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BIRTH OF THE EARTH AND
WATER’ IN A VIET-MUONG
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
AN ALTERNATIVE VISION OF THE
COMMON PAST**

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The paper deals with Muong epic tales included into the cycle of ‘The Birth of the Earth and Water’. These tales, which represent a type of ritual narrative performed during traditional mourning rites (*Mo*), are analyzed in the context of Vietnamese folk stories from a 15th century collection entitled ‘A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam’. The comparative analysis of two bodies of narratives is used to suggest an alternative vision of the ethnic and cultural history of the Muong and the Vietnamese (*Kinh*).

JEL Classification: Z19.

Keywords: Vietnam, Muong, Viet-Muong, epics, comparative analysis

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Introduction

The Muong are an officially recognized minority people of Vietnam³ and the closest relatives and neighbors of the Vietnamese (Kinh or Viet), the majority ethnic group in the country. According to the modern classification, the Muong and the Vietnamese together constitute the so called Viet-Muong sub-group of Vietic peoples and their initial commonality is ubiquitously underlined in Vietnam. Meanwhile, being a politically dominating group in a multicultural society, the Vietnamese from the Middle Ages have imposed their own myths as being the essential core of national culture and history. These myths, which were written down in the 14th and 15th centuries and included into official historical chronicles, have prevailed in representations of Northern Vietnam's past, providing a very 'Viet-centric' view of it.

In parallel with omnipresent stories describing the origins of the Vietnamese and, respectively, Vietnam's political and cultural early history, the Muong in rural upland areas have maintained their own oral tradition which appears to offer an alternative vision of the common Viet-Muong past. This tradition is implemented in ritual narratives (*Mo*) that accompany funeral rites of the Muong. The most significant set of tales within this type of narrative is the epic cycle of 'The Birth of the Earth and Water' which seems to be underestimated by scholars in Vietnam studies and practically unexplored by folklorists.

At a glance, tales constituting the Muong epic cycle have little in common with Vietnamese myths and legends: they were recorded five centuries apart; there are very few distinctly shared themes, no apparent common heroes. However, in-depth comparative analysis reveals so many parallels and interpretable divergences that medieval Vietnamese mythology clearly appears as a more Sinicized variation of the Muong (or, to be more precise, formerly common Viet-Muong) narratives. With this in mind, in this paper I focus on the themes of the Muong epic 'The Birth of the Earth and Water' that could be comparatively analyzed in the context of Vietnamese canonical myths and legends. During the course of my analysis I will endeavor to interpret some ambiguous or even 'weird' themes in Vietnamese mythology and demonstrate an alternative vision of ethnic and cultural history of both the Vietnamese and the

³According to the 2009 Census, Muong population in Vietnam accounted about 1.3 million people (The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census: Completed results, p.134). The Muong live in settlements scattered in upland areas of several provinces of Northern Vietnam – Hòa Bình, Phú Thọ, Sơn La, Thanh Hóa, as well as in the province of Nghệ An in the Northern part of Central Vietnam.

Muong. To do this, apart from using published collections of Vietnamese and Muong legends and tales, I will draw on data gained through interviews with my Muong respondents.

Approach, Terms and Categories

Folklore studies require a variety of research methods and insights. Meanwhile, a comparative method seems to define one of the major and most fruitful approaches in the field. Pieces of folklore are compared for different purposes: to reveal universal archetypes and common patterns or to identify particular variations. Even defining the group that forms the ‘folk’ in each particular case is a result of comparison. To analyze and compare oral traditions of the Muong and the Vietnamese it is worth not only revealing common themes and their variations but also identifying what groups of people are actually considered, what terms and categories are used to describe them and how it could be connected to the narratives.

All the terms and categories that are used to describe ethnic, cultural and linguistic distinctions between the Vietnamese and the Muong are quite widespread but inherently discrepant. Such a situation appears to have occurred because of the centuries-long practice of using ambiguous principles of categorizing and designating groups of the population in Vietnam.

In 1944 Olav Janse, Swedish archeologist, in his overview of ‘The Peoples of French Indochina’ noted that it was very difficult for him to find a basis for a logical division of the peoples living in the region. He admitted that the most appropriate criterion for such categorizing should be the linguistic one that had been earlier applied by Henri Maspero but for some practical reasons Janse preferred to divide the local population into two main groups: (1) the more developed peoples of the plains, including the Annamites (i.e. Vietnamese)⁴, and (2) the less developed mountain tribes, including the Muong (Janse, 1944, p.11). This example represents a general approach that was used by European and even by local scholars of that time to describe the heterogeneous population of a French colony in Indochina and which has determined modern lists of ethnic groups in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In the case of Vietnam, this approach was similar to the previous perception of population categories peculiar to the Vietnamese Sinicized elite.

⁴ During the colonial period Annam was the name of the French protectorate in the central part of Vietnam, the Vietnamese were subsequently referred to as Annamites.

