

## **Dynamics of Yao Genealogy (A Case Study of a Yen Stream Village)**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, by means of a study of a Yao community in Yen Village, Tan Minh Commune, Da Bac District, Hoa Binh Province, I try to add to our understanding of the relationship of the nature of the Yao community in the mountain-forest environment. A social structure with a solid line of descent gives the Yao people a nature which is open and receptive but which does not lose its specific ethnic character. This allows the Yao a great deal of differentiation within the ethnic group and helps them to find a sustainable basis for the development of their line of descent. In the current of eradicating hunger and poverty, this is of considerable advantage, though it also creates for more than a few difficulties.

Key words: Yao, Hoa Binh province, social structure, adopted child, matrilocal marriage, inheritance right, migration en masse

### **Introduction**

Yen Stream Village belongs to Tan Minh Commune, Da Bac District, Hoa Binh Province. This article is mainly written depending on my fieldwork research conducted there in 1991. Looking at the micro level to understand the macro level, looking closely to see far, I have also used some fieldwork data on the Yao collected from 1961 to 1995, in order to clarify some legal points. Yen Village is made up entirely of Yao Tien people, one of sub-ethnic groups of the Yao.

### **Yao people in Hoa Binh Province**

Hoa Binh Province was established on 22 June 1886 on the division of Hung Hoa Province.<sup>(1)</sup> After numerous divisions of this sort Hoa Binh had, on 31 December 1990, a land area of 4,613.1 km<sup>2</sup>, a population of 673,500, and was made up of nine districts, one city, nine towns and 201 communes and boroughs.<sup>(2)</sup> There are seven ethnic groups in Hoa Binh Province. According to provincial statistics, of a total population of 348,859 on 1

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Table 1. The distribution of Yao people in four main districts of Hoa Binh Province

	District	Population	Yao Population	Proportion of Yao people compared with total district population (%)	Remarks
1	Luong Son	48,666	331	0.68	27 communes
2	Kim Boi	46,895	663	1.41	35 communes
3	Ky Son	41,831	595	1.42	27 communes
4	Da Bac	26,501	2,958	11.16	23 communes

October 1968 the Muong comprised 66.16%, and the Yao 1.74%. The Yao are to be found in four main districts, as the following figures from the provincial statistical department (1.10.1970) indicate (See Table 1). The Yao people are mainly concentrated in Da Bac District.

Hoa Binh Province is well known for being home to the Hoabinhian culture,<sup>(3)</sup> an archaeological culture which gave rise to a technological revolution during the neolithic period throughout ancient Southeast Asia. In the process of Vietnam's modernisation, the province is known for the construction of the Hoa Binh hydroelectric dam on the Da River. I have already discussed the influence of the dam project elsewhere.<sup>(4)</sup>

In the campaign to come down from the mountains in order to make cultivation and residence sedentary, the Yao is one of the ethnic groups which have responded the most quickly and positively to sedentary settlement. With the migration process out of the Da River lake-bed area, carried out over a number of years, Hoa Binh's provincial authorities have become aware of a very important aspect of the Yao people's character. They cannot live separated from a mountain-forest environment. The Yao need the forest not only for economic reasons but also for its importance to their psycho-physiology. Recognising this, since 1993 according to Programme 327, Hoa Binh Province has set up an in-province new economic zone in the Thung Rech area of Du Sang Commune, in Kim Boi District. Thung Rech, which originally had only two Yao villages, now houses more than a hundred Yao families who have moved up from Da Bac.

### Yao people in Da Bac District

Da Bac District now has twenty communes and a district town. Da Bac is one of the districts which suffered most from the need for migration out of the Da River lake-bed area. Sixteen of the communes in the districts were affected by the flooding, of which seven were completely submerged. The Yao in Hoa Binh and Da Bac consist of two sub-ethnic groups: the Yao Tien (Yao who wear money) and Yao Tam Dao (Yao who wear tight trousers).

