

# SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF KHO MU HOUSEHOLDS IN CURRENT LIVESTOCK BREEDING

## Case research in Ky Son district, Nghe An province

Dang Minh Ngoc

Institute of Anthropology

Email: [dmngoc@gmail.com](mailto:dmngoc@gmail.com)

Received: 05/9/2024; Reviewed: 22/9/2024; Revised: 28/9/2024; Accepted: 28/10/2024; Released: 20/11/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54163/ncdt/351>

Social relations play an important role in helping Kho mu households in Ky Son district, Nghe An province develop livelihood activities, including livestock raising to develop household economy. The article examines the social relationships of Kho mu households in livestock raising as reflected in their relationships with the veterinary system, markets, government support and how these relationships impact the livestock raising activities of Kho mu households. The role of social relations of households in each situation will show the ability to change the form of livestock farming of the people. The research results contribute to clarifying the characteristics of social relations of Kho mu households in the conversion of livestock farming forms of the Kho mu in Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune and Binh Son 2 village, Ta Ca commune, Ky Son district, Nghe An province.

**Keywords:** *Kho mu ethnic group; Social relations; Livestock farming; Ky Son district; Nghe An province.*

### 1. Introduction

Ky Son is a mountainous border district with special difficulties, located in the west of Nghe An province, 250 km from Vinh city. Ky Son district has a natural area of 209,484 ha, with 203.409 km of border adjacent to 4 districts and 3 provinces of Laos. The whole district has 21 communes and towns, of which 11 are border communes. Ky Son has Nam Can international border gate, which is a place for trade, commerce and exchange of goods between Vietnam and Laos. By the end of 2022, Ky Son district had 83,480 people, of which the Kho mu people had the largest population with 30,992 people, accounting for 37.13% of the district's total population (Ky Son district Ethnic Affairs Department, 2023). Currently, according to Decision No. 1227/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the Kho mu people are on the list of 32 ethnic groups still facing many difficulties. Therefore, with the desire to contribute to the development of the Kho mu ethnic group in particular, build and develop the socio-economy of Ky Son district in general, at the same time contribute to ensuring national security and defense in the border area between Vietnam and Laos in Nghe An province, the author chose to study the livelihoods of the Kho mu people currently living in Binh Son 2 village (Ta Ca commune) and Khanh

Thanh village (Nam Can commune), Ky Son district, Nghe An province, focusing on the issue of social relations in livestock raising of Kho mu households in Ky Son district, Nghe An province.

### 2. Research overview

Vietnam is a country with a large agricultural economy, in which livestock contributes 30% of total agricultural output. Livestock is an important economic sector in Vietnam, to be the main source of food for the people. Of which, small and medium scale livestock farming accounts for 70% of the total product value of the livestock industry. This is also an economic sector that helps farmers increase their income, solve many jobs for workers (Huong & Hung, 2015).

Animal husbandry is one of the important economic activities of ethnic minorities. Animal husbandry is not only an economic activity but also preserves spiritual values in ethnic life (Linh, 2015).

Research in Nghe An province shows that the black pig breed of the Mong and Kho mu people is the most popular among the people. In order to raise this type of pig, they do not have to use industrial feed but only use corn, potatoes, bananas and forest leaves. They often sell pigs and chickens at Muong Xen market, and even bring them down to Hoa Binh town (Tuong Duong

district) for wholesale and retail (Ha, 2012a).

Livestock and poultry farming is currently a strength that helps people in Ky Son district reduce poverty and become prosperous, this is also a “spearhead” for local economic development, contributing to maintaining the goal of 3 pacifications: “Peace for the people, peace for the area, peace for the border”... (Thu & Phuc, 2024).

Social relations play an important role for Vietnamese farming households in production and household economic development (Cien, 2018). All relationships between individuals are established through stable, normative social interactions (Truong, 2023). However, these relationships are very different if we consider the content or social nature of each type of social relationship (Mui, 2023, p.54). The ability to diversify the livelihood of each individual or household is closely related to the level of their network and social relationships (Lan & Tam, 2022, p.22).

### 3. Research method

The article is based on the results of investigation and research conducted in Ky Son district, Nghe An province during the 2023 field trip and an overview of researches, as well as a synthesis of relevant secondary documents, thereby clarifying the content of this research.

### 4. Research result

#### 4.1. Overview of natural characteristics and livestock activities in the research area

Within the scope of the article, the author focuses on describing, analyzing, and evaluating the social relationships of Kho mu households in livestock farming in Nam Can and Ta Ca communes, Ky Son district, Nghe An province.