In the past, when Vietnam's population did not see itself in ethnic categories, *Mường* was a term that was used by Vietnamese speakers in the lowlands to refer to their immediate neighbors living in small villages to the west, upstream, in the hills and foot-mountain areas. Since Viet-Muong speakers lived there intermingled with some Tai-speaking groups this term was historically used to designate linguistically diverse population (ĐDDN, 1988, p.7). *Mường* is a Tai word (ᨠᩣ᩠ᨦ) meaning 'community', 'country' or 'village'. There is also a compound *Mường Mán* (茫蠻) that is found in Vietnamese texts written in vernacular character script (*Nôm*), where *Mán* (蠻) appears to be the same Tai word with the same meaning but in its Han-Viet form. Initially this term was used by Chinese authors as a generic term to designate all 'southern barbarians'. It is quite clear that the compound *Mường Mán* was also used by the Vietnamese elite in a pejorative way.

The emergence of the idea of 'the Muong people', according to Taylor, occurred in the 1920s when the term *Mường* became, due to French colonial reasoning, a category to designate upland people linguistically related to the Vietnamese living in the lowlands (Taylor, 2001). Being accepted as an official name of a minority group, the term *Mường* appears to be merely an exonym since it is not used by the Muong to refer to themselves. The Muong use this term only to designate a territorial unit (a group of several villages) or, by extension, each of three worlds that constitute their cosmological system.⁵ The use of this term by the ethnic Vietnamese and consequently by all others around the world to indicate them is considered by Muong intellectuals as inaccurate (ĐDDN, 1988, p.7) but they have no choice other than to accept this practice and also use this designation when they are speaking or writing in Vietnamese or other languages. Their autonym is 'Mol/Monl/Moan' (depending on dialect) which is a Mon-Khmer⁶ word meaning 'people'. This word in its Vietnamized form *Mọi* was used as an ethnophaulism to indicate 'mountain savages' inhabiting all over Vietnam regardless of linguistic affiliation.

The term *Việt*, which was accepted all around the world during the second part of the twentieth century as a key term to designate both the Vietnamese nationality and the ethnic Vietnamese, is a local form of what is pronounced as *yue* in modern Mandarin Chinese or *yuht* in Cantonese. Nowadays this term is used to refer to the ethnic Vietnamese along with the term

⁵ For more on this, see Nguyễn Từ Chi (1997).

⁶ Vietnamese and Muong languages constitute the Viet-Muong sub-group of Vietic languages within the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. The so called Muong language consists of a number of closely related dialects all of which remain unwritten.

*Kinh*⁷ which is assumed to be the official ethnonym. As noted by Taylor, the term *Việt* ‘was not indigenous to Vietnam’ (Taylor, 1983, p.42). It is well known that some other groups in the area of what is now Southern China and Northern Vietnam also used and are still using this term for self-identification.

Historically, ancestors of the modern-day Muong also could be referred to as *Việt*. Vietnamese scholars usually underline that far back in the past ancestors of two peoples together constituted a community of ‘the ancient Viets’ (*người Việt cổ*). With regard to later periods, scholars also admit the possibility of considering the Muong and the Vietnamese within a single category. Thus, Cuisinier suggested that the Muong could be viewed as ‘retarded Annamites’ (i.e. Vietnamese) (Cuisinier, p.563); Stratanovich raised a question as to whether the Muong should be considered as ‘elder or younger brothers of the Vietnamese’ (Stratanovich, p.62); Taylor and Li gave several examples of how iconic characters of Vietnamese history could be referred to as both *Việt* or *Mường* (Taylor, 2001, p. 33; Li, p.95). One of the most illustrative examples of this would King Lê Lợi, the founder of the Vietnamese royal dynasty of Later Lê (1427-1789), who was referred to as a ‘barbarian amongst barbarians’ in sixteenth century Chinese records (Li, 2010, p.95) because of his origins, from an inner area of Thanh Hóa province, ‘from a place that, in contemporary terms, can only have been Muong’ (Taylor, 2001, p. 33). Additionally, Dang Nghiem Van mentioned that among different groups of people of Northern Vietnam, both the Vietnamese and the Muong are referred to by some other common designations such as *Cheo* (*Cheo Chi*) or *Keo* and *Nhà Lang* (Dang Nghiem Van, 1988, p.143).⁸

Basically, the Muong elderly do not refer to the ethnic Vietnamese by the term ‘*Việt*’, they prefer designating them by location-based terms – *Kinh* ‘capital inhabitants’ or *Kẻ chợ* ‘market people’. They also avoid specifying Vietnamese language in a Vietnamese manner (*tiếng Việt*) but refer to it as ‘capital-city language’ (*tiếng Kinh*) or ‘generally spoken language’ (*tiếng phổ thông*).⁹ This is to say that the practice of designating lowlanders, i.e. the ethnic Vietnamese, by the term ‘*Việt*’ was not formerly widespread among the Muong as it was not

⁷ *Kinh* is Chinese borrowing (京) meaning ‘capital city’ and, by extension, ‘capital inhabitants’.

