, rat fleas, and mites. Mite-borne typhus is reportedly rampant among all the Montagnard tribes.⁷

Cholera, typhoid, dysentery, yaws, venereal disease, and various parasitic infestations are also found in the Muong areas.⁸

Disease in the tribal area is spread by insects, including the anopheles mosquito, rat flea, and louse; some diseases are caused by worms, including hookworms; and some diseases are associated with poor sanitation and lack of sexual hygiene.⁹

The Muong believe illness is caused by the spirits, *ma khu*, which haunt the rocks and forests. When a person is seriously ill, a sorcerer or *thay mo* is asked to identify the tormenting spirit. With an egg suspended by a thread over the patient's clothing, the sorcerer calls out the names of the spirits. A certain movement of the egg indicates the name of the responsible evil spirit, and the sorcerer then tells those attending the patient what sacrifices will be necessary. In payment for his services, the sorcerer reportedly receives a share of whatever is offered to the spirit.¹⁰

For particularly grave illnesses, a special sorcerer or *thay pol* is first consulted to identify the causative spirit, and then a *thay mo* offers a white chicken (*kon ka lo*) to this spirit.¹¹

In addition to sorcerers and sacrifices to cure the sick, the Muong reportedly use various concoctions made from medicinal plants and herbs. They have also had access to Vietnamese and Chinese druggists, but no information is available concerning the extent to which the Muong use commercial medicines and drugs.¹²

The Muong consider any person 40 years old as aged, although actual senility among them does not occur until later. A Frenchman who lived among the Muong reported that he encountered no cases of senility, but found people as old as 70 still vigorous, especially well-to-do women who had always been attended by servants.¹³

Insurance

The general indolence of the Muong, more a manifestation of

their cultural background than an indication of natural laziness, makes it difficult to gauge their overall endurance.

The Muong dislike expending energy and will avoid doing so whenever possible. When engaged in hard work, they will take breaks that last as long as the actual work periods. French colonials who employed Muong tribesmen on their plantations soon got rid of them because of their low efficiency.¹⁴

Walking is the primary physical activity of the Muong. They seldom undertake long marches; but when they do, they can cover ground at the rate of 30 to 40 miles a day—a pace that can be maintained for several days by either sex. Upon reaching their destination, they are likely to spend several weeks resting.¹⁵

The Muong generally walk at a steady, unhurried pace; they shift to a jerky, jogging walk when they are in a hurry. Adults seldom run. Their walking rate does not change when they are carrying loads (the average load seldom exceeds 20 kilograms). Rest stops usually last 3 or 4 hours, during which they eat and smoke.¹⁶

It is probable that those Muong addicted to opium will not have the endurance of tribesmen who abstain from this drug or use it only occasionally.

The Muong are reported to adjust to the warm, humid climate of the lower valleys of Indochina better than the delta peoples, who are often overcome by fever.¹⁷

Psychological Characteristics

The Muong are generally passive and reserved. Occasionally they are totally indifferent to their surroundings and do not respond to fellow villagers who try to attract their attention; at other times the slightest unusual noise arouses them instantly.¹⁸

The Muong have been described as being indolent and slow to comprehend. From a Western point of view, their work habits leave much to be desired. However, Muong willingness gradually to apply more advanced Vietnamese techniques to their own economic activities is in strong contrast to the inflexible resistance to change found among many other tribal groups; this willingness has contributed to their relatively higher standard of living. Moreover, the combination of opium and better satisfaction of their basic needs for food and shelter minimizes incentive to progress and contributes to the impression of apathy.

Some sources describe the Muong as passive, unintelligent, hospitable, and tradition bound; others refer to them as vigorous, intelligent, vindictive, and passionately revolutionary. The tribe's size and wide dispersal probably make all of these characteristics applicable to various Muong individuals, but not to the tribe as a whole.¹⁹

SECTION IV

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Muong society is patrilineal and distinguished by a strong extended family structure. Traces of an ancient feudal social organization are also evident. The elite class of the feudal hierarchy was characterized by its special customs and privileged landownership. But the Muong have adopted Vietnamese characteristics to the extent that they also have widespread peasant ownership of individual fields and communal ownership of village land. There is a strong feeling of mutual aid in Muong villages; each villager supports his neighbor in local projects. The village chief or tho lang, however, still retains his feudal rights to extensive village labor and a share of the community harvest. The tho lang, whose ancestors are believed to have been selected by heaven, lives apart from the villagers in a large dwelling surrounded by a strong mat fence.¹

Although the changes in Muong feudal structure have eroded the authority of the tho lang and members of the elite class,² the family structure has retained its strength and ancient internal system of authority. The quarrels and indiscretions of individual family members remain a matter within effective family jurisdiction.³

Kinship System and Tribal Structure

Apparently there is no overall tribal structure among the Muong except for the division between elite and peasant. The tho lang are a superior group, who seem to have authority only over their own village or group of villages. Their former status was based on their exclusive title to land, woods, and watercourses. It is difficult to describe present conditions, particularly because of the lack of information about either North Vietnamese administration of their Muong areas or the Republic of Vietnam's administration of Muong refugees.

The most important corporate kin group appears to be the patrilineal common descent group, whose members include those related through the male line to a common male ancestor in the fifth ascending generation. The influences of the kin group appear to be more significant among the tho lang, for all these members gather for rituals to honor the common ancestor; among the peasants, only a small group gathers for such ceremonies.⁴

The *ho*, or kin group, is particularly important in regulating marriage and adoption. One cannot marry close relatives, that is, those within the same *ho* related through common ancestors.⁵

There also appear to be groups known as *families féodales* which have associated food taboos that vary according to the region. The Quach family of Lac Son, for example, is forbidden to eat dog, while the Quach family of Kin Boi cannot eat the flesh of white buffalo or marsh hen. The Dinh family of Cao Phong cannot eat monkey, while the Kinh family of Duong Son has a taboo against eating panther.⁶

Place of Men, Women, and Children in the Society

Patrilineal descent and strong paternal authority distinguish Muong society. The authority of the male head of the family is uncontested, but the next position of authority is held by the first wife.⁷ This inconsistency could be a relic of an earlier matrilineal descent pattern among the Muong. In any case, the Muong male authority is much stronger than in many other Montagnard groups in the Republic of Vietnam.