##### \* Nam Can Commune

It is a mountainous, border commune of Ky Son district (Nghe An province), bordering Pha Danh commune to the east, Noong Het Tay village cluster (Laos) to the west, with 23,099 km of border adjacent to Laos, Ta Ca commune to the south, and Na Loi commune to the north. Nam Can commune has a natural area of 9,031.07 hectares. As of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Nam Can commune has 908 households, with 4,512 people. Nam Can commune has long been home to 4 ethnic groups: Thai, Kho mu, Mong and Kinh.

The Kho mu people have 668 people, accounting for 14.8% of the commune’s population; residing in Pa Ca and Khanh Thanh villages (Ky Son district Party Committee, 2020, p.535).

The commune’s livestock and poultry are 168 buffaloes, 2,900 cows, 300 pigs, 7,756 poultry and 553 goats. The commune regularly pays attention to and directs vaccination and prevention of hunger, cold and heat for livestock and poultry. The commune’s veterinarians have sprayed disinfectants to prevent African swine fever and vaccinated the commune’s livestock against foot and mouth disease and anthrax (People’s Committee of Nam Can commune, 2023).

Khanh Thanh village alone has 100% Kho mu people. The village has 300 cows, 50 buffaloes, 100 pigs, 1200 chickens, ducks and 150 goats (Field data collected by the research team, 2023).

##### \* Ta Ca Commune

It is a mountainous and difficulty commune of Ky Son district (Nghe An province), bordering Huu Kiem commune to the east, Pha Ven village to the west, Noong Het Tay cluster, Noong Het district, Xieng Khouang province of the Laos People’s Democratic Republic to the south; Tay Son commune to the south, Nam Can and Pha Danh communes to the north. Ta Ca commune has a total natural land area of 6,442.74 hectares. As of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Ta Ca commune has 1,137 households, with 5,493 people; including 4 ethnic groups: Thai, Kinh, Mong and Kho mu. The Kho mu ethnic group has 2,603 people, accounting for 47.4% of the total population of the commune, residing in Hoa Son, Son Thanh, Binh Son 1, Binh Son 2, Na Nhu, Sa Vang, Nhan Ly and Nhan Cu villages (Ky Son district Party Committee, 2020, p.534-535).

The commune’s livestock and poultry are 170 buffaloes, 1,720 cows, 1,050 pigs, 13,790 poultry and 105 goats. The commune continues to direct the people in the commune to prevent African swine fever, septicemia and foot and mouth disease by disinfecting and vaccinating all livestock in the commune against septicemia and foot and mouth disease (Ta Ca Commune People’s Committee 2023).

Binh Son 2 village has 100% Kho mu people. The village’s livestock and poultry are 48 buffaloes, 81 cows, 63 goats, 20 pigs and 120 chickens (Field data of the research team, 2023).

#### 4.2. Social relationships in livestock farming among Kho mu households

Kho mu villages are basically grouped together based on neighborly relations, meaning that in a village there are many families from different clans residing, each village has about 3 clans but there are also villages with up to 9 clans, between Kho mu

villages and families in the village, blood relations still dominate, however neighborly relations are increasingly maintained and strengthened, clans in the village are often linked together by tai hem relationships (*friendship*). It is these relationships that are the basis for economic mutual assistance... (Chung & Associates, 1995, p.159-160).

The Kho mu people's livestock and poultry raising depends on the needs of each household. Their farming practice is half care, half free-range, so the family's livestock and poultry develop naturally. Currently, villagers mainly raise buffaloes, cows and goats to sell in case of illness, funerals or weddings when they need cash. Buffaloes and cows are grazed in the village's common grazing ground, households build sheds or pens so that the buffaloes and cows have a place to sleep at night. Every three days, the owner brings salt, medicine and grass into the ground to feed the buffaloes and cows. If you don't see your family's buffalo or cow in the pasture, you have to go look for it, if you find it dead, you can bring it home to butcher it to eat or sell it for 60,000 - 80,000 VND/kilogram to the villagers, if the beef is healthy, you can butcher it and sell it for 150,000 VND/kg. A buffalo currently costs about 20 million VND/one and a large cow only costs 10 - 15 million VND/one, half the price compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. Goats are new livestock. People in Binh Son 2 village saw some Kho mu households in Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune raising goats and they developed well, so they also bought them to try raising and they developed relatively well. The wages sent back by relatives working in Taiwan are also a source of capital for people to buy goats for raising: "My husband went to Taiwan and sent money back. I took out 5 million to buy 4 goats from an uncle near my parents' house. Later, two of them died due to an epidemic. The remaining two were raised freely, gave birth on their own and created the herd of goats we have today. My family has a herd of goats, so if any of my siblings or my husband's family is in difficulty, they can give them away or lend them 1-2 goats, when the goats give birth, they can return the goats or the parents. When the children move out, if the parents are well-off, they can give their son's family 1-2 cows, buffaloes or a few goats as capital" (*Interview 36 year old female in Binh Son 2 village, Ta Ca commune*). In case all the livestock die due to an epidemic, they will ask or buy from relatives and friends in the village, commune or in the neighboring Nam Can commune or buy at Muong Xen market.

