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'So we stayed together'

TWO YEARS AGO I AGREED TO HELP sponsor two Southeast Asian refugee families in Des Moines. As my friends and I helped these families adapt and grow accustomed to American ways of living — bureaucracy, winter weather, new kinds of food, different social customs — it occurred to me that video-recording their experiences in their own words might create a valuable historical document. Imagine if someone had systematically recorded the early impressions of the first Norwegians in Decorah or the first Dutch settlers in Pella! Here was Iowa's newest ethnic group, a group considerably different from the Europeans who settled in Iowa. And here was an opportunity to record through oral history methods first-hand accounts of new settlers, for future historians and for later generations of young Americans of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian descent. Like most groups, Southeast Asians will want to know their roots, how their parents and grandparents reached America, and by what means they survived those often difficult first years of the immigration and assimilation process.

The Tai Dam are an ethnic group who lived in the northwestern provinces of Vietnam until the communist Vietminh defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Opponents of Ho Chi Minh and allies of the French, the Tai Dam were forced to flee to either South Vietnam or Laos after the 1954 treaty in Geneva established North and South Vietnam. (Most of the Tai Dam who eventually came to Iowa were those who had first fled to Laos.) There they settled until 1975, when

The Tai Dam Immigrate to Iowa



by
Siang Bacchi,
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Soulinthavong,
and
Jack Lufkin

communist troops overtook South Vietnam, Laos, and later Cambodia. Repercussions of the war reverberate today as "boat people" and other people from Vietnam and neighboring countries continue to flee persecution and oppression and find refuge in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The United Nations defines refugees as individuals unable to live in their native country due to a "well-founded fear of persecution" because of "race, religion, social group, nationality, or political opinion." The Tai Dam's sorrowful background qualified them under this definition; hence they were able to move to a new home if another country would have them.

As the plight of the "boat people" and other refugees from the Vietnam War became known in 1975, Iowa governor Robert Ray acted on behalf of a plea from an American friend of the Tai Dam who worked with them in Laos. That same year Ray formed the

Iowa Governor's Task Force for Indo-Chinese Resettlement, and the Tai Dam began to arrive. In 1979 Ray, Colleen Shearer (then director of Job Service), and Ray's aide Ken Quinn (then on leave from the State Department) created the Iowa Refugee Service Center in Des Moines (now called the Bureau of Refugee Programs, headed by Marvin Weidner) and Iowa SHARES (Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation). These organizations coordinated churches and other sponsors interested in refugee resettlement statewide, which continues today with the support of Governor Terry E. Branstad.

Unlike most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants who relied solely on the beneficence of relatives or friends who had already immigrated, today's refugee groups (often family units) usually have a volunteer sponsor who helps the refugees get settled into new living quarters, find employment, and learn English and other skills needed to function effectively in American society. Refugees receive various forms of governmental assistance.

In all some 10,000 Southeast Asians have come to Iowa since the mid 1970s, including some 2,600 Tai Dam. This represents about 90 percent of the Tai Dam now living in America. (Shearer and Ray had decided to originally accept one ethnic refugee group, to insure compatibility.) Reflecting on his governorship in a recent biography, Ray felt this "gratifying" experience "made me think I had done at least something worthwhile during all those years."

Like most other immigrants before them, the Tai Dam and

other Southeast Asians faced, and continue to face, interrelated problems caused by acute emotional stress and fatigue from war and oppression, the need to find refuge, the loss of loved ones, separation from family and friends, language barriers, and the difficulties adjusting to a new culture. Also like many earlier immigrants, recent refugees have come to America with visions of boundless opportunity, freedom of expression and religion, and social equality. (They would probably agree with Thomas Jefferson's charac-

terization of America as an "asylum" for "oppressed humanity.") Apparent in the following interviews are the Tai Dam's efforts to adapt to a new culture while preserving their ethnic heritage — a balance all immigrant groups have struggled to achieve.

These excerpts were taken from two extensive oral history interviews regarding Tai Dam immigration and resettlement. The interviews were conducted in the native Tai Dam language. As editor of the complete translated

script, I did not want to alter the spirit or lyrical feel of certain sections, or remove the metaphors and rich imagery. In the following excerpts, only syntax and grammar have been corrected; some repetition has been cut.

This project represents only a beginning. It is hoped that under the continuing leadership of the Tai Studies Center in Des Moines more interviews will be conducted with Iowa's newest immigrants.