Table 2. Distribution of Yao people in the communes of Da Bac, according to the fieldwork conducted in July 1995

	commune, town	Yao Tien	Yao Tam Dao	Remarks
1	Dong Nghe	X		2 villages
2	Suoi Nanh	X		1 village
3	Giap Dat	X		1 village
4	Tan Pheo	X		2 villages
5	Doan Ket	X		1 village
6	Trung Thanh	X		1 village, later moved to Yen Hoa
7	Yen Hoa	X		1 village
8	Tan Dan	X		1 village, moved to elsewhere
9	Vay Nua	X		4 villages
10	Hien Luong	X		1 village
11	Tan Minh	X		1 village
12	Tu Ly	X	X	2 Yao Tien villages and 1 Yao Tam Dao village
13	Toan Son	X	X	<i>ditto</i>
14	Da Bac District Town	X	X	<i>ditto</i>
15	Cao Son		X	3 villages

In 1995 more than 5,000 Yao people live in Da Bac, a population nearly twice that recorded by the 1970 statistics. They are concentrated in villages in fifteen out of the twenty-one communes and towns of the district (See Table 2).

We can see from Table 2 that, except for those living in the district town, the Yao live together in their own villages, according to sub-ethnic group. This may be perceived even more clearly in the process of migration from the Da River lake-bed area. Arranging the merging of different Yao sub-ethnic groups in a small residential area, such as a village, does not usually give satisfactory results. This is not, however, to say that they are self-contained. We shall explore the basis of their integration in a later section.

It is common for Yao people in Da Bac to regard the tending of household gardens and forest gardens as extremely important. Wooded areas entrusted to their care or protection are all carefully preserved, especially those surrounding the village. On the other hand, they are quite ready to emigrate to elsewhere and make swiddens, or remove timber from areas of forest which are not strictly guarded. These areas of forest may belong to other communities in the district, or they may cross into Thanh Son district in Vinh Phu Province. This is not only linked to their particular relationship with the mountain-forest environment as mentioned above, but also bears upon their conception of woodland ownership rights. Every house has its own rice storehouse situated in the garden. Although they invariably have good harvests, Yao people never take their rice to market to sell. This shows that their main worry remains hunger.

## Yao people in Tan Minh Commune

Tan Minh was one of the communes chosen to receive families moved up from the Da River lake bed area. In the past it was made up of six villages situated along the road in a narrow valley. This road was upgraded more than ten years ago and cars can now go to all the villages, even the furthest. Yen Stream Village is almost at the end of the commune; its inhabitants are entirely Yaos. The last village is Enh Village, inhabited by Tay Da Bac people. In 1957-58, village-size cooperatives were set up. When the movement to set up commune-size cooperatives got underway, the Yen Stream Cooperative refused to work together with Tay Da Bac people, and thus retained its village-size co-op. The Enh Village Co-op, because it was separated from Yen Stream Village, also retained its original size. The commune had three agricultural cooperatives at that time. Following Contract 10, in 1988, the larger co-op embracing four villages was split up into seven small ones, to form a commune with nine villages and nine agricultural cooperatives.

Yen Village has only 2.8 hectares of wetrice fields, to support thirty-one families (180 persons). It is the village with the smallest area of wetrice fields in Tan Minh commune, around 155 m<sup>2</sup> per head, which is not even as much as the average field area in Thai Binh province, a place well known for having limited land and a high population. This shows that the main source of livelihood for Yao people is not the cultivation of wetrice fields.