⁸ *Cheo* (*Cheo Chi*) or *Keo* are derivations from *Giao Chi*, the name of Northern Vietnam during the first millennium AD. These designations are used by Tai-speaking people in Vietnam. *Nhà Lang* which is a term indicating local administrators or land owners among the Muong is used by some Hmong groups. In the same time it is an autonym of several Muong groups in Thanh Hóa province (Dang Nghiem Van, 1988, p.143).

⁹ My own observation during 2015 field work.

widespread among other peoples of Northern Vietnam.¹⁰ It seems likely that the Muong used to perceive the term *Việt* not as a designation of people living in lowlands but rather as a symbol of political power. Thus, in Muong epics this term is used as a name of their first king – *Yit Yang/Dit Dang* (*Yit/Dit* is a Muong variant for *Việt*)¹¹ whose palace was built in the lowlands in the area of the capital-city and market-place (*Kinh Kỳ Kẻ Chợ*).¹²

As we have seen, *Việt* and *Mường* are historically overlapping categories rather than two which are opposing each other, unlike *Kinh* and *Mường* which derived from designating contrasted locations. However, despite all of the constraints mentioned, during the twentieth century both *Việt* and *Mường* became commonly accepted categories and ethnonyms to identify two closely related groups in Vietnam – the Vietnamese and the Muong. Obviously, recognition of the Muong and the Vietnamese as two different peoples was not a result of objective linguistic or ethno-linguistic analysis but of mere opposing elite/non-elite (‘savages’), lowlands/uplands groups of people. This process, rooted in pre-modern times and activated by colonial scholarship and administrative practice, is now actively maintained by the modern Vietnamese nation-state.

In historical and comparative linguistics the two terms *Việt* and *Mường* are widely applied in combination – *Việt-Mường*– to indicate some proto-language forms or common phenomena. Within this paper I will use this linguistic term and the concept of ‘Viet-Muong comparative perspective’ to reveal apparently common or comparable elements in Muong oral tales and Vietnamese myths and legends.

Sources and their interpretation

The tales currently classified as Muong epics are a kind of ritual narrative that is performed during funeral ceremonies. These tales, which were mentioned in descriptions of Muong funeral rites or partially retold in a few works published on the Muong and their culture by European scholars (Grossin, 1926; Cuisinier, 1946; Nikulin, 1985), however, remain mostly unexplored and even unknown outside Vietnam.

In Vietnam Muong ritual narratives have been intensively collected, and written down in Vietnamese and in Muong by Vietnamese Latinized script since the 1970s. During textual

¹⁰ Here, again, I refer to such common exonyms of the Vietnamese and the Muong as *Cheo/Keo* and *Nhà Lang* that are used by some minority groups of Northern Vietnam.

¹¹ Phonetic form of the name depends on the dialect and varies in different versions of Muong epics.

¹² In the past this expression was used as a folksy designation of the city which is now named Hanoi.

analysis of collected narratives, Vietnamese scholars recognized that a certain group of tales appeared as a cycle which was very similar to what is commonly considered as epics. This body of tales was identified as *sử thi* (literally, narrative verses) or *trường ca* (long song) which are two terms corresponding to the European notion of epics.¹³ Since then, Vietnamese scholars, some of whom are ethnic Muong, have published several works on Muong epics introducing it as a piece of cultural heritage and delineating its substantial and artistic features (ĐDDN, 1973; ĐDDN, 1988, pp.7-64; Trương Sĩ Hùng, 1992; *Mo kể chuyện Đẻ Đất Đẻ Nước*, 2005). Some authors paid attention to apparent similarities between epics and ritual practices of the Muong and Taic peoples living in Vietnam. Thus, Bùi Thiện mentioned that the composition of ritual narratives (*Mo*¹⁴, both in Thai and in Muong) and their performing have much in common among these two neighboring peoples (ĐDDN, 1973, p.93).

Tales of the epic cycle of ‘The birth of the Earth and Water’ are referred to as *Mo Tlêu* in Muong, i.e. ‘telling stories’, and performed only during elaborate and lavish funerals. Unlike other Muong ritual narratives (for instance, *Mo Vải* ‘Going back to ancestors’) these tales have a certain sequence and share common heroes. They combine characteristics of both cosmological and heroic epics, narrate the origins of the world, animals and plants, the first people and their cultural practices, rulers and their deeds. Every new episode in the cycle begins with *rằng* ‘saying that’ that opens a new theme. In the opening part of the cycle there are two *rằng* talking about the origins of the Earth and the Water ‘in the times when there is not yet the Earth down on earth and there is not yet the Sky up in the sky’ (ĐDDN, 1988, p.227). These two opening episodes gave the title to the whole cycle – ‘The birth of the Earth and Water’. Interestingly enough, the combination of the two words ‘earth’ (*tắc/đất*) and ‘water’ (*đác/nước*) in Muong and also in Vietnamese means ‘country’ (*tắc đác/đất nước*) thus the epics’ title could be understood as a double meaning mentioning both natural phenomena and political realm.