—Jack Lufkin

INTERVIEW 1



PHOTO BY JACK LUFKIN

Khao Baccam (right) first became a refugee when he was seven, fleeing from northwestern Vietnam to Hanoi. "My parents moved me frequently, fleeing from war and persecution," he stated. "I did not know where we were going. I just held onto my mother's hand and she kept on dragging me along." In 1954 they fled to Laos, where he grew up and studied electronics. In 1975 he and his family crossed the Mekong River to a refugee camp in Thailand. That November they immigrated to Des Moines. In June 1987 he was interviewed by InNgeun Baccam Soulinthavong (left), his cousin.

InNgeun Baccam: Why did you choose to come to America instead of other countries?

Khao Baccam: Oh, we did not know which country we were going to at first. Everybody was very confused about where to go at the time, because during the fall of Laos no one had accepted us as refugees from Laos. So we stayed together. Tai Dam people had leaders who had asked permission to go to many coun-

tries, every country. But I heard that the governor of Iowa, Governor Robert Ray, was interested in our people. So with this quota, we were allowed to come to Iowa. . . .

InNgeun: When you first arrived in Iowa, who met you?

Khao: I came in a second group [in November 1975]. Those relatives and friends who had come first went to meet us. Those friends who used to live together at the refugee camp came to Camp Dodge. . . .

InNgeun: Did you get the job that was in your profession?

Khao: Not really, because what I had studied was harnessing hydro electricity. But this is similar [current job at IBM repairing computers]. . . . At first I spoke French. . . . I was not good in English. Even though I have the knowledge in the field, communication is very important. I took the job to provide for my family. Then things got easier. I got used to the language. Friends got used to me, to my voice and accent.

InNgeun: How do you furnish your house, in Lao style or the style of people here?

Khao: . . . In Laos, we decorated it in one way and here we decorate it in another style. For example, the sofa: in Laos, it's made of bamboo; here it's made of foam.

InNgeun: Do you like it, the style?

Khao: As a man, I don't know much about it. It's my wife who has decorated.

InNgeun: Did you buy all of the decoration here?

Khao: Yes, everything we bought here.

InNgeun: Do you have anything brought over from there?

Khao: No. Nothing at all. I remember all I had left with me at the time of coming over was one hundred dollars. We spent it at Fort Chaffee [Arkansas, where refugees first arrived]. It was gone by the time I got to Iowa.

InNgeun: What about food and cooking? What kind of food do you mostly eat? American food or Tai Dam food?

Khao: Food is prepared and cooked the way we ate in Laos. My children sometimes eat hamburgers, but we older people still eat the food like it was prepared in our country. . . . When there's a party, I eat the way our people eat. Mostly we have *mum*, *chup-nor*, *chuphak*, *khousa*, *keng*, and *khaou-pun*.

InNgeun: About school: after you got here, in the United States, what school did you go to?

Khao: Many places, because I wanted to know the language, the pronunciation and the communication. I have not got it yet. I have gone to night school at North High in ESL [English as a Second Language], Iowa State University in their language class.

InNgeun: Are those schools and programs for refugees only?

Khao: Those classes and programs are for newcomer refugees who want to learn the language, how to communicate in English. They had them for free. . . .

InNgeun: What are the problems that you have encountered?

Khao: . . . I found out that when I am looking for a job, the most important thing is the language or communication. It's one of the biggest problems which prevents refugees from obtaining jobs. It's because I have to talk, not write, all the time.

InNgeun: Have you found a way to solve this problem and, if so, how did you do it?

Khao: To solve this problem, I needed a lot of time. For example, there were customers who could not understand me. Because Iowa is not one of the biggest states, Iowans do not have opportunities to meet people from different parts of the world. Unlike people in New York or Chicago or L.A., the Iowans have a more difficult time understanding me. When I go out of town on an assignment — to small towns like Creston or Winterset — the people there are

not used to meeting a foreigner, especially an Asian. It's even more difficult for them and me to communicate. I have tried to solve the problem, reading newspapers out loud, listening to the news and repeating after them. Sometimes at home, I read out loud and record it on a tape, and re-listen to it, to see if I can understand it. Anything I couldn't understand myself, I would find it [in a dictionary] and say it over and over again. . . . My tongue is not as flexible as when I was young. Unlike younger children — they go to school [here], watch TV, they already know how to speak the language.

InNgeun: When you were in Laos, before you came here, did you know how to speak English?