Muong society appears to function around a complex system of shared responsibilities. A Muong will ask for the concurrence of the villagers when he wishes to build a house, and they in turn will share the work. Everyone will collect supplies, such as mountain grasses, and then divide the actual labor according to custom: the young people will install the roof, for example, while the elders supervise. The new owner is obligated to provide a banquet which includes a jar of whiskey.⁸ All members of the family assist in gathering the harvest.

Males have the exclusive right to own real property; and the eldest son inherits the bulk of the family property.⁹ Among the nobility, where there is more property to share, the eldest son of the first wife inherits the paternal house, the bulk of the property, and the family authority of his father. Other sons of the same wife may also inherit some land. Sons of concubines do not inherit, but the father may provide for them by an allotment of ricefields or cash before his death. In return for his inheritance, the eldest son is expected to support both his widowed mother and any unmarried females in the household.¹⁰

In general, the men do most of the agricultural work. They also hunt, but this is a leisure-time activity rather than a necessary means of augmenting the food supply. Dogs and gongs are used to flush the game. The men hunt alone or in organized groups under the direction of the *tho lang*. The sport also functions as training in the use of weapons—an important factor in areas where pirates and smugglers exist.¹¹ Although some weapons are obtained by trade, the men usually make their own firearms, cross-

bows, and traps for both game and fish, thus necessitating the gathering of forest bamboo for construction and repair. There is some specialization in the work done by Muong men; that is, there are carpenters and joiners, coffinmakers, and makers of pots and farm implements.¹²

The women are primarily responsible for household tasks and for spinning and weaving cotton. Weaving skill is considered an important attribute in a wife. The Muong prepare several different types of dyes.¹³ Women have several additional tasks; they carry water and gather plants, herbs, and wood.¹⁴ Young girls and old women also help the men in the fields.¹⁵ Women have an important and appreciated place in Muong society because they perform so much of the village labor; nevertheless their status is subordinate to that of men and is symbolized by the fact that they do not take their meals with the men.¹⁶

Children are raised with great laxity and are quite undisciplined. Parents seldom administer bodily punishment, usually only threatening their children.¹⁷

Marriage

Marriage is exogamous and arranged by intermediaries, although a peasant male actually has considerable freedom in selecting a partner. Some Muong prefer a mate selected from another village, and the nobility require the first wife to be from another fief.¹⁸ Because marriages tend to take place within the same social class, and because a *tho lang* must find a wife from another *tho lang* family, persons of the higher ranks have less personal choice of marriage partners. Females marry between the ages of 16 and 18, elite males between 15 and 20, and peasant males between 18 and 25.¹⁹

Marriage is forbidden between close relatives and those related through common ancestors within four generations, but marriage may be contracted by distantly connected members of the same ho or lineal descent group. It is also possible to marry outside the tribe. The Thai are happy to intermarry with the Muong, but Muong marriage to a Vietnamese is rare.²⁰

Parents of the Muong boy initiate marriage arrangements by sending an intermediary to the selected girl's house with symbolic gifts. If the initial overtures are approved, the bride price, the engagement period (5 months to 5 years), and the marriage date are determined. The groom is expected to spend a period of up to 2 years working at the house of his prospective parents before the marriage is officially consummated.²¹

The actual marriage ceremony consists of two significant rituals: the first, before the ancestral altar in the bride's house, signifies her departure from the family; the second, before the groom's an-

cestral altar, signifies her acceptance into his family. The first ceremony is followed by a feast, and the second—which takes place the evening of the same day—is followed by another feast. The bride returns home at midnight and is claimed by her husband after 3 days.²²

Of the two types of Muong marriage contracts, the most common is that of buying a daughter-in-law (*khat yu*, or *khat zu*). The bride price is higher during the harvesting season because the groom's family is gaining another worker. The Muong also observe the custom of buying a son-in-law (*khat cao*), which in practice means that he is promised the inheritance, but he is not exempt from paying a bride price.²³

The couple live with the groom's parents until the girl is allowed to establish her own household. This permission is usually granted after the birth of the first child.²⁴

Divorce and Second Marriage

Divorce is rare, although a man may repudiate his wife on a variety of pretexts if she is still young and can return to her family. Divorce is impossible during a mourning period or if the couple have become poor. A wife can also obtain a de facto divorce by making an extended visit to her parents. If she commits adultery, divorce is obligatory.²⁵

Polygamy is permitted and even customary among the nobility, but peasants rarely take second wives. A point of similarity between Muong and Chinese society is the prominent position of the first wife. If the second wife of a member of the nobility comes from the peasant class, she must also act as a servant to the first wife.²⁶

Adoption

Muong quite often pay a fee to adopt additional children, presumably to increase their labor force. It is even possible to adopt a son who becomes head of the family, but this process requires that the boy must be of the same kin group as the father and not already an eldest son.²⁷

Pregnancy, Abortion, and Birth

Because of a combination of high infant mortality and a low birth rate, few households have more than three children. The use of both opium and alcohol apparently reduces fertility considerably. Although the Muong are familiar with the practice, they seldom resort to abortion.²⁸

Pregnancy involves no taboos or special practices, and illegitimate pregnancy is punished only to the extent that the families of both boy and girl must pay fines to the village.²⁹ The forthcoming event is neither proclaimed nor concealed (except in rare cases),

so that pregnant women continue to mix with society and perform their ordinary tasks. At this time women may acquire a special talisman and continue to wear it after the baby is born.³⁰

When the time of delivery approaches, the house is taboo to strangers, and the mother is secluded behind partitions with a fire kept burning to purify her. One source claims that only relatives assist the mother; a more knowledgeable source asserts that there is some use of midwives.³¹

The placenta is either buried, hidden in the forest, or suspended from a tree. When the taboo has ended, the family announces the birth to the ancestors, makes ritual offerings on the family altar, and holds a feast for friends. The mother herself is considered unclean for a period after the birth and remains secluded in her room.³²

There is now no standard practice as to whom the birth taboo applies, or for how long. Various signs may announce a taboo, although relatives and even other villagers may ignore it. The restriction ordinarily lasts from 2 to 4 weeks for a firstborn, and from 4 to 5 days for subsequent births. The surest practice is not to visit a new mother at all.³³