Since Muong language is unwritten, tales from the Epic cycle of ‘The Birth of the Earth and Water’ as well as all other Muong ritual narratives have been passed down orally up to now.¹⁵ They have been transmitted mostly within families of ritual masters *thầy Mo* who are, at

¹³ Trương Sĩ Hùng tends to define these narratives as a mytho-epic cycle - *sử thi thần thoại* (Trương Sĩ Hùng, 1992).

¹⁴ *Mo* is a Tai word meaning ritual narratives, rituals recitations and ritual specialists.

¹⁵ There is a story explaining why the Muong do not write down their tales but have to memorize them: Once the Muong were bringing characters back to their home but when they crossed the stream they put characters into the mouth and inadvertently swallowed them up. Since then when the Muong need to tell stories they have to get scripts off from their entrails (ĐDDN, 1988,

the same time, professional storytellers. Tales were memorized in a certain sequence and then recited in a singing voice during lengthy funeral rites.¹⁶ The teller would, meanwhile, improvise on familiar material by drawing on a set of fixed formulas and metrical patterns that resulted in the appearance of a variety of epic versions spread throughout all the areas of Muong residence in Northern Vietnam. To date, there are more than a dozen epic versions from three provinces of Northern Vietnam (Hòa Bình, Thanh Hóa, Sơn La) that have been collected and published. The volume of poetry in these versions varies from three and a half to sixteen thousand lines while a medium-volume version has about eight thousand lines. Collected versions differ slightly in the main characters' names, by focusing on one particular theme or another, but, generally, all of them follow a common narrative outline and share common motifs. Further in the article I will draw primarily on one of the most earliest recorded versions from the province of Hòa Bình, compiled in prose by Nguyễn Từ Chi and Nguyễn Trần Dân (ĐDDN, 1974). In cases of divergence I will refer to other versions of the epics.

Tales from the epic cycle are performed during night-time inside Muong stilt houses with a large amount of relatives and villagers gathered around the coffin of the deceased. Recitation of epic tales is usually accompanied by a group of musicians with traditional instruments while a *Mo* master could be assisted by one or two other ritual specialists. The ritual purpose of such a performance is to guide the deceased's soul to the otherworld; at the same time it is a good occasion to pass on elements of traditional culture and historical memories to the younger generation. Thus, the Muong epic perfectly fits the definition of a 'primary' epic, which 'has its origins in oral performance' (Epic, 2012, p.439).

How and when the Muong epic cycle came to be created is a question that still remains unclear. The Muong authors themselves assume that it could have occurred no later than the fifteenth century. According to them, this assumption is supported by genealogies of ritual masters' families that can be traced from the end of the fifteenth century (Bùi Huy Vọng, p.29). Although this argument itself is not solid enough evidence to ascertain the time when the Muong epics were formed, I believe that this could well be so for two other reasons. Firstly, since the Muong epics have much in common with ritual narratives and the practices of the Tai people,

p.9). The last expression 'to get scripts off from their entrails' is associated with the starting moment of recitation when ritual master is 'trying his voice' by producing sounds similar to a kind of throat singing.

A similar story is typical for some other people of Northern Vietnam that had not got script for their languages.

¹⁶ To prevent a dead body from rotting and preserve it for lengthy funeral ceremonies (up to half a month) the Muong had been using some local herbs (information gained during fieldwork in 2015).

there should be a period of intensive interaction between the Viet-Muong and Tai speakers in Northern Vietnam. According to Kelly, due to certain historical circumstances this was in the fifteenth century, when contact between the Viet-Muong and Tai peoples was particularly active (Kelly, 2013a, pp.82-83). Secondly, another part of the Viet-Muong population in the lowlands, i.e. the Kinh people, or ancestors of the modern-day ethnic Vietnamese, at the same time were also creating, or at least recording, their own folk traditions, and this process was also widely influenced by interaction with neighboring peoples.

While the Muong epics represent a living oral tradition which is still connected with rituals, Vietnamese myths and legends exemplify the so called ‘residual orality’. The concept of ‘residual orality’ was used by Walter J. Ong to refer to a transitional situation between primary orality and literacy or pre-literacy. Entitling one of the sections of his book as ‘Tenaciousness of Orality’ (Ong, p. 112) Ong points out that even though in literary cultures written word is much more valued than spoken, in some circumstances orality is still very significant within literate cultures. This was the situation in fifteenth century Vietnam (*Đại Việt*) where a literate elite used the authority of oral tradition to create new senses in canonizing the main elements of this tradition in a certain written form and transforming it into history.