Khao: [From a class at school] I learned grammar and vocabulary, but I didn't speak. . . . It was easy just to learn, but it's a really different situation when you speak to a real American.

InNgeun: Do you still use our Tai Dam language?

Khao: I try. I will try to use the Tai Dam language for the rest of my life. Because Tai Dam people have been refugees in so many countries, we have lost part of our language. It was mixed with the Vietnamese language, as a result of our being refugees in Vietnam. In Laos, again the same thing happened. Right now, I am speaking Tai Dam mixed with Lao. And now that we have been here [in Iowa] for ten-twelve years, we are and will be using English in our language. Now, my children can't understand the Tai Dam language that well when I speak to them. Because of the reasons above, I like to have dinner or eat together with them and make them speak in Tai Dam.

InNgeun: Your littlest child, the youngest — do you speak English or Tai Dam to him?

Khao: My wife is a Laotian. When he, my child, is with me I speak to him in Tai Dam, but when he is with his mother, she speaks Lao to him. He ends up hearing three languages. Television taught him the English, plus his sisters speak to him in English. My children, when I speak Tai Dam or Lao to them, they don't comprehend it that well.

InNgeun: In your house, do you have any Tai Dam books or handwritten manuscripts?

Khao: Yes, I do have a computer that I use to do



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Vietnamese refugees land in Des Moines about 1981.

programs in Tai Dam. I'm trying to preserve the Tai Dam books and language.

InNgeun: What kind of books do you have? Magazines or what are they?

Khao: They are books from Tai Studies Center, song books, newspapers.

InNgeun: About clothing and dressing, do you try to teach [your children] to dress as in the old time?

Khao: . . . For myself, I would like for them once in a while to dress in traditional Tai Dam dress. For now they dress only in Western style, jeans and shirts just like the Americans here. To have them dress in Tai Dam, they don't have it. To dress in Lao, they don't like it. . . .

InNgeun: Have you any regrets about coming to Iowa?

Khao: No. I have not any regrets. On the contrary, I was lucky to have the chance to come and live here. Leaving our home, our country — yet I still found a new one, therefore I have no regrets. Only memories in the homeland, which make me think and miss home. Anything else, I am pretty happy with the situation.

InNgeun: The native-born Americans here, no matter black or white, how do they treat you, with dignity or not?

Khao: Some people do not, but I have not met one person yet who is prejudiced. It's only a few. Everyone that I have met and talked to has treated me nicely. I don't have this kind of problem.

InNgeun: What about among your people, do

you find the segregation among yourselves?

Khao: No, nothing like that. We will have the same culture, language, no one has divided into higher or lower class. We treat one another the same. When there is a death in a family, everyone comes to help out. It's one of the characteristics of Tai Dam society. I might say it's a good one.

InNgeun: In your point of view, do you think that the refugees here are prejudiced towards the native-born Americans here?

Khao: In my point of view, I don't think so. The younger people here do go out with their American friends. Some even get married to Americans. And they have not had any problems. In conclusion, I say we can live together.

InNgeun: Where you are living right now, are there a lot of Tai Dam families living nearby?

Khao: In this area, there are five or six families living here. There's my brother's house, Mr. Houg's house, Mr. Phoung's; next block there is Mr. Pheng's house, Mr. Cheu's, Mr. Kham-tanh's, and Mr. Done's house.

InNgeun: Did you intend to live close by your people or did it just happen?

Khao: It just happened. But it's good to be able to live close to each other. But we can't choose. It all depends on the circumstances. If we could build a village like Ban Song Khua, Ban Hong Seng [village in Laos], it would have been better.

InNgeun: Why would you want to live only with Tai Dam people?

Khao: Living together, we will be able to keep or preserve our language. The children will speak Tai Dam. It will help us preserve our culture. If we live mixed with other people, and when we have any special ceremonies, and too many relatives come over, we feel concern for our [non-Tai Dam] neighbors, we feel like we are being inconsiderate.

InNgeun: In the future, what do you think you and your family will become? Will you be able to maintain Tai Dam characteristics or will you become Americanized?

Khao: I think I will still be a native Tai Dam, but for my children's generation, I don't think so. They live here, they eat here. I hope they stay the same, but we can't stop the circumstances. We will just have to let go.