The Yao of Yen Village fixed their residence at the time of the collectivisation movement, when they got wetrice fields. Before that they lived in the area of the commune and Thanh Son, Vinh Phu, shifting their residence and cultivation. Swidden fields of the Tay Da Bac people are often named after plants and trees, like nghe man (turmeric), mit man (jackfruit), che man (tea) etc., which indicates that this was originally land where the Yao had swidden fields. In Yen Village, there are still some tea trees of which the trunk is so thick that a man cannot close his arms around it. The house there are lined along the Yen Stream, and face onto it. Most of them have kept an old look, but were built by craftsmen from Thach That in Ha Tay. The Yao regard keeping springs clean as extremely important, and the community severely punishes people who pollute the water. But in the village there are also three wells, dug since 1988, from which they can draw water for everyday use. They still use water power to pound the rice, but also like to take their unhusked rice out to a private shop near the commune people's committee building for husking and polishing. Yen Stream Village is unique in the commune as having water-powered electricity. The small hydroelectric machine provides enough power to run lights, televisions and radios. The village has a school with five grades, but Yao characters are only taught at home to adults, when they are old enough to make offerings. The ancestors' altar is placed only at the clan head's house.

These general features also allow us to notice that, in terms of incorporating technology, they have a taste for the new. This makes them very hospitable, and welcoming to

friends. Openness to attract the genius of other ethnic groups is a good characteristic, so why, despite this, do the Yao give the impression of being self-contained?

### The structure of the Yao line of descent in Yen Village

The Yao follow the patrilineal system. So according to Table 3, the families of Yen Village include surnames Ban, Trieu, Dang, Ly and Le. On the female side, the Dang does not appear. In actual fact, there are marriages between three lines of descent. Ban, Trieu and Dang make up 93.54% of the families of Yen village.

The Yao use Chinese characters, which can be read in Han Viet, Yao or Cantonese pronunciation. This means that each Yao Chinese character is one written symbol, but when transcribed into Vietnamese (quoc ngu) they become different surnames. "Ban" is in Han Viet pronunciation, while "Phan" is in Yao pronunciation. In the same way, "Dang" may be "Tau", "Tan" and so forth. Yao people obey the principle surname exogamy. But a marriage between young couple who have the same surname may occur because the younger generation do not know Yao Chinese characters and they pronounce each surname in different ways. We should explore further to understand clearly the cause of this problem.

According to Table 3, there are seven families in Yen Village whose husband and wives have the same surname Ban. Does this mean that they are ignoring the principle? Research showed that seven men, with surname Ban, have different origins: three are of Viet origin, three are of Muong origin and one is of Tay Da Bac origin. In 1945, at the time of the terrible famine, people from Thai Binh drifted up to Thanh Son, Vinh Phu Province, and Da Bac, Hoa Binh Province. Two Thai Binh children were adopted by the Yao from Thanh Son. Two other Thai Binh children were adopted by the Yao from Yen Village, one belonged to Dang, the other Ban. Two Thanh Son men came here to marry

Table 3. Yao families in Yen Village (1992)

Man's surname \ Woman's surname	Ban	Trieu	Ly	Le	Surname unknown	Total
Ban	7	2	1	5	2	17
Trieu	1			2	4	7
Dang	2	1			2	5 (1 unmarried)
Ly					1	1
Le					1	1 (1 unmarried)
Total	10	3	1	7	10	31