Childhood

Neither the mother nor the father expends any particular effort on the education of the child, nor do they direct or restrain him in any way. He learns appropriate behavior patterns by imitating his elders.³⁴

Death and Burial

Mortuary rites are complex, and one report states that the Muong have the unusual custom of retaining the casket in the house for an extremely long period—sometimes several years.³⁵ Two other sources, however, report burial after 3 days.³⁶

When a Muong tribesman dies, his family immediately covers his chest with a cloth. This procedure is to prevent the man's spirit from escaping.³⁷ The body is placed in a hollowed tree trunk with some personal possessions, and a thay mo (sorcerer) is summoned to pray and officiate at rituals for as long as 3 days. Among the nobility, an additional ritual official is customarily present to announce the death. Mourning signs are placed around the house, and friends and kin gather to offer condolences and share a feast. Both the thay mo and the participating relatives don ceremonial garb. The ritual involves placing a dead dog, rice, alcohol, and incense in a basket tied to the coffin. The deceased is invited to enter the basket and not haunt the living. At periodic intervals, the deceased is also offered a meal.³⁸

On the eve of burial, there is a ritual sacrifice of cattle among

the wealthy or a pig among the peasantry. The funeral cortege, led by the *thay mo*, consists of the catafalque, an orchestra, and relatives who periodically prostrate themselves. The Muong place a headstone and footstone on the grave and erect a small thatched house over it. Mourners return in 1 to 3 days for additional rituals and, like the Vietnamese, bring offerings to the grave every 50th day for the first 2 years after burial.³⁹

Daily Routine

The Muong are a more developed and prosperous group than are the other Montagnard tribes in the Republic of Vietnam. Unlike most of the other tribes, they engage primarily in the cultivation of wet rice and other crops, rather than in dry rice cultivation. In addition to managing the crops and constructing and caring for their houses, the Muong find time for travel, marketing, and considerable visiting and gossip among themselves. They also hold cock-fights accompanied by extensive betting. Of the various games played, a favorite is that of teams of girls competing with teams of boys to throw a ball through a ring on a pole—all the action accompanied by singing, joking, and laughter.⁴⁰

The lang families have numerous servants to assist in household tasks.⁴¹ Entertainment for visitors to a Muong family can, therefore, be fairly extensive. In addition to a good meal and conversation involving the retelling of old legends, young girls will sing old, traditional melodies accompanied by various tribal musical instruments.⁴²

SECTION V

CUSTOMS

Dress

Muong men, like their Vietnamese neighbors, dress in cotton trousers and shirts, preferring blue garments and short, knee-length tunics. Many Muong wear blue turbans.¹

The women wear long, blue, sarong-like skirts fastened at the bosom; the top third of the skirt is decorated with various colored threads woven into the blue fabric. They also frequently wear short blouses cinched at the waist by a green belt.

Men wear their coarse, black hair in a knot at the back of the neck; women dress their hair in a similar fashion, sometimes wearing a simple headdress made of a square of cloth pulled to the back of the head.²

Muong women and children are very fond of jewelry. The women sometimes wear crude silver jewelry in their hair, and young girls and boys often string amulets or tiger claws around their necks.³

Folk Beliefs

The Muong, like all Montagnard tribes, behave according to the dictates of their cultural tradition, a large body of laws, proverbs, and religious beliefs. Local interpretations of these folk beliefs vary, however, from village to village; the Muong, unlike many other hill tribes, have shown a willingness to embellish and change their beliefs to suit local needs. Frequently they have incorporated elements of Vietnamese oral tradition into their own cultural practices.*

Eating and Drinking Customs

The staple of the Muong diet is rice grown by the wet-rice method in irrigated, terraced paddies. However, rice grown by the dry method, although actually less substantial and palatable than that raised in paddies, is often reserved for pregnant women, the sick, and the aged, and wealthy families frequently serve it as a special dish to guests after the other rice has been eaten.⁴

*Specific information about various Muong beliefs can be found in the sections on "Religion" and "Cultural Background" in this study.

Chewing and Smoking Customs

All Muong chew betel, the continual use of which eventually discolors the teeth. Opium and tobacco smoking are also favorite habits. Most smokers use a bamboo and porcelain pipe of Vietnamese design.

Use of Opium

Because of the high price of opium, addiction is more common among the rich than the poor, although some individuals reportedly have spent everything on their daily opium ration and allowed their families to starve.⁵ Wealthy families that do not use opium will often keep a supply on hand to offer visitors. Addicts often switch from smoking to opium pills, which have a stronger and more immediate effect.

The Muong themselves apparently do not actively engage in opium smuggling; before the Indochina War they obtained the drug through connections with smuggling organizations operated by the Vietnamese and the Chinese.⁶

Customs Relating to Strangers

Generally the Muong are reserved but hospitable in their relations with strangers. It is doubtful that they fully trust a visitor until they have carefully evaluated his intentions. Although they are reported to be affable, any violation of local custom might incur their hostility. An example of such a violation might be the unauthorized entrance of a person into a newly constructed house before the customary interdiction has been lifted. No information is available regarding the application of specific customs and rituals to strangers.

SECTION VI

RELIGION

The religion of the Muong has a variety of aspects and pervades all of Muong life. Tribal religion has historically combined a great number of animistic practices with some of the Buddhist and other religious practices of the lowland Annamese. The Muong believe in a large pantheon of supernatural beings, many of which are also found in the oral tradition of the Vietnamese religion. The central theme of the Muong religion is the interrelationship of the Muong cult of the ancestors with the important New Year ceremonies and with the intricate spirit world.

Not only are a great variety of cults associated with different spirits, but the number of spirits differs with each village. Ancestors are honored in communal and familial cults as are the spirit of the mountains, the spirit of agriculture, and the spirit of the hearth. Individuals maintain a cult of living souls, as well as cults of those spirits which protect the soul and the body. Traditionally, after a Muong hunt, a ritual offering of game was made to the spirits of the forest and mountains, depending on the region, and to the spirit of wildlife and firearms.¹ Religious rituals occur frequently with participation by various inhabitants of the Muong village.