InNgeun: How about the preservation of Tai

**Dam history, the old manuscripts or culture?
How do you feel about that?**

Khao: If possible, it's one of the most important things for the Tai Dam people. . . . We should try to work on the Tai Dam scripts and teach people how to read them. Whoever has done anything about it, I congratulate them, send them compliments for having a heart to preserve Tai Dam heritage, Tai scripts, and Tai culture. But whatever part of the culture is good, let's keep it; what's bad, let's forget it.

INTERVIEW 2

PHOTO BY JACK LUFKIN



As a soldier, Vong Lo Van (right) fought at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and continued fighting the communists in Vietnam and Laos for over two decades as his wife, One Lo Thi (left), raised their eleven children. In March 1981 they fled from Laos to a Thailand refugee camp, where they lived until immigrating in 1984 to Des Moines. This interview took place in April 1987. (Lo and One are not related to interviewer InNgeun Baccam; the terms "Aunt" and "Uncle" denote respect.)

InNgeun Baccam: Why did you choose to come to the United States over other countries? You had hoped to go back [to Laos from Thailand], hadn't you?

Vong Lo Van: . . . When I arrived [in March 1981 at the refugee camp] in Thailand, I saw the situation differently from my earlier viewpoint [of returning to Laos to fight the commu-

nists] because former high officers, high-level such as ministers, from Laos were dispersed, and were showing no signs of fighting. [All these] led my heart to come to other countries. "Which country would be best to go to?" I thought over and asked myself when I got all my family with me. When we stopped fighting, we lost hope of going home. All I could do was come to America, the most important place or the end [the top] of the world. A lot of friends asked me to go with them to Australia, France, New Zealand, Canada, et cetera. Thinking it over, if a war has to break out again, we might have to move again. If we go we would rather go right to the end. There were already a lot of Tai Dam and relatives living in Iowa or America here. That's why I presented myself to American officers in the camp.

InNgeun: How about Aunt? Did you come after Uncle's decision, or did you take part in the decision?

One Lo Thi: I had the same opinion as your Uncle's. My parents were here in Iowa.

InNgeun: Why did you choose Iowa, instead of other states such as California, Hawaii, et cetera?

Vong: There were two reasons for me to come to Iowa. The first reason was that I have my in-laws and my own relatives, whose name is "Lo," who had been living in Iowa before and had sent money to help us out in Thailand for four years. The second reason was when I arrived in America, I did not have any skill in the English language. I had to depend on my own strength. Iowa is an agricultural state, where there's farming and gardening. I thought I still had strength to do a farming job. For the first year, I worked [detasseling] in a cornfield near Mt. Pleasant.

InNgeun: At the camp, what did you think you would find when you arrived in Iowa, concerning the state, the people, weather, country, et cetera?

Vong: I knew for certain that there was a lot of snow. I also knew that there would be a lot of problems in working, social [customs], transportation. Everything would be hard because it's different from our country. But when you arrive and with effort, you would overcome these problems. . . .

InNgeun: Do you think the American and Tai

Dam people in America are different from what you thought?

Vong: I saw a big difference between the Tai people who came earlier [in the mid 1970s] and the newcomers. First, for the social matters such as clothes and behaviors. The ones who came earlier were confident, radiant and happy. For the newcomers, they dressed differently, their faces were skinny — because these two worlds were very far away from each other.

One: . . . [My daughter and four grandchildren] didn't get to come along [from Laos to Thailand] because the [accomplice] was in a hurry and couldn't get them all. I dropped my tears crossing [the Mekong River]. At the [Thailand] camp, whenever our beloved relatives [in America] sent [money] over to us, we then had a chance to go to the market for food for our kids. One egg was divided into four or five portions.

I'm still mentioning it. Now we buy eggs by the box. "Kids, do not eat too much. One egg used to be eaten by four or five people," says their grandmother, just like a legend.

InNgeun: What did you study [at the refugee camp in Thailand]?

One: We learned ways in America, learned how to use the toilet, where to go, look for signs, how to store food in the refrigerator, how to talk on the phone. . . .

InNgeun: Who were the instructors?

One: [The high administrators of the camp] hired outside instructors, Thai people. Just like you, all were young ladies. Some were very mean, very rude. Some were very good: "Mom, if you don't understand, don't worry. It's ok to just remember a few words." Some were very mean: "Old witch, why don't you remember? You will die in America. You will die if you don't know how to spend money." We learned how to spend money (they gave us dollar bills) and how to go for groceries and shopping. . . . "To shop, there are carts to put in all of what you need. If you [carry items in your pockets] they will see and [think you are hiding them]."

