



Fig. 11: A scene of *lẫu xá* preparation in Muồng Lò (Nghĩa Lộ) (Hoàng Luong, Vietnam, 1999).

of our era, i.e., before the appearance of wet rice production and, more importantly, mankind produced dry rice earlier than wet rice and the best *lẫu xá* is made from nếp nương (glutinous rice from upland fields). The Hà Van Ban's suggestion seems firmly ungrounded.

The following folktale about the origin of *lẫu xá* (collected in Thanh Hóa province, northern part of Central Vietnam) confirms the above-mentioned doubt:

Bá Khut is the unique son in Pham Pháng family that consists of only three persons, Bá Khut's parents in advanced age and himself. When he reaches his twenties, his parents urge him to get married. In the kin *chiêng bóc may* festival, he meets Ngân Liêng, a beautiful daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Xen Xay, who live in the surrounding *muồng*. The parents from both sides agree and organize a wonderful wedding party for the two young lovers and after that the couple lives in happiness and concordance.

Once Bá Khut's parents said to their son and daughter-in-law: "We are old enough and very happy to see both of you live in harmony. We want to taste some special delicacies before it is too late for us. Bá Khut and Ngân Liêng, our dear kids, if it is possible, each of you prepare for us a meal to show your filial piety."

Bá Khut goes to rivers and catches a lot of big fish, then with his strength and his skill he prepares, as usual, a sumptuous meal with grilled fish and steamed glutinous rice for his parents who taste it with a great satisfaction.

After two weeks it is Ngân Liêng's turn. She wishes to do something different from her husband. She remembers her mother's instruction before her wedding ceremonies two years ago: people like to eat and to drink at the same time. That is the best way to satisfy

people. She goes to rice fields, she enters into deep forests, and she gathers a couple of medicinal plants and spices that grow on the field borders and under high trees. She mixes and powders these plants; then she mixes it again with a little glutinous rice flour and stream water. She wraps the mixture with fresh banana leaves and puts it on the bamboo frame above the fireplace in the family kitchen. After a week, she is stupefied by the vapors and taste of this mixture.²⁹ She decides to add more steamed glutinous rice and more water and hermetically seals the recipient up with sun-dried banana leaves.

The contest day arrives; Ngân Liêng goes to the forest and takes two long bamboo tubes to facilitate the drinking of her liquid produce, then she prepares an ordinary meal with aromatic [glutinous] rice and grilled fish and invites her parents-in-law to taste it with her liquid produce. And, naturally, her parents-in-law are wonderfully satisfied with the meal. Moreover, after drinking the liquid provided by their daughter-in-law the Pham Pháng get the feeling of strength and joviality, their cheeks turn attractively rose. The next day, they invite with pride some neighbors to taste and to appreciate the fermented produce prepared by their daughter-in-law. From then on, the Tháy master the way to prepare this *lẫu xá* because Ngân Liêng's produce is really what we call now *lẫu xá* (*ruou cần*). From that time on the Tháy produce and drink *lẫu xá* at any festivity or ceremony. In particular, on their wedding day, the bride and the groom have to drink up a *ché* full of *lẫu xá* before going to bed (Fig. 11).

For the Tháy, festivities cannot be called festivities if the hosts do not provide some *ché* (traditional terracotta jar) of *lẫu xá*. Nowadays, every

²⁹ Later on it is called *ke* (yeast) or *pénh lẫu* (yeast for *lẫu xá*).