In the preface to one of the first collections of Vietnamese myths and legends, entitled ‘A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam’ (*Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*)¹⁷ its editor Vũ Quỳnh introduced the idea of a very ancient oral tradition that was specific to the country. He claimed that twenty-two stories describing Vietnamese antiquity that were included into collection were being passed down orally for a long time before they had finally been recorded.¹⁸ Later some of these stories with minor changes were incorporated into the historical chronicle ‘Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt’ (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*) and thereby became a part of national history. The core information regarding the origins of the Vietnamese (one hundred Viets) and their ancient history and culture is found in the first story entitled ‘The

¹⁷ The title of this collection is translated differently into English by different scholars. Thus, Taylor translates it as ‘Wonders Plucked from the Dust of Linh-nam’ (Taylor, 1983, p. 354) while Kelly suggests another variant of translation – ‘Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes’ (Kelly, 2013b, p.88). There is also a variety of Russian translations of this title. For basic information about this collection see Taylor, 1983, p. 354–57; Kelly, 2013b, p.88-95 and Kelly, 2015, pp.161-170. English translation of the stories included into ‘A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam’ is available on Viet Texts, <https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/viet-texts/> [accessed November, 24 2015]. Retelling in Russian could be found in Myths and legends of Vietnam, 2000.

¹⁸ In one of variants of this preface Vũ Quỳnh mentioned that these stories had been passing down ‘from mouth to ear among persons of special ability’ (LNCQ, 1961). Apparently, it could be a reference to ritual masters (*thầy Mo*) who kept in memory a big amount of narratives to retell them during performing rituals.

story of *Hồng Bàng* dynasty' (*Hồng Bàng thị truyện*). Essentially, this story - about Father-Dragon *Lạc Long Quân* and Mother-Fairy *Âu Cơ*, their one hundred sons that hatched from eggs and then settled down in the mountains and plains after their parents' separation, the eighteen generations of *Hùng kings* and their state of *Văn Lang* - represents a founding myth or a story of descent of the Vietnamese. While Kelly argues that all its themes and heroes were borrowed from Chinese written sources and constitute a kind of medieval 'invented tradition' aimed at promoting the Vietnamese identity and its ancient connection with the lands of Northern Vietnam (Kelly, 2013), I could not totally agree with it. In partial agreement with Kelly, I strongly believe that some motifs and heroes of Vietnamese stories from 'A *Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam*' have obvious connections in local oral tradition, at least, as it is preserved in the Muong epics. Only through these connections can we adequately interpret why the first Vietnamese hatched from the eggs, why a pair of progenitors had to separate and divide their children, why the capital of *Văn Lang* was located in an upland area and what might be lurking within the term *Việt*. I will demonstrate this in further details.

Story of descent: motif of origin from egg/eggs

According to the story of the descent of the ethnic Vietnamese, as it appears in 'The story of *Hồng Bàng* dynasty', the Father-Dragon *Lạc Long Quân* and the Mother-Fairy *Âu Cơ* gave birth to a sack of one hundred eggs. A hundred sons that hatched from the eggs were divided between the parents who decided to live separately. Fifty sons followed Father-Dragon to live in the lowlands by the water and the other fifty sons followed Mother-Fairy to take up residence in the mountain areas. It is claimed that they became ancestors of the Hundred Việt. The eldest (or most dominant) son who stayed in the mountains with the Mother-Fairy became the *Hùng* king of *Hồng Bàng* dynasty and the ruler of the first Vietnamese kingdom called *Văn Lang*. The *Hùng* kings and their descendants are considered to be the progenitors of the Vietnamese people.

The Muong story of descent links the origins of the Muong as well as of some other neighboring peoples (such as the Kinh, i.e. ethnic Vietnamese, and the Thai, for instance)¹⁹ with

¹⁹ In Thanh Hóa variant of epic tales there are such people as Lao, Kinh, Mon (i.e. Muong), Siên quan (old Muong-?), Thai, Man and Meo that hatched from the birds' eggs (ĐDDN, 1975, pp.47-48).

an egg (or the three last eggs from a thousand / ten thousand eggs) of a pair of birds (*Chim Ấy* and *Cái Úa*).²⁰

While Kelly suggested that many elements of the Vietnamese story of descent are more likely rooted in Chinese written sources than in local oral tradition (Kelley, 2013a), I argue that some of its themes and motifs do have obvious links with common Viet-Muong and, wider, regional lore. First of all, it relates to the motif of origin from egg/eggs.

Interpreting the story that narrates the origins of the first Vietnamese, Kelly brings a passage from a seventeenth-century Chinese source:

‘Each time a crocodile gives birth, it produces some several tens of eggs. When they hatch, those that descend into the water become crocodiles while those that ascend onto the shore become peculiar snakes and worms. Sometimes the mother will eat them to prevent them from multiplying’ (Kelley, 2013a, p.104).

On the basis of this story of crocodiles eggs and other stories of dragons and immortal fairies found in Chinese texts depicting the areas to the south of the Yangzi River, Kelly argues:

‘...while local lore may have been a source of inspiration for the Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ tale, we should also not rule out the possibility that this story was inspired by some written source as well’ (ibid).