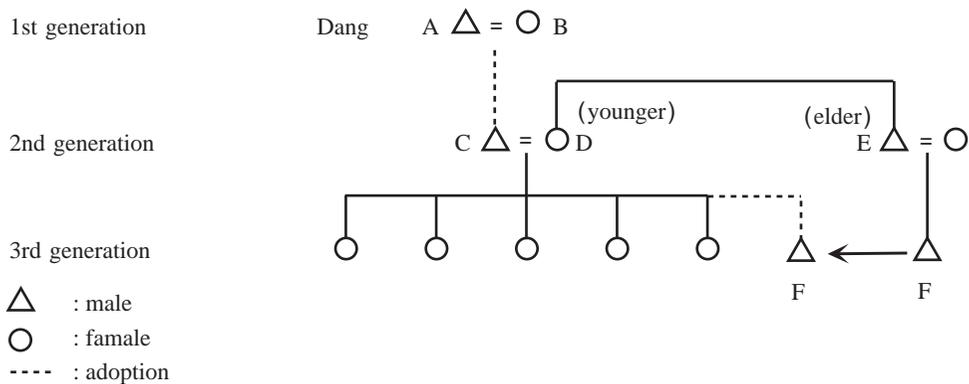


Figure 1. Genealogy of a Dang family, Yen Village

matrilocally and had to change their surnames to their wives'. Of three Muong families with the surname Ban, two are from Thanh Son, and one from Tu Ly; they came as matrilocal husbands and took their wives' surname Ban. The Tay Da Bac person was originally an adopted child of the Ban family. This very procedure is very liberal, but is also closely related to the surname Ban, the original family at Yen Village, which is in fact the surname of seventeen out of the thirty-one families there. If you count two families who recently split off on their own, the Ban make up 60% of the families of this village.

Cases among the Yao of adopting people to keep up descent line not only involve the incorporation of people of different ethnicity, but also quite commonly bring people in from the affines. At Yen Stream Village, there is a case of husbands and wives having the name Dang and Trieu (Figure 1).

At the 1st generation, the Dang family have no son, so they (A and B) adopt a child (C) to continue the line.

At the 2nd generation, the child (C) was a Tay from Enh Village, adopted by the Dang family (Yao), and now a member of the Dang family. He married a Trieu woman (D), and became a father of five daughters. At the 3rd generation, the couple adopted a son (F) of the wife's elder brother to continue the line. He was a Trieu, who now becomes a Dang.

This allows us to affirm that the sustainable nature of the development of the line of descent is adhered to closely by the Yao. It allows them to defend their ethnic particularity. This sustainability is of a social nature. The social nature does not, of course, always combine with physiological reality. To bring the latter into line with the social norm, the Yao use methods like matrilocal marriage and adoption under many different forms to maintain this sustainability. Ancestor worship ceremonies to change the family affiliation are strictly observed.

As far as wives whose origin is not Yao are concerned, although ancestor worship rituals are still properly carried out, the formalities of rituals are simpler and less expensive. However it is not possible to change her family affiliation at any time. Of the twenty-one

wives I came across in the course of my fieldwork, one was Vietnamese, adopted into a Trieu family and still not clear about her ethnicity; seven were from Thanh Son, who came to Yen village as brides, of whom two were of the Ban families; three, none of them were Yao, came as brides from other places. The ancestor worship ceremony is entirely voluntary, but if it is not agreed, the community does not recognise the marriage. That means that the husband and wife do not exist in the eyes of the community.

In Tat Village there is a Muong woman of the Nguyen family who had married a Yao from Yen Village. She did not agree, after the marriage, to become a Yao, so they divorced. In Hao Ly there is a Viet woman, who has three times had to move out of the Da River lake-bed area, in each place she married a Yao man, and from each marriage had a child: two children have the surname Ban and one Do (after the mother). She finally brought all three children to live in Hao Ly.

### **A social structure both close-knit and open-natured**

The close-knit social structure, as observed during fieldwork research with the Yao in Yen Village, is a common phenomenon. This feature ensures that, despite their openness, the Yao have been able to maintain their original ethnic culture. Of the Yao sub-ethnic groups the Yao Dai Ban have liberal social relations, and find it easy to merge with communities of other ethnic groups. Nevertheless they still adhere to the principle of living together in villages by community, and do not join up and interlock in "sawtooth pattern" with other ethnic groups. There are many Yao Dai Ban who leave and go to work as cadres at the district level or above, but when they return to their village they have to abide by the strict rules of the community. Thanh Son Village, Quan Ba Commune, Ha Giang Province, has two hamlets belonging to two sub-ethnic groups of Yao, Dai Ban and Thanh Y, which share a common cooperative. While the commune head is a Yao, if the village cadre is a Yao Thanh Y, then the head of the cooperative must be a Yao Dai Ban, and vice versa. The distinction between sub-ethnic groups of the Yao is thus rigorously enforced. This is rather different from the Hmong. They also live together in villages by community, but within the village still join up with other sub-ethnic groups.