For a long time, the Kho mu people in the West of Nghe An have had ethnic relationships with their relatives in Laos, their nomadic lifestyle and historical changes have caused this ethnic group to frequently move in multiple directions within the region and area (Toan, 2014, p.84).

Traditionally, the Kho mu people mainly raise buffalo, cows, pigs and chickens, but rarely raise goats. Raising goats on a large scale with up to one hundred goats like the farm model (of Mr. A) in Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune, started when he visited successful livestock farming models in other places, which encouraged people to develop livestock farming. "I visited the buffalo, cow and goat fattening model in Noong Het and Muong Kham and saw people successfully fattening buffalo, cow, goats, I also learned from them, buying buffalo, cow, goat to raise (Interview 50 year old male, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune).

"Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune currently has over 10 farms raising buffalo, cows, goats, pigs, chickens,... for sale purpose. The number of animals raised on each farm varies from a few dozen to a few hundred" (Interview Nhang M, 48 years old, Kho mu ethnic group, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune). The scale of the farms ranges from several dozen to hundreds of hectares, the largest being the farm of Mr. Moong Ph.Ng's family with an area of over 100 hectares raising buffalo, cows, goats, pigs, chickens and fish. Thus, it can be seen that the farm economy is contributing to promoting the process of transforming the agricultural and rural economic structure towards rapidly increasing the proportion of commodity production in a concentrated direction" (Cuong, 2024, p.62).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people rarely visit each other's houses to exchange information about livestock farming, but often use social networks such as Zalo and Facebook as a new form of information exchange on how to care for and prevent diseases for livestock. They often share experiences on how to prevent and treat livestock diseases with brothers, relatives and neighbors to develop livestock farming together. Thanks to that, brothers and relatives increased their income and created a local market for goats. Income from goat farming has contributed to improving the livelihoods of some households in the village.

This is a positive change of some Kho mu households in the village moving from a small-scale household livestock farming model mainly

serving rituals and using as food for the family to commercial livestock farming on a large-scale farm model with hundreds of cattle “Currently, my family is raising 10 male buffaloes, priced at 35 million/one; 15 cows priced at 8 million/one; 100 goats and growing several hectares of elephant grass for buffaloes, cows and goats to eat (Interview 50 year old male, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune). Kho mu households raising livestock also participate in training courses organized by the district agricultural extension agency in conjunction with the commune agricultural extension agency on how to care for and prevent diseases for livestock. “I attended a training course on how to raise and prevent diseases for buffaloes, cows and goats organized by the district agricultural extension agency in conjunction with the commune agricultural extension agency, so I also know how to treat some common diseases for my family’s livestock” (Interview 48 years old male). In this course, in addition to the new knowledge about animal husbandry they gain from the lecturers, they also have the opportunity to exchange experiences about animal husbandry, disease prevention and how to sell livestock to traders without being forced to lower prices. During the social distancing period due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kho mu people’s buffaloes, cows and goats could not be sold at the market, some Kho mu farm owners and traders set up livestock trading groups on Zalo and Facebook to post photos of livestock and exchange information about prices and quality of livestock “If I need to buy buffaloes, cows or goats, I will ask my brothers to help me find them, take photos, post them on Facebook and give me a price, if I see them, we will meet at a certain location so I can pay and take the buffaloes, cows or goats home to raise” (Interview 51 year old male, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune).

In livestock trading, the Kho mu also value trading relationships with relatives because buffalo, cows and goats are valuable animals, so trading with relatives and family members helps them feel secure about not being cheated. “When buying buffalo, cows and goats to raise, I will prioritize buying from my brothers, relatives and neighbors so that I don’t have to worry about them getting sick or dying because they often sell me good, healthy breeds at reasonable prices” (Interview 48 year old male, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune).

In business activities, friendship and intra-ethnic relationships are also quite clearly shown. Friendship is a purely personal relationship, built

and developed by each individual, which is not a typical way of forming business relationships like kinship or clan relationships, but for each person, it is still one of the basic forms of social relationships (Condominas Georges, 1997, p.25-27).