Definitely, we should not rule out the possibility and even obviousness, after Kelly’s brilliant works, that the Vietnamese story of descent was strongly influenced by some Chinese written sources but yet, in my opinion, its deep, though not so apparent, roots lay in local oral tradition. The motif of origin from egg/eggs is one of numerous examples.

Some decades ago an appealing interpretation of this motif was suggested by the Russian scholar Stratanovich. Analyzing two main patterns of descent typical of the oral tradition of South East Asia (descent from egg/eggs or descent from gourd) Stratanovich suggested that the motif of origin from egg/eggs may be evidence of a ‘second birth’. That is to say, according to Stratanovich, that the pattern of descent from egg/eggs, unlike origin from gourd, could be a marker of a new cultural tradition that emerged due to migration, cultural contacts or assimilation of a former aboriginal group (Stratanovich, 1977). While Stratanovich’s assumption has not been thoroughly verified or confirmed by other folklorists, historical linguistics nevertheless testify in favor of his theory: according to recent findings in the history of Viet-Muong languages, once (probably at the turn of the Common Era) the Viet-Muong speakers

²⁰ In Thanh Hóa variant of epics the birds named *Tùng* (male) and *Tót* (female) (*trống chim Tùng, mái chim Tót*, ĐĐĐN, 1975).

migrated to the area of what is now Northern Vietnam from mountain regions of Eastern Laos (Nguyễn Tài Căn, 1995).

The motif of dividing grown-up children between parents and their subsequent resettlement throughout the mountains and plains has parallels not only in the Chinese story of crocodiles mentioned by Kelly but also in local oral tradition. Moreover, it makes more sense if we look at the history of the Viet-Muong people from the uplanders' standpoint.

Uplands, Lowlands and Migrations

In the Muong epic cycle the origins of all natural phenomena, the first people and then their cultural practices such as the acquisition of fire, building houses, producing silk, casting bronze drums, and weaving and embroidering, are related to the uplands. The first Muong people were living in a cave on the mountain *Hao* from where their descendants resettled in all the other big and small villages (*muòng*). Only one son of the first Muong parents, *Dịt Dàng*, or the king *Việt*, went down to lowlands to live and to build a capital city there with a palace and big market. This place in the plains is named in the epic tales as *Kinh Kỳ Kẻ Chợ*, i.e. the area of the capital-city and market-place. In the Muong epic tales uplanders and lowlanders intensively interact with each other. For instance, they jointly cut down the huge tree of *Chu* 'with its copper trunk and iron branches' and together move it out of the mountains down to the plains.

In contrast to this, in the Vietnamese story of descent the capital city is located in an upland area, in *Phong Châu*. Here the eldest of the fifty sons who stayed in the mountains with their mother founded the capital of the first Vietnamese kingdom *Văn Lang*. Many depicted details of ancient life of the Vietnamese are also related to mountains: they use burnt ginger roots instead of salt that could be produced only by the sea; men cut their hair short to make it easier when moving in the forests;²¹ their lands are reserved mainly for cultivating glutinous rice which requires less water to grow than wet rice and could be easily cultivated on the hillsides; for some ritual purposes they prepare special dishes from this sort of rice such as rice cooked in bamboo tubes or stuffed steamed cakes (*bánh chưng, bánh dầy*).²²

²¹ Forests in Vietnamese tradition are always associated with mountain areas as plains are reserved for paddy fields. Cutting hair was a custom specific for Viet (Yue) men in contrast to Han Chinese who had been keeping their hair long.

²² Interestingly enough, completely the same stuffed steamed cakes as Vietnamese *bánh chưng* and *bánh dầy* are typical for 'Buluotuo Culture' of Zhuang people in Guangxi province in China, that again provokes associations between Tai and Viet-Muong cultural traditions.

According to Kelly, all these details are mentioned to illustrate the lifestyle of the peoples who were referred to as ‘*Man savages*’ in Vietnamese stories and through this give a sense of the ‘Vietnamese past’. With the title of one of the sections in his paper ‘Othering the Savages’, Kelly argues that those who compiled these stories sought to define a cultural boundary between the assumed readers and the depicted barbarians living in the uplands (Kelly, 2015, pp.170-179). I could not agree with this. To the contrary, I would argue that in Vietnamese stories lowlanders and uplanders, occasionally referred to as *Man*, coexist in a common cultural landscape and, moreover, the Viet themselves, their progenitress Mother-Fairy, first kings and their kingdom are located in the uplands.