The Muong religion is grounded in the concept of death and is expressed in the cult of the ancestors. The Muong believe that the passage from life to death is in stages. Furthermore, the Muong believe the soul is divided into 90 parts and that there are 16 vital or life spirits (7 male and 9 female) which, as death approaches, die gradually. Regardless of how death occurs—by lingering illness or sudden accident—it is considered gradual.²

The 90 parts of the multiple soul of the living Muong are separated into two principal divisions: the *wai*, immortal and superior; and the *bia*, regulator of man's animal functions. Only a Muong well versed in his religion can distinguish between the *wai* and the *bia*; most Muong use the two divisions of the soul interchangeably.

In the transitional period between life and death, the soul is believed to become a *ma*, a ghostly, errant, and dangerous spirit. Part of the *ma* goes to heaven, and another part attaches itself to the corpse, hovering first around the coffin and later around the

grave. This disembodied soul still retains some memories of its earthly existence. Therefore, the ma has the same needs as the living soul and expects to have these needs satisfied. The Muong feel themselves surrounded by the terrifying presence of the deceased and make daily offerings of food to the dead.

The ma, in this miserable, transitional state, attempts to snatch other souls that are about to leave the world of the living. This act is part of the Muong belief of resurrection, which the Muong think is possible only if vital spirits reenter a body a few hours after leaving it. If several days pass before the return of vital spirits to the body, magical intervention is necessary to coax the spirits back into the body. However, if a long period of time passes, even magical intervention cannot get the spirits to reenter the body.

Many souls do not remain ma—perpetually hovering in the transitional area between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This transitional existence is generally limited to the mourning period observed by relatives. Performance of the final funeral rite permits the spirit to enter the world of the dead and the company of his ancestors; it also allows the mourners to return to their normal routine. Subsequent performance of the rites of the cult of the ancestors is confined to special, solemn occasions, probably memorial ceremonies.³

Religious Ceremonies

The principal religious festival of the Muong is the festival of the lunar New Year, called *tet*, *thet*, or *set*, according to the region. Muong New Year rituals are similar to the Vietnamese tet celebrations. The New Year signifies a regeneration of natural energies, the resumption of agricultural work, and the triumph of the forces of budding and sprouting over the inertia and slumber of winter. To celebrate this renewal of natural energies, there is a suspension of human activities. One taboo associated with the New Year period is the prohibition against breaking the soil for planting during the first 3 days of the first lunar month.⁴

The New Year is the longest annual Muong celebration, often involving festivities which last for several days. Although at one time it was earlier, the date now is apparently near the end of January or at the beginning of February. During this period there are rituals honoring the ancestors, family feasts, and much inter-village visiting. Guests in the Muong households are invited to sample alcoholic beverages.⁵

During the last days of the old year, preparations are made for the entrance of the home, the body, and the multiple soul into the New Year. These preparations involve both general housekeeping and ritual ceremonies. The housekeeping activities include cleaning house, polishing the large copper dishes for the offering tables,

washing clothes, and baking cakes. Ritual ceremonies prepare the physical body of the souls for the New Year; thus, as an act of purification of the body, the Muong takes a bath on the last evening of the year. On the last day of the year the Muong place offerings on or before their ancestral altars. The well-to-do Muong summon religious practitioners to bless them and to request heaven to give strength and continued good health to the household.

In addition to the New Year's ceremonies, the Muong also have religious ceremonies for the spring season and for the phases of the agricultural cycle. Some ceremonies involve all the villagers under the leadership of the *tho lang*; others are performed as domestic or family rites.*

Religious Practitioners

Diviners, healers, and male and female magicians are an integral part of the Muong society. They not only perform the same traditional rituals as do the rest of the population, but they officiate at public rituals upon request and perform the special rituals of their office.

Sorceresses or *moi** ordinarily remain single; however, those who marry transmit their special skills to the eldest daughter, although hereditary instruction is not a necessary precondition to practice sorcery. The magic practiced by women is considered less powerful than that practiced by men. Although women are usually considered more inherently susceptible to direct mystical revelation than are men, they rarely aspire to the closed society of sorcerers who preserve the tradition of magic lore. Heaven-sent inspiration may make a sorceress ill; inspiration may also occur during an actual illness; a sorceress may sometimes be seized by a spirit causing trances, emotional crises, and physical upset. While this suggests pathological conditions, symptoms are seldom prolonged or acute.

The *moi* are always under the command of one or more male spirits. Moreover, the *moi* wear a man's turban or a man's vest beneath their own clothing; when in direct communication with the spirit, they tie their belts as the men do.

A select number of *moi*, however, are believed to be directly seized by the spirits and do not employ the elaborate preparations of a sorceress who consciously wishes to communicate with the spirits. The *moi* who speaks in a trance is often later quite unaware of what she has said.

Instruction for sorcery requires training of from 3 to 10 years. The student learns by performing ceremonies corresponding to

* This term is a specific Muong expression and should not be confused with the general term "mou" meaning savage.

his or her level of instruction, but during this period, he or she is not permitted to use ceremonial attire.

The student begins with the study of the world's origin—the birth of heaven and earth—then the origin of specific things, such as King Nhon, the creator of plants, and the bird, Ol, who gave birth to the human race, and green bamboo. The next step is to learn the first prayers. When the training period has been completed, the sorcerers can perform all ceremonies, those without as well as those with magical elements.

Although initially the sorcerers do not specialize in particular rituals, in some regions, such as the Muong Vang region, they specialize as soon as their instruction is completed. In some Thanh Hoa villages, if sorcerers had not completed their instruction they could not perform funeral rites, for these rites are taught during the final period of the instruction.

Sorcerers are given names according to the types of rituals they perform.

Professional sorcerers—both men and women—consecrate a personal altar to one or more patron spirits. Some worship San Su, the patron spirit of all sorcerers, while others worship their own personal patron spirits. Most sorcerers worship both spirits at the same altar. The women seem to acknowledge more personal spirits than do the men.