InNgeun: When you arrived in America, what was going on?

One: . . . When we arrived and touched earth [in December 1984] there were a lot of rela-

tives and friends who rushed to welcome, embraced and hugged us. . . . I was then very skinny, just like a fish bone. . . . My mother cried, my younger sister did too, my uncles and aunts also cried. They then [took] us to our sponsors' car. . . . We came out [of the airport], oh, we never saw [anything like this] before. All was white. I was surprised.

InNgeun: Before anything, what did you do?

Vong: . . . The sponsors explained how to go to the hospital. Naturally, when we arrived in a new atmosphere and climate, we had to fight for our health, we had to see doctors, have physical exams. Secondly, we looked for schools or where to study language and skills.

InNgeun: How about you, Aunt, do you remember?

One: Yes, I remember. When we arrived, our sponsors found us a home. About three or four days later, they took us for medical exams. Right after those exams, they took us to the flower house [Botanical Center in Des Moines]. They took your uncle and daughter to study for six months. I was not allowed to. I stayed at home and looked after the kids. After six months of study, they looked for a job for your uncle. . . . The sponsors asked for food stamps for us and cash assistance for our rent. The food stamps were enough to buy food. For the car, our sponsors provided for us: "Take the cheap one, because you haven't got a permanent job." Then I saved some money to pay back our sponsors.

InNgeun: Do you remember what you ate?

One: Rice! Everything I like, we had them all there. My son, my nieces, my granddaughters brought the food, much more than we could put in the refrigerator, we put them outside in the cold. . . . Our Tai Dam people looked in on us for everything, such as silverware, appliances. Our Tai Dam relatives, families, gave us everything, clothes or linens. After a while, I started looking for a job and got one.

InNgeun: Comparing the living, in this house and the house you used to live in in Laos or our country, what are the differences?

Vong: About the differences of living here, there are food, [running] water, electricity. . . . Renting this house, we have land to grow a garden, because our people like to have a backyard garden. Living here is very



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Tai Dam immigrant Somsak Saythongphet, center, smiles at a citizenship party.

comfortable, there is electricity, heating, air conditioning, a refrigerator, freezer, fans. This is the best for human beings, compared to the standard of living in Laos. . . .

One: . . . Over there, if you earn enough and own a house, that is it. Here, it's different. You have to set apart money for the house, water and electricity payments. If you've never done it before, it's kind of hard, but when you live many years longer, you try to get [save] money for the house, water and electricity, because you are afraid not to have money for them when they're due. That's the difference.

InNgeun: When you first came, what were your first jobs?

One: When I said I would like to work, our relatives took me to Job Service. I told them that I would like to work at a fabric-cutting company [Bob Ellen Companies, Inc.] where my daughter had been working. The Job Service staff was a Hmong [another Southeast Asian ethnic group]. He took me there to apply and take a test. Since then I worked there for one year and three months.

Vong: About me, I still work at my first job [Container Recovery, Inc.]. I'm old but still work. Talking about working here, nobody forces you to [accept or take a particular job]. And people don't like being forced by other people. That's why we're here. People like being forced, but forced by ourselves [self-motivation]. . . .

InNgeun: Do you mean the jobs you're both working at now are not the jobs you learned [in Laos]? You've been trained here?

Vong: These jobs are new and we've never learned them before.

One: We learned them here. We never learned, never saw [these kinds of jobs] in

Laos. We just tried our best.

InNgeun: When you first worked, did you have intentions to work temporarily or for a long time?

One: Before I worked I had set my mind to work until my retirement.

Vong: To work temporarily or permanently, we couldn't decide, it depended on our health. We had to ask ourselves if we had enough strength to work on the job. Or if there is a better job. Like all human beings, we have to look for high places, not like water that flows down hills, right? Water goes wherever is lower, but humans always look for betterness. Wherever is better, we should try to get there. That's the theory [*laughing*].

InNgeun: The job you had been trained for before, couldn't you find it here in America?

Vong: About my profession: . . . I was a physician in the army, referred to by the French as a medical assistant. Comparing that profession to here, I can't do it, because they use computers. The computer will do the tests and diagnosis, and people will follow the computer. That's not what I learned before. I had been working in the medical field for more than twenty years. . . .

InNgeun: Uncle, where did you go to study?

