



**Fig. 10:** A scene of *lâu xá* drinking (Hoàng Lương, *muòng Thanh* [Diễn Biên], 1999).

Sometimes this fermented liquid is called *lâu tâu* (wine with rice chaff), particularly by the Tháy from Quy Châu district, Nghệ An province, because glutinous rice chaff must be added to the *ché* (jar) for facilitating the drinking, the solid part of the fermented mixture doesn't move with the liquid and obstruct the bamboo tubes. Ordinary rice chaff can turn the mixture sour; only glutinous rice chaff is suitable in this case.

The *lâu xá* is drunk on every possible occasion in family atmosphere or at *ban muòng* environment: feast, ritual ceremony, religious celebration, funerals, wedding, or even at the reception of an ordinary guest. Whenever there is any event, happy or sad, important or non-important, the *muòng's* inhabitants, men and women, young and old, are invited to gather and drink *lâu xá*, possibly in the gong vibration; it is really a pride and pleasure for the whole *ban muòng*. The *lâu xá* is consumed at any time of the day, early in the morning, or at noon, or late in the afternoon or, in most cases, in the evening. For these people, the drinking of *lâu xá* is radio, movies, and contract bridge all in one! In some cases, this ceremony will last for some hours or a whole day according to the wealth of the host and as long as the host's supply of *lâu xá* (and eventual food) holds out. Domestic animals receive also *lâu xá*. Often they are given the rice mash of the *lâu xá's* jar when it is finished and a change is made to a new one. This crude alcohol is always contained in an earthenware jar that is a heirloom (in the 1930s, a valuable jar was equivalent to some silver bars). The number of jars in a ceremony as well as the number of bamboo

tubes and their length can change according to local ethnic customs.

The *lâu xá* feast is, in fact, a gathering of all kin members to celebrate a product of glutinous rice. Sometimes, when there is a shortage of glutinous rice or glutinous paddy, other cereals such as maize, cassava root, or even mung bean are used to ferment the *lâu xá*. Raw material can be soaked or boiled before putting in the jar. Whatever the main ingredient, the yeast always contains some popped glutinous rice flour and other specific (for a given ethnic group) ingredients.

In the early 1920s, Dorgelès (1995 [1925]: 27), a French essayist, has described a scene of *lâu xá* feast among the Tháy in Sông Con region, Phú Quỳnh district, Nghệ An province: "Under some first forest trees, people are drinking from a jar, everyone sucks, in his turn, the same hollow bamboo as a straw. This kind of rice alcohol, with a taste of bitter beer, rarely gives pleasure to Europeans but for Vietnamese as well as for local ethnic peoples, for Cambodians as well as for Laotians, it is a beverage on feast occasions ... Young dancers drink long draughts ... and after that, they are cheered up ..." (translated from French by NXH).

Nobody knows the origin of *lâu xá* and its history, but in many folk songs and proverbs about *lâu xá* it is also called *ná* (wet rice fields). Therefore Hà Van Ban (1998: 479) suggested that *lâu xá* appeared only after the time when the Tháy produced rice in paddies. Anyway, humans, including the Tháy, knew the fermentation process very early, at least from the very beginning