Rates for healing services depend on the patient's ability to pay and the length of his illness. However, the disciples of a master sorcerer must pay him in specified amounts or rice, alcohol, chicken, pork, cloth, or some specifically designated object.⁷

Missionary Contact

The Roman Catholic missions established near Muong population centers always contained a core of Vietnamese Christians which the Muong considered a separate colony. Only villages in which there were enough Catholic converts to throw off the religious hold of the village tho lang could be considered Catholic villages. In theory, tho lang's conversion to Catholicism would automatically cause the villagers' conversion; however, such a conversion occurred only once—at the end of the 19th century. Conversion of the villagers would probably not result in the conversion of a tho lang, for once he lost his priestly prestige, he would lose all his privileges. Moreover, even if he did not lose all of his prerogatives, his heirs would certainly lose theirs.⁸

SECTION VII

ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

Data about the economy of the Muong in the Republic of Vietnam were not available at this writing. The bulk of the information in this section was drawn from French studies of Muong settlements in the area of present-day North Vietnam; therefore, the data are indicative only of the general background and customs of the relocated Muong.

Type of Economy

Agriculture is the basis of the Muong economy. Secondary economic activities are fishing, hunting, trading, weaving, and carpentry. The Muong have reached a higher level of development than neighboring tribal groups, as manifested by the variety of crops they cultivate, the more permanent nature of their landholdings, and the sophistication of their techniques in agriculture and local industry.

Rice is the staple crop of the Muong who, unlike many other highland groups, engage in both wet-rice agriculture on terraced paddies and slash-and-burn cultivation of dry rice in upland areas. A wide assortment of other food crops are cultivated: corn, sesame, eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes, papaya, grapefruit, beans, beets, betel, mustard plants, and onions. Other agricultural activities include the cultivation of cotton, indigo, castor bean plants, and benzoin trees (balsamic resin trees), and the collection of sticklac (a resinous substance produced by insects) from tree limbs. Domestic animals raised for food are cattle, ducks, chickens, and pigs. Buffalo and cattle are common draft animals.¹

The Muong engage in various crafts. The women weave cloth for their own garments; material used in men's clothing is usually purchased. Men fabricate their own crossbows and traps for hunting and fishing. Specialized industry exists to the extent that certain skilled artisans will make farm implements, coffins, and cooking equipment for the entire village. It has been reported that some villages had specialists capable of producing an occasional firearm.²

Agriculture

The Muong cultivate nonglutinous and some glutinous wet rice

in marshy areas around streams and in terraced paddies. Their irrigation system consists of small channels dug along the edge of the terraces; a system of bamboo tubes links the channels, enabling the farmers to control the downward flow of water. In some areas, the terraced ricefields produce two crops: a summer crop in the fifth lunar month and a winter crop in the tenth lunar month.¹

The Muong cultivate dry rice in the uplands. New fields are opened early in the dry season or late in the rainy season. After selecting a wooded area, the Muong cut and burn the trees and brush. Once the rains have dissolved the ash and loosened the soil, planting begins. A dry-rice plot is cultivated for 2 to 3 years and, whenever possible, is transformed into a terraced, irrigated field.²

The Muong use several kinds of natural fertilizer. Special crops, such as manioc, are fertilized with a mixture of hearth ash and buffalo manure. Ashes are spread thinly over paddy fields, and straw is used as a compost around certain plants.³

Preparation of fields for cultivation—cutting and clearing the dry fields and plowing the wet-rice areas—is predominantly a male occupation; however, the very young and the old women help during planting, and all members of the family assist in the harvest.⁴

In addition to their daily household and child-raising tasks, Muong women husk rice, water the gardens (with water fetched from the river in 2-meter long bamboo tubes), sow the grain, hoe, cut, and harvest the rice crop. They also wind silk, weave cotton, and gather wild roots, leaves, and shoots from the forest.⁵

Many Muong agricultural techniques, the most advanced among the Montagnards, have been borrowed from the Vietnamese and, to a lesser extent, from the Laotians.⁶ Iron-bladed bamboo and wooden plows, pulled by either cattle or buffalo, are employed in paddy and dry-rice agriculture, and wooden harrows prepare the soil. For harvesting, there are machetes, several types of sickles, and various cutting knives.⁷

In certain northern villages the Muong were once considered great hunters, but Muong hunting skill apparently has declined, and the traditional bonds between the hunt and religious life have been loosened—sometimes completely broken. As the need for game as a food staple decreased, fewer Muong men hunted. Gradually, hunting became an excuse for the gathering of the men to march for long hours and to eat and drink more than usual upon their return to the village. In villages where the *tho lang* was fond of hunting, he would frequently arrange a hunt to celebrate a wedding or the completion of a new house. At one time, some ceremonies required the sacrifices of a deer or boar, so hunting

parties would be organized for the hunt; later, however, the Muong substituted domestic pigs for the original sacrifice.¹⁰

Most male villagers participated in the leisure-time group hunts. Gongs sounded to call men and dogs; the hunting party then moved into the forest, beating the brush before them and striking gongs to flush out the game, stalked by the dogs. The hunters bagged their quarry with crossbows (sometimes equipped with poisoned arrows) and ancient firearms inherited from earlier generations. Game is also taken with traps of bamboo, rattan, and other flexible woods.¹¹

By the late 1940's fishing had supplanted hunting as a source of food. Although fishing is more routine and less exciting than hunting, the Muong are still skillful fishermen and netmakers. Their fishing skill includes catching fish with wicker traps and poison. The requirement for plates of fish for certain ritual offerings has contributed to the continuing emphasis on fishing.¹²

Weaving and Dyeing

In contrast to many other Montagnard tribes, the Muong have developed fairly sophisticated techniques of textile production, although this activity has always been confined to the home. The Muong grow cotton and raise silkworms, using cotton and silk for their clothing. More recently, the women weave the material for their own clothing but purchase men's clothing from the Vietnamese, who also supply Muong villages with cocoons, raw silk, and thread.

The dyeing of woven cloth was one of the original feminine skills practiced by Muong women prior to end of the Indochina War. Despite the introduction of aniline dyes, the Muong women continued to use their traditional vegetable dyes to produce indigo, brown, and black on both their home-woven cloth and the white or raw cloth purchased from the Vietnamese.¹³ Information is not available to show whether this tradition still exists among the resettled Muong in the Republic of Vietnam.