Vong: I went to PROTEUS [in Des Moines, a publicly funded, nonprofit employee training program for the disadvantaged, especially former farmers] for six months [in 1985]. . . . There are Tai Dam, Khmers, also Mexicans, and many nationalities studying together.

InNgeun: What did you learn?

Vong: Conversation, reading, writing.

InNgeun: . . . Was it hard to study?

Vong: It wasn't hard at all, because the government paid us to study [*laughing*]. It's not like in our country. Over there we had to buy our own books and tuition. Here, the government paid us to study, more than three dollars an hour.

InNgeun: How many hours a day did you study?

Vong: I studied eight hours a day. . . . Each program is for six months only. If you want to continue, you have to apply to the government for more funds. . . . You have to look for a job after enough studying to become self-sufficient.

InNgeun: How about you or your generation?

Do you try to teach the kids how to speak Tai Dam?

One: We talk in Tai Dam, of course. Sometimes our daughters, the youngest one talks to us in English. And I yell at them, "Don't talk to me in English, I don't understand anything." "I taught you," [they reply,] "you just don't remember." [laughing] Now children teach their parents. . . .

InNgeun: About the Tai Dam script: do you have any books or scripts in Tai Dam to read?

Vong: . . . Since we escaped and lived in new countries, we didn't have a chance to bring [Tai Dam history books] out. All were abandoned. But there are some writings. Especially our Tai Dam associations have published books for our people to read.

InNgeun: We're now coming back to the kids. How do you raise them and discipline them?

One: . . . This country is very advanced, very educated. Because I am ignorant, teaching my kids is telling them: "Please, study hard since this country has a lot of riches, opportunities, happiness, education. I was ignorant because I didn't get to school. I raise you up till now and

arrive in America. It was with a lot of difficulties. Believe me and study hard." That's all I can teach them. It's very different from Laos.

InNgeun: Do you want to add anything, Uncle? About our culture?

Vong: About the costumes: the Tai Dam nowadays still do not let them go, because there are people who just come straight from our country. After my generation, for sure, the children and the grandchildren's generations won't keep the Tai Dam old fashion of costumes.

One: There won't be any, after our generation. There won't be any because they don't know how to make them.

InNgeun: If we teach them to wear them once in a while, when there are parties or reunions?

One: Yes, we prepare for those occasions. When asked, they will know how to show. My youngest daughter already knows how to show.

Vong: Most of our people are good at socializing. We look after each other whenever there is sickness, a death, a birth. Our people know how to gather and look after each other. We still do this in Des Moines. The Americans would look wrong on us [misunderstand us] about weekends. Instead of working or after church, there are Tai Dam religion gatherings, or weddings. Our people still stick to custom, whenever there's a wedding. If invited we will go. But us, we help each other preparing the wedding for two or three days. We gather, we eat, a lot of cars are around here and there. We have stronger social ties, a stronger love and cooperation than Americans, truly speaking. These are the loves of our Tai Dam people.

InNgeun: Now in America, do you live close to many Tai Dam in this area?

Vong: Now here, I still have the same feeling, because of the love between the Tai Dam couldn't be thrown away. We're now in this area with eight houses, very close to each other.

InNgeun: How about the teaching: "My kid, he's an American, don't go out with him, I don't like you flirting with American boys." Is there anything like this?

Vong: I take it as natural. I feel rather good, in my opinion. Because being here, I want my children, girls or boys, to get close and associate with the Americans.

InNgeun: This question is not about being only

A Hmong woman about 1979, arriving in Des Moines.



friends, but flirting as boyfriends or girlfriends.

Vong: No, I don't set them apart. If they love each other, with black Americans, or white Americans, or Chek [Chinese ethnic] or Chinese, that's their business.

InNgeun: Auntie, how do you feel?

One: I want our people as daughters-in-law.

InNgeun: *[laughing]* Mostly, every mother would say so. . . . Talking about visitors or friends coming to our house, I don't mean our Tai Dam people *[but]* all other nationalities. How do you feel? Do you feel happy to welcome them?

Vong: This concerns respect and culture. . . . There is happiness and radiance because we have friends and relatives visiting. We will try to make those friends happy and satisfied with us. Following our Tai Dam traditions, we have to welcome, to entertain, and to feed them. That's our Tai Dam way. Many more people coming will be best. . . . But *[Americans]* are different. Following their ways, they tell in advance how many people will eat, how many will come. But us, we don't have to. From our Tai Dam traditions since long time ago, if there's a lot of relatives coming, that's much better. . . . At least, the very least, you have to offer tea. When going into somebody's house and there's no water offered, there will be bad talk around: "Going to that house, there's no water to drink!" Have you ever heard *[that expression]*?