The sustainability of the community by sub-ethnic group is clear in many respects. Migrating out of the Thac Ba lake-bed area in Yen Bai, and the Da River area in Hoa Binh, the Yao usually go as whole groups. The Yao are different from other ethnic groups in migration pattern. If they have to migrate, not only families who are flooded out, but also those not flooded will move; then the whole village will migrate. In the migration to the south, to provinces like Dong Nai, Lam Dong, and Dac Lac, while they go of their own free volition, they go as whole villages, including all social classes: teachers, doctors, religious

leaders, as well as the secretary of the Party cell to lead the people. This phenomenon has led many researchers to conclude that they have a narrow-minded psychology. Such a conclusion is insufficient. In the past, with their migratory lifestyle, if they did not have a close-knit social structure, how could they protect their ethnicity in the face of a difficult and arduous life of migrating? In the process of migration, they have never stopped opening up the community and incorporating members of other ethnic groups.

The practice that a husband lives matrilocally with his wife's parents ("o'rê" in Vietnamese) is not uncommon among many groups with patrilineal-patrilocal systems. But the Yao are different from other ethnic groups in this practice. Their practice is highly suited to Vietnamese civil law concerning inheritance rights following the blood line and marriage. In other ethnic groups who have patrilineal systems, a matrilocal husband has to feed the whole of his family but does not change his surname. His children will take their father's surname and thereby their inheritance rights are established through patrilineal line. In Yao society where they usually marry patrilocally, a matrilocal husband has to change his surname to his wife's father's. Then, in theory and practice, his children will have their mother's surname. As a result the practice of matrilocal residence poses no problems for inheritance rights among the Yao.

Furthermore, if the rule were not so strict, differentiation within the community might take place. While I was working in Nam Ban Commune, Yen Minh District, Ha Giang Province in 1961, a number of Yao Dai Ban told me that their paternal grandfather was a Lo Lo according to their family records. In 1995 while I was working in Meo Vac, some Lo Lo people said that there came people from Nam Ban to research their genealogy and returned little before my visit. Their research was only intended to find out their origins and the two groups did not take any relations further than that.

The Yao are among the poorest people in Vietnam. Despite that, when living alongside other groups with higher standards of living, like the Tay, Nung, Thai, Muong etc., the later groups still hold that the Yao are well off. The important thing here is that while they remain poor, the Yao are very prompt to pick up anything new, and are well able to adapt to new technology. In 1963, at the time I was working in Na Hang, Tuyen Quang, the Yao there had already bought improved oil-fired lamps, which they used for light and heated up to run batteries and listen to the radio. The Tay in that area consider this a sign of wealth. In 1968, I was shown a hydroelectric project in Loc Binh; while the offices of the district party and people's committee and the collective residence of the workers remained without electric light, the Yao village nearby was already lit electrically. People explained this with reference to air defense during the war, but this is unlikely to be the whole story. During the 1970s, the Yao region was the first to have water-powered electricity, common in Lang Son and Cao Bang, which they set up with their own capital.

### Concluding remarks

The Yao are a people at one with a mountain-forest environment. In the process of changing the structure of agricultural production, regional planning should take the above points into account. In other words, differentiation between Yao sub-ethnic groups something that should be strictly respected in group settlement and the creation of villages. Their strong sense of community has given them a close-knit social structure. This is an issue which should be addressed in administrative management. In the current process of eradicating hunger and poverty, this feature of the Yao character gives them many advantages, but also creates considerable difficulties. The spirit of community has already contributed to the success of projects such as the digging of clean water wells for everyday use, the building of new schools, the protection of designated forest. On the other hand, there are difficulties: the need for the whole village to migrate en masse, the refusal to accept members of the same ethnic group into the village, the refusal to accept members of other groups into the commune, the availability of help for poor people in times of difficulties only at commune level and according to the name list (so that people have to go to the community for help which is also distributed evenly [not according to need]), destruction of the forest in more distant areas, etc. The social structure, then, is close-knit, but open in its contribution to maintaining sustainability in the process of development and its relations with the line of descent.

### Notes

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(Accepted July 31, 1996)