Property System

The traditional land tenure system, the basis for the feudalistic society that evolved among the Muong, was founded on the right of the first cultivator. The individual who initially cleared and cultivated a plot of land also gained title to the adjacent woods, streams, and surrounding area (not always clearly defined). As this man's family increased, members gained titles to an ever-expanding area, producing a group of noble families who held most of the land in a local area. Whoever wanted to settle the area was required to obtain the permission of the first cultivator or his descendants. If allowed to settle, newcomers were obliged to honor the first culti-

vator during religious ceremonies. Inheritance of a peasant was never shared except when it was considered large enough to be divided among all of his sons. Among the land-rich gentry, however, the eldest son of the first wife inherited the parental house, most of the other property, and the responsibilities and authority of the father. If the father was the lord of a fief or a tho lang, the son also inherited this title.¹⁴

Several centuries of Vietnamese influence have gradually changed the Muong system of land tenure; by the late 1940's the system was reportedly almost like that of the Vietnamese, including both peasant proprietorship and communal ownership.¹⁵ The extent to which land ownership among the Muong has been affected by the policies of the present North Vietnamese government is not known. Information concerning arrangements for tribal ownership of land in the Republic of Vietnam was likewise unavailable at this writing.

SECTION VIII

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

General Political Organization

Little information is available concerning the present political organization of either the bulk of the Muong who live in North Vietnam, or of the refugees who have been settled near Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot in the Republic of Vietnam.

Traditional Muong political organization closely resembled the European feudal system of the Middle Ages. Two distinct classes existed in Muong society: a large non-land owning peasantry and a small entrenched nobility who exercised political and economic control over the peasantry. Despite a façade of centralized authority and tribal unity, Muong villages were, for most practical purposes, independent, self-contained, self-sufficient political units subjected to occasional interference from outside authority.¹

When the Chinese withdrew from Indochina in the 10th century, the Muong came under Annamese (ethnic Vietnamese) control. The Annamese appointed Muong administrators, who in turn obtained control of large principalities. These Muong and their retainers, supported by the Annamese, formed the original aristocracy of provincial and village chieftains; their descendants inherited the positions of wealth and power.²

Various external influences have slowly eroded the powers and privileges of the ruling aristocracy. Although originally permitted to maintain their own laws and frequently to act without the restraint of Annamese authority, many Muong gradually accepted Annamese customs and laws. Even more changes in the traditional Muong political organization have resulted from the French, and, more recently, from the political regimes of North Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam. Moreover, Christian Muong—primarily Catholics—have also modified the political structure.³

It can be assumed that the more recent changes are substantial, especially when it is remembered that the Muong in the Republic of Vietnam are resettled refugees from the north, while those still residing in their original lands are subject to the controls of a Communist regime. However, even a people like the Muong, with a facility for acculturation, will attempt to maintain many of the traditional customs and practices of its original social and political

order. In all probability, then, both in North Vietnam and in the Republic of Vietnam, the two separate classes of Muong do still exist to some degree, and it is probable that the nobility—or former nobility—still exercise some political authority within the villages.

In the traditional system, the quan lang was a descendant of the Annamese appointees who exercised ownership and administrative control. The quan lang owed fealty to a number of Annamese mandarins, who, in turn, were pledged to the Annamese emperor in Hanoi. There was no Muong king as such; in fact, there was no overall tribal organization among the Muong. Rather, there were only large sections of Muong territory administered by individual quan lang whose allegiance was not to a senior Muong tribesman, but to the Annamese.

Village headmen were vassals of the quan lang. The tho lang or headman had either the original title to all the land claimed by the village or the title bestowed on him by the quan lang. The tho lang, as the ruler of the village, held all political authority and was charged with the responsibility of adjudicating disputes and judging crimes committed by the tribesmen. The tho lang usually lived apart from the village in a separate house and, in the eyes of the peasants, was the lord of the village itself, the keystone of its governing institutions and the symbol of its origin. In most ways the village was an entirely self-sufficient political unit. Except in highly unusual circumstances, little reference was made either to the quan lang or the Annamese.

The tho lang was assisted in his tasks by the *au po*, also a member of the aristocracy, who acted more or less as the executive officer of the village. In most instances the position of *au po* was a hereditary one, although on occasion a new *au po* would be named to the position by the village chief or other notables. It should be noted that there is usually no tho lang in villages which have a majority of Catholic residents, nor in the relatively few villages organized along the lines of the Vietnamese villages. Additionally, villages in which a proper male heir is unavailable have no tho lang.

In areas that have a village political structure instituted by the ethnic Vietnamese in North Vietnam, there are usually the following officials: a *ly truong* (administrative chief), a *pho ly* (deputy administrative chief), a *kai lang*, *ka sa*, or *ko da* (mayor), and the local *au kwyen*, *kai com*, or *thu ho* (hamlet chiefs). The *ly truong* is responsible for supervising the local police, for collecting taxes, and for executing orders from higher authorities. In villages where the tho lang has retained his role as leader, he has considerable control over the *ly truong*. The tho lang may name candidates for the *ly truong* (often from among his kin), and from them the villagers select the *ly truong*. Both the *ly truong* and the *pho*

ly are elected for life. Whereas the *ly truong* receives a salary that varies from village to village, the *pho ly* and other minor officials are granted the use of a certain amount of paddy land as compensation for their services.⁴

Definite information dealing specifically with relations between the Muong and their respective central governments was not available at this writing. The regime in North Vietnam claims it allows the various tribes a degree of autonomy under the direction of district zone administrators. In the Republic of Vietnam it is probable that the Muong, particularly because they are resettled refugees, are administered closely by the Central Government.

Legal System

Originally the Muong had their own legal system, which varied in detail from region to region and village to village. Basic to much of the legal system were the traditional customs, mores and religious beliefs. However, many of the Muong adhere to the Annamese legal system, while other Muong have changed many of their traditional laws because of their conversion to Christianity. At present, it is probable that the Muong are subject to and have accepted the laws of both North Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam.⁵

Many traditional Muong laws were rooted in the operation of their feudal system: each of the two classes had, by law, certain privileges, prerogatives, and responsibilities. For example, the aristocracy were obligated to marry only within their own social rank or lose their position.