InNgeun: Yes, what's the meaning, please tell me?

Vong: Now you're a young girl, you need to prepare for it. If there are relatives coming — with big glasses, fill only one third of it, not much.

One: Oh, that's old tradition. We don't do it anymore.

Vong: That's our tradition.

InNgeun: Even if we don't do it anymore, I want to know.

Vong: . . . If you fill the water glass full, it means you chase them out. . . . If I fill it less, it means that I want you to come often.

InNgeun: Now let's talk about the Tai Dam future in America.

Vong: . . . Since we've been here for ten years, there has been a big change, in education and



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Seuang KaVanh and child arrive in Des Moines in 1979.

traditions. On the good side, we do have more doctors now, and five years from now, there will be more. And the traditional culture is preserved by old people. It will disappear later. . . .

InNgeun: Auntie, five or ten years from now, do you think our Tai Dam people will hold their hair-bun on top *[a sign of marriage]* or still dress in their black skirts?

One: After my generation, hair-buns will be no more. Even the language will be spoken differently. When the next generation marries, they will tell their wives or children that their mothers were Tai Dam, how they dressed. They will tell, but won't dress like us.

Vong: Five years from now, there will be no distinction between Tai Dam and other people. For now, we still can tell who's Tai Dam because of the hair-bundle on top and black skirt for people over fifty years old. But for younger people, . . . they just dress like local *[American]* people. Everything is changing so fast, let alone our children's generation. So American people won't be able to tell who's Tai Dam; they will only know that we are Asians.

InNgeun: This question is more political. If Laos became a democracy again, would you



PHOTO BY JACK LUFKIN

Seated at a loom on display at the Historical Building, Toui Baccam wears a traditional Tai Dam black skirt, silver-buttoned blouse, and *kout-piay* headpiece.

want to go back? . . . If you did not have to fight, for example, and our country had turned back to democracy and everybody was allowed to go back because it belonged to us, would you want to stay there or just visit?

Vong: First of all, I would visit. . . . I don't think I would stay because I have already resettled here and my children growing up here would not go with me. As for my generation, we would go for political or democratic deliberation, not by force. But if there was a chance of fighting, I would go too. This is my cause, I fled not to run away from my country, but to go back to fight.

InNgeun: How about Aunty?

One: I want to go back to my country. Decades won't make me forget.

InNgeun: Is your mother still living in Tai Dam country?

One: My mother wrote me letters. She's still alive, but my father has already died. She recommended to my nephew: "I won't die till I hear news from my youngest daughter. Go and try to find her for me. Send me news as soon as you find her." That's how we got letters from her, also from my nephew's father, or my

brother, saying: "Dear sister, I am so poor here, if you have enough to help our mother and my family, please send me some clothes. Our mother won't go into the earth until she sees you first. . . . She loved you so much, missed you so much, she won't be able to go into the earth if she doesn't get to see her youngest child one more time. I have tried to find you, to have news about you. Now that I have letters and news from you, they are to me more precious than silver and gold." They are very poor over there. We are poor too, here — still we have enough to eat and enjoy life. But however happy we are here, we can't forget our people over there. Younger generations, five or ten years from now, might not know, not understand all these things. They might know that they are Tai Dam but not how miserable their people are.

InNgeun: That's true and possible. But the only way to prevent it depends on older people to keep on telling, orally or by scripts, how our history, our culture, and our people were. If not, our Tai Dam people will be no more, just like many other nationalities. . . . Do you think preserving our scripts and language is important?

Vong: Plainly talking, if you think it's important, it is, and if you think it's not, then it isn't. There are two aspects — first, if you think that the Tai Dam country is still our country, it's absolutely important; and if you don't care about our Tai Dam country, it's not important. We will be new people, such as all American people from England became Americans and built up their new country. □

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Sources include Jon Bowermaster, *Governor: An Oral History of Robert Ray* (Ames, 1987); "Tai Dam History" (unpublished, no date); "The Tai Dam: Nowhere To Stay," slide presentation written by Siang Bacthi, edited by Ginger Murphy (1988); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983); and Jerald Starr, ed., "The Lessons of the Vietnam War" (Center for Social Studies, 1988).