The ‘mountain origin’ of the Vietnamese was first suggested by linguist Nguyễn Tài Cẩn who argued that the Vietnamese speakers came to the plains from the uplands (Nguyễn Tài Cẩn, 1997, pp.322-323). This suggestion is based on historical linguistic data demonstrating that the most archaic Viet-Muong languages are spread over the mountain area of Central Vietnam by the Laos border and that many groups of Vietic speakers are still living in the uplands. According to Nguyễn Tài Cẩn, one of the obvious pieces of folkloric evidence for the ‘mountain origin’ of the Vietnamese is the story narrating the victory of the Mountain spirit in the battle with the Water spirit.²³

The motif of children dividing and their subsequent resettlement in mountains and plains, which is found in the Vietnamese story of descent, could be easily interpreted as an echo of the migration from the mountains to the plains that once occurred within the Viet-Muong community. Essentially, the same information is contained in the Muong tale of Mother-Dappled-Doe and Father-Carp-Fish that was mentioned by many authors in connection with the Vietnamese story of Mother-Fairy *Âu Cơ* and Father-Dragon *Lạc Long Quân* (for instance, Cuisinier, 1946, p.xii-xiii; Taylor, 1999, p. 303). This tale is widespread in a number of variants throughout Muong areas in Vietnam, some shorter or longer, but the part at the beginning, narrating the meeting of a doe and a fish, is told in the same way everywhere. This tale is inevitably included into the Muong epic cycle as it bears coded information: the doe symbolizing the hills and forests while the fish is a symbol of the water realm. According to the tale, the doe and the fish taught people to make two little flags, one of an animal (with a picture of doe in

²³ Mountain spirit (*Sơn Tinh* or *Tản Viên Sơn Thánh*) is a hero of a story of ‘*Mountain spirit and Water spirit*’ (*Sơn Tinh Thủy Tinh*) that is also included into collection ‘A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam’. Mountain spirit is one of the most venerated spirits in Vietnamese pantheon.

typical pose with his head turned back, *cờ con moong*) and one of a fish (*cờ con cá*). These two flags are used during Muong funeral rites to show the path on earth as well as underwater during the soul's journey to the otherworld.²⁴ According to the final part of the tale, which is not usually included in the epic cycle, there were fifty sons and fifty daughters born from the Mother-Doe and Father-Fish, half of them stayed with their mother in the mountain area and became ancestors of the Muong, while the other half followed their father to the sea and became the ancestors of the Vietnamese (*ibid.*).

Ruler *Dịt Dàng* and his deeds

Another interesting subject for our analysis is the character of the Muong ruler *Dịt Dàng* (or *Yít Yàng*, where *Dịt /Yít* reflects the Muong pronunciation of the term 'Việt'). According to the Hòa Bình variant of the epics, *Dịt Dàng* was the youngest son of 18 children born from the first Muong parents (previously, a brother and a sister *Lang Đa Can* and *nang Kit*).²⁵ Unlike his brothers and sisters who scattered all over the uplands to manage the settlements, he went down to the plains and became a ruler in the area of *Kinh Kỳ Kẻ Chợ*, i.e. in the capital city with the market place.

The location of the ruler's residence in an area which is now associated exclusively with the ethnic Vietnamese is further evidence demonstrating that previously, at least, at the time when the epic cycle was forming, the ancestors of the Muong did not perceive themselves and the capital's inhabitants (i.e. Kinh people) as two different groups, neither culturally nor politically. They saw themselves as a single community, one part of which was living in the uplands while the other part migrated to the lowlands and established a center of political power there. The idea of this power was termed *Việt* in Muong epics. Interestingly, roughly the same vision of the Viet-Muong community, but from the other side, by a Vietnamese author, was found by Taylor in the text from the turn of the twentieth century (Taylor, 2001).

The Muong themselves and researchers usually associate the ruler *Dịt Dàng* with the *Hùng* Kings (Cuisinier, 1946, xii; ĐĐĐN, 1988, p.8). This could make sense in terms of formal logic. However, the comparative analysis of the Muong epic tales and Vietnamese stories of 'A

²⁴ This information is gained from Bùi Huy Vọng, member of The Vietnam Folklore Association; commune Hương Nhượng, county of Lạc Sơn, province of Hòa Bình.

²⁵ In Sơn La variant of epics *Dit Dang* is one of twenty three children of the first family pair (ĐĐĐN, 2005, p.256-257) while in Thanh Hóa variant he is born from the first egg of the birds *Tùng* and *Tót* (ĐĐĐN, 1975, p.48).

Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam indicate that the image of the Muong ruler *Dịt Dàng* most likely correlates with the mythical progenitor of the ethnic Vietnamese Dragon *Lạc Long Quân*: both heroes are related to the lowlands and were involved in similar deeds.

The deeds committed by the ruler *Dịt Dàng* include victorious battles, cutting down the tree of *Chu* with ‘bronze trunk, iron branches, brass flowers and tin fruits’, building a palace and defeating an animal monster *Tin Vĩn Tượng Vương*. Two of his deeds, cutting down the tree and defeating a monster, apparently are reminiscent of the deeds of the Dragon *Lạc Long Quân* as depicted in two stories from ‘*A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam*’ – ‘The story of the Tree spirit’ (*Truyện Mộc tinh*) and ‘The story of the Fox essence’ (*Truyện Hồ tinh*). Interestingly, other episodes of the *Dịt Dàng* reign have no obvious associations in Vietnamese tradition: such as his ‘treachery’, or rather ingratitude towards people from the uplands, the subsequent burning of his palace and military campaign of the uplanders against the ruler.