The peasantry, on the other hand, suffered all the disadvantages of a feudal system; the peasant could not own land, was obligated to labor in the fields of the nobility, and had to give the *tho lang* a certain amount of produce at the New Year, during certain local feasts, and upon any special event that occurred in the *tho lang*'s family, such as a birth, a wedding, or a death. It should be noted, however, that the *tho lang* in return had certain obligations toward the peasantry.⁶ The *tho lang* administered all judgments and assigned all punishments. Small infractions of village rules or slight misdemeanors were punished by a few strokes of a rattan whip, while more serious offenses were punished by fines. On the occasion of an exceptionally serious or complex crime or judgment, the *quan lang* might assume jurisdiction.⁷

Subversive Influences

There is no information available concerning subversion among the Muong residing in the Republic of Vietnam and practically none on the main group in the north.

In 1956, the North Vietnamese took cognizance of the tribes-

men's objections to the Government's centralizing policies by giving the northeastern part of the country—where the Tho subgroup of the Muong live—internal autonomy very much like that granted them by the French.⁸ It thus appears likely that any subversive tendencies among the North Vietnamese Muong will be suppressed either by similar concessions or by coercive measures if necessary.

Since the Muong appear to have migrated south to escape Communist rule, the Viet Cong would probably have great difficulty subverting the groups that have been settled near Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku.

SECTION IX

COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

The principal means of disseminating information among the Muong is by word of mouth. No information was available at this writing concerning Muong familiarity with or access to radios. Any radios in operation in the Muong settlements in the Republic of Vietnam were probably brought in by military personnel.

Where feasible, short movies covering simple subjects and using either the Muong or the Vietnamese languages might be effective in communicating with the tribesmen.

Written communication might have some effect on the Muong. Although most Muong are illiterate, the tribe does have a written language and some of the tribesmen can read Vietnamese and French. The literate tribesmen could be expected to communicate information in written materials to the rest of the tribespeople. Data about the use of printed materials are not available at this time.

Information themes to be used among the Muong should be oriented around the principle of improving conditions in the refugee settlements. Protection against Viet Cong harassment and the control of disease are also possible themes for information programs.

SECTION X

CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

Most Muong tribesmen would probably respond favorably to ideas for change presented in terms of local community betterment. The reasons for innovations should be thoroughly explained: the Muong adopt new ideas more readily than many other tribal groups, but they do resent interference in their normal routine if they do not understand the reason for it.¹

Current civic action programs of the Vietnamese Government have included the control of malaria, medical aid programs, agricultural assistance, and the provision of educational facilities in the Muong refugee settlements.

The following civic action guidelines may be useful in the planning and implementation of projects or programs.

1. Projects originating in the settlements are more desirable than suggestions imposed by a remote Central Government or by foreigners.
2. Projects should be designed to be challenging but should not be on such a scale as to intimidate the tribesmen by size or strangeness.
3. Projects should have fairly short completion dates or should have phases that provide frequent opportunities to evaluate effectiveness.
4. Results should, as far as possible, be observable, measurable, or tangible.
5. Projects should, ideally, lend themselves to emulation by other groups.

Civic Action Projects

The civic action possibilities for personnel working with the Muong encompass all aspects of daily life. Examples of possible projects are listed below. They should be considered representative but not all inclusive and not in the order of priority.

1. Agriculture and animal husbandry
 - a. Improvement of livestock quality through introduction of better breeds.
 - b. Instruction in elementary veterinary techniques to improve health of animals.

- c. Introduction of improved seeds and new vegetables.
 - d. Introduction of techniques to improve quality and yields of farm lands.
 - e. Insect and rodent control.
 - f. Construction of simple irrigation and drainage systems.
2. Transportation and communication
- a. Roadbuilding and clearing of trails.
 - b. Installation, operation, and maintenance of electric power generators and village electric light systems.
 - c. Construction of motion picture facilities.
 - d. Construction of radio broadcasting and receiving stations and public-speaker systems.
3. Health and sanitation
- a. Improve village sanitation.
 - b. Provide safe water-supply systems.
 - c. Eradicate disease-carrying insects.
 - d. Organize dispensary facilities for outpatient treatment.
 - e. Teach sanitation, personal hygiene, and first aid.
4. Education
- a. Provide basic literacy training.
 - b. Provide basic citizenship education.
 - c. Present information about the outside world of interest to the tribesmen.

SECTION XI

PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

Unless given Government training and support, the Muong cannot effectively resist the Viet Cong.

Villagers who are given adequate training and support would presumably defend themselves.

Weapons Utilized by the Tribe

In the past, the Muong relied upon crossbows, spears, and knives. Some Muong received military training from the French and are familiar with modern weapons; before the Indochina War, the Muong reportedly produced some of their own firearms.¹

Ability to Absorb Military Instruction

The Muong can absorb basic military training and concepts. They learn techniques and procedures readily from actual demonstration, using the weapon itself as a teaching aid. They do not learn as well from blackboard demonstrations, an approach which is too abstract for them.

Muong who are veterans of service with the French are invaluable in training the younger tribesmen.

SECTION XII

SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE MUONG

Every action of the Muong tribesman has specific significance in terms of his culture. One must be careful to realize that the Muong may not react as outsiders do.

A few suggestions for personnel working with the Muong are listed below:

Official Activities

1. The initial visit to a Muong village should be formal. A visitor should speak first to the village headman, who will then introduce him to other principal village figures.
2. Sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness are essential in dealing with the Muong. Promises and predictions should not be made unless the result is assured. The tribespeople usually expect a new group of personnel to fulfill the promises of the previous group.
3. Outsiders cannot gain the confidence of Muong tribesmen quickly. Developing a sense of trust is a slow process requiring great understanding, tact, patience, and personal integrity.
4. An attitude of good-natured willingness and limitless patience must be maintained, even when confronted with resentment or apathy.
5. Whenever possible, avoid projects or operations which give the tribesmen the impression they are being forced to change their ways.

Social Relationships

1. The Muong should be treated with respect and courtesy at all times.
2. Outsiders should request permission to attend a Muong ceremony, festival, or meeting from the persons responsible for the ceremony.
3. An outsider should never enter a Muong house unless accompanied by a member of that house; this is a matter of good taste and cautious behavior. If anything is later missing

from the house, unpleasant and unnecessary complications may arise.