Although, it is worth mentioning that the character of the ruler *Dịt Dàng* is illustrated in more detail only in the Hòa Bình and Sơn La variants of the epics. In the version of epics from Thanh Hóa, which is a province more remote from the capital city, this hero receives far less attention.

Motif of incest and its echoes

Motifs of incest are widely represented in archaic folklore all around the world. They are also found in the Muong epics: the first Muong people that hatched from the squared egg were two brothers and a sister (*Tá Cản, Tá Kài* and *cô nàng Kị*). One of the brothers then became the first Muong ruler (*Lang Tá Cản*) and married his sister (*nàng Kị*): ‘that was a time when no one knew the Law of the Heaven. But as they had violated the Heaven’s Law therefore the Heaven must punish them’ (ĐĐĐN, 1974, p.36). As a result of the Heaven’s wrath, all the children born of this couple were physically disabled – without arms, without legs, dumb, or deaf. Then one wise old man told the parents:

‘The Law of the Heaven does not allow brothers and sisters to marry among themselves. Only chickens and pigs can have such promiscuous relations. Both of you are the first people who were born from the squared egg, you are the brother and the sister, you should not be the husband and the wife. But, well, it has been already happened; I have to find the way to correct it somehow. Now you have to leave each other. Let the man go to the east, and the woman go to the west. When you come back and meet each other, you have to pretend that you are not intimate, that you

have never known each other. When you will be eating, the woman should eat in a shelter for chickens and the man in a pen for pigs, as if you are no different from animals. Then you have to make the wedding ceremony, with matchmaking, according to the rules ... Maybe then you will be able to avoid the punishment of the Heaven' (ibid.).

Incest between the first known people forms a very specific pattern within Southeast Asian oral traditions and the Muong epics, as we have seen, perfectly fit this. Obviously, the aim of the tale quoted is to taboo the sibling incest and introduce the norms of marital relations.

A motif of incest is not actually found in Vietnamese folk stories; this may be evidence of their later origin and the strong influence of Confucian ethics. Although, a passage from the Muong tale that depicts the separating of spouses with the husband going to the east and the wife going to the west seems to be echoed in the Vietnamese story of descent where the Father-Dragon and Mother-Fairy also have to separate for some ambiguous reasons. Thus, in the Vietnamese story the spouses' separation is explained by the opposition of *yin* (*âm*) and *yang* (*đương*) which, on the one hand, is needed for producing offspring but, on the other hand, hinders a long cohabitation. As appealing to the categories of *yin* and *yang* sounds so vague and unconvincingly in such a context, I assume that these Daoist associations could be used in the Vietnamese story of descent to veil the previous connection with the motif of incest between progenitors and its consequences.

Conclusion

In June 2015 the ritual narratives of the Muong from the province of Hòa Bình, including tales from the epic cycle of 'The Birth of the Earth and Water', were awarded a certificate of special safeguarding from the national UNESCO association. Obviously in the future, Vietnam will promote these narratives to be included into the global list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. In my opinion, compared to some other nominated objects and sites in Vietnam, the Muong ritual narratives fully deserve this title as they represent a living oral tradition that brings to a modern society the cultural values and historical memories of previous generations. These narratives should be considered not only as a piece of art or part of a mourning ritual but also as a precious historical and cultural resource since they provide us with an alternative, most likely a true-to-life vision of Northern Vietnam and the ethnic history of two people now referred to as the Muong and the Vietnamese (Kinh).

Although, the Muong epics collected in the 1970s and Vietnamese stories recorded in the fifteenth century, at first glance, seem to belong to different folklore traditions and genres, in fact, they describe essentially the same historical process, namely, the formation of the local identity and cultural norms of the Viet-Muong people in the lands of Northern Vietnam. The comparative analysis of Muong tales from the epic cycle of ‘The Birth of the Earth and Water’ and the Vietnamese stories of ‘A Selection of Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam’ reveals both similarities and divergences in representation of this process. Thus, two bodies of narratives are united by a common concept which is termed *Việt*. While in the Muong epics it is the name of the first king who went down to the plains and established his capital there, in the Vietnamese story of descent it is the designation of a people, the Hundred *Việt*, who are considered to be ancestors of the Vietnamese.

A number of ambiguous issues in Vietnamese folk stories and historical tradition could be clarified or interpreted through the Muong epic tales. Therefore, while Kelly suggested that the main themes and heroes of Vietnamese stories rather had their roots in Chinese texts than in local orality, I argue that they represent a fusion of a common Viet-Muong oral tradition and Chinese patterns perceived from written sources. Special attention in this context should be given to the interaction between the Viet-Muong and the Tai people and their oral traditions as this process was very tangible at some points. However, this problem lies beyond the framework of this article and might become a subject for further research.

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