4. Outsiders should not get involved with Muong women.

Living Standards and Routines

1. Outsiders should treat all Muong property and village animals with respect. Any damage to property or fields should be promptly repaired and/or paid for. An outsider should avoid borrowing from the tribesmen. Animals should not be treated brutally or taken without the owner's permission.
2. Learn simple phrases in the Muong language. A desire to learn to speak their language creates a favorable impression on the tribespeople.

Health and Welfare

1. The Muong are aware of the benefits of medical care and will request medical assistance. Outside groups in Muong settlements should try to provide medical assistance whenever possible.
2. Medical teams should be prepared to handle, and should have adequate supplies for, extensive treatment of malaria, dysentery, yaws, trachoma, venereal diseases, intestinal parasites, and various skin diseases.

FOOTNOTES

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Frank M. LeBar, *et al.*, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964), p. 171.
2. Louis Malleret, "Le Groupe muong," *Les Groupes ethniques de l'Indochine française* (Saigon: La Société des Études Indochinoises, 1937), pp. 14-15.
3. U.S. Information Service, *Montagnards of the South Vietnam Highlands* (Saigon: U.S.I.S., July 1962), pp. 19-20.
4. E. H. Adkins, *A Study of Montagnard Names in Vietnam* (East Lansing, Mich.: Vietnam Advisory Group, Michigan State University, February 1962), p. 6.
5. Jeanne Cuisinier, *Les Muong: Géographie humaine et sociologie* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, 1948), pp. 25-28.
6. H. C. Darby (ed.), *Indo-China* (Cambridge, England: Geographical Handbook Series, 1943), pp. 47, 56, 63.

II. TRIBAL BACKGROUND

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2. Joseph Greenberg, "Historical Linguistics and Unwritten Languages," *Anthropology Today*, edited by A. L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 281.
3. Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Charles Robequain, *Le Thanh Hoa: Étude géographique d'une province annamite* (Paris: G. Van Oest, 1929), pp. 110-13.
6. U.S.I.S., *op. cit.*, p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*
8. A. Cheon, "Notes sur les dialectes nguon, sao et mu'o'ng," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, VII (1907), p. 87.
9. L. Cadiere, "Les Hautes vallées du Song-Gianh," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, V (1905), p. 356.
10. U.S.I.S., *op. cit.*, p. 17; A. Cheon, "Note sur les Muong de la province de Son-Tay," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, V (1905), pp. 340-41.
11. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-48; Robequain, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-131.
12. E. Lunet de la Jonquière, *Ethnographie du Tonkin septentrional* (Paris: Leroux, 1906), p. 347.
13. Henri Deydier, "A Propos d'un conte Mu'o'ng," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises*, XXIV (1949), pp. 47-49.
14. Le Thanh Khoi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et civilisation* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1955), pp. 49, 81-82, 116.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88; Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), p. 76.
16. Le Thanh Khoi, *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 81-82, 116.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 360, 382-83.
18. Buttinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-244, 325-85.
19. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 71-75.
20. A. Bonhomme, "Au Pays muong," *Revue Indochinoise*, XXVI (July-August 1916), pp. 33-34; Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 14; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-90.
21. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*
22. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 344.
23. Nguyen Van Huyen, *Introduction a l'etude de l'habitation sur pilotis dans l'Asie du sud-est* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geunthner, 1934), p. 179.
24. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-90; Robequain, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-12.
25. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-90.
26. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
28. E. Castagnol, "Les Muong," *Indochina*, V (April 1964), pp. 29-30.

III. INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 343.
2. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
3. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
6. Darby, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-14.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-16.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-24.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-13.
10. Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 347.
11. Cheon, "Note sur les Muong," *op. cit.*, p. 343.
12. *Ibid.*; Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
13. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 343.
18. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

IV. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

1. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-56.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
8. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Huyen, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
9. LeBar, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
10. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-83.
11. Castagnol, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–29; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 129–39, 147, 154–80, 214.
13. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 215, 220–22.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–39.
15. Castagnol, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
16. *Ibid.*; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 352.
17. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
18. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–56.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 260–76.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 260–67; Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 348–49.
22. Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 348–49; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 260–76.
23. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–76.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 256–59; Cheon, “Note sur les Muong,” *op. cit.*, p. 345.
25. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–77.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 256–57.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 277–80.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 417; Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 347–48.
30. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 417.
31. Cheon, “Note sur les Muong,” *op. cit.*, p. 345; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
32. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 419, 443–85.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 417–18.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
35. Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
36. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 443–85; Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 350–52.
37. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.
38. Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 350–52; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 443–85.
39. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 443–85; Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44; Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 350–52.
40. Castagnol, *op. cit.*, pp. 26–29.
41. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 256–57.
42. Castagnol, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30.

V. CUSTOMS

1. Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 345; Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Cheon, “Note sur les Muong,” *op. cit.*, p. 341.
4. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 180–81; Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 343.
5. Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 343–44.
6. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

VI. RELIGION

1. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–62, 380–414.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 340–45, 499–501.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–62, 340–43, 380–414.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 498–522.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 415–16.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 486–98.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 284–86.

VII ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

1. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–99, 111–13, 145–46.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 147, 214, 215, 220-22.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-13.
4. Robiquain, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
5. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-18.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-39.
7. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
8. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-18.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48, 154-80.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 280-83, 287-93.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 287-93.

VIII. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

1. Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
2. Lunet, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-58.
3. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
4. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-37; Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 354; Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30, 384, 295-310; Malleret, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
5. Lunet, *op. cit.*, p. 354.
6. Cheon, "Note sur les Muong," *op. cit.*, p. 342.
7. Bonhomme, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
8. Bernard B. Fall, "Commentary on 'The Tribesmen,'" *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, edited by Richard W. Lindholm (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1959), p. 138.

IX. COMMUNICATIONS TECHNIQUES

No footnotes.

X. CIVIC ACTION CONSIDERATIONS

1. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 343.

XI. PARAMILITARY CAPABILITIES

1. Cuisinier, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-48.

XII. SUGGESTIONS FOR PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THE MUONG

No footnotes.

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