#### ***4.3. The relationship between livestock farming households and the government and socio-political organizations***

The development of livestock farming in the village must take into account the role of the State’s poverty reduction support projects that have provided cows and goats to some poor households to help them escape poverty and the Policy Bank has lent capital to households to develop livestock farming. In addition, there is also support from district and commune agricultural extension agencies to guide people on how to prevent diseases for buffalo, cows, and goats, how to care for these animals so that they can grow well and encourage and support people to build barns for buffalo, cows and goats to prevent cold and disease so that they can sell at a good price on the market. The social network in animal husbandry of the ethnic people in the past mainly relied on mutual assistance combined with buying and selling on the market. Recently, when the market developed, the social network in animal husbandry of the Kho mu people in Ta Ca and Nam Can communes has also developed quite well.

Livestock raising households in Ky Son district in general and the Kho mu people in Khanh Thanh village in particular are strongly supported by the district, commune and village authorities in building barns and borrowing bank loans to develop livestock raising. “Each member of the farmers’ association can borrow 30-100 million VND to develop livestock farming. In the village, 60/83 households have borrowed money from banks to develop livestock farming” (Interview Village official).

“In 2015, growing hybrid corn was not successful, so my family borrowed 30 million from the bank to invest in buying 13 goats. From 2015 to 2019, the herd of goats gave birth to 100 goats. We sold 60 goats for 200 million to buy 12 male buffaloes to fatten. This job brings a stable income with the selling price of female goats at 90,000 VND/ kilogram, male goats at 130,000 VND/ kilogram and breeding goats at 150,000 VND/ kilogram” (Interview male born in 1972).

Kho mu households raising livestock also participate in training courses organized by the district agricultural extension agency in conjunction

with the commune agricultural extension agency on how to care for and prevent diseases for livestock. “I attended a training course on how to raise and prevent diseases for buffaloes, cows and goats organized by the district agricultural extension agency in conjunction with the commune agricultural extension agency, so I also know how to treat some common diseases for my family’s livestock” (Interview 48 years old male).

In the past, people often raised livestock by free-range method, cows and goats found their own food every day, so many animals got sick and died due to lack of food and care. Since around 2000, the district’s Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has coordinated with the commune’s agricultural extension department to implement a program to provide technical guidance and support for people to grow elephant grass for livestock and to encourage people to build barns for livestock to avoid the cold in winter, thanks to this program, the livestock of households in Ky Son district has grown rapidly. Some livestock farmers have converted the traditional farming method from letting cattle roam free to find their own food to a semi-free range, semi-cage method, raising and cutting elephant grass for cattle to eat.

Local authorities and organizations have mobilized, trained, and supported people to build barns for livestock, helping them switch from free-range livestock farming to semi-free-range (during the day) and semi-confinement (staying in barns at night). There are some large farm households that are often the first families to come to establish villages, so they have more land than other households in the village.

#### ***4.4. Social relations between livestock farming households and breeding suppliers***

Small-scale farmers often prefer to buy buffalo, cows and goats from relatives and neighbors in the village or commune because these animals are often suitable for the climate and rarely get sick. When they decide to buy livestock from a family, they will spend time observing the livestock for a certain period of time to see if the livestock is healthy and grows quickly, only then will they discuss buying the livestock with the owner. However, if they cannot find a suitable pet at a reasonable price, they will ask their relatives in Laos to help them find it, take pictures and quote a price. When I need to buy buffalo or cows, I will ask my maternal cousin (my mother’s younger brother who is currently in Laos) in Laos to take pictures and send them to me via

Zalo and give me a quote, if I find it reasonable, I will ask them to buy it for me (Interview 50 year old male, Khanh Thanh village, Nam Can commune).

If a cattle looks healthier and the price of that cattle is also cheaper, they will prioritize buying that cattle. Spontaneous small-scale cattle raising households are usually households that feed their cattle with elephant grass, corn, cassava and rice bran, which are agricultural products that they grow themselves.

#### ***4.5. Social relationships of livestock farming households with the veterinary system***

Commune and district veterinary offices play an important role in the livestock raising process of small and large-scale households. The fear of livestock diseases spreading to the whole herd and losing both capital and assets is a constant concern of large-scale livestock farming households. Therefore, they often have a very close relationship with the district and commune veterinary offices. “When my goats got sick, I reported to the commune and district veterinary officers to come down and help with treatment advice and buy medicine right away. The commune and district veterinary officers came down to visit and examine my goats, give them injections and instruct me on how to give them medicine and injections”. District veterinary officers play an important role in disease management in large livestock farms in villages, communes and districts.

For large-scale livestock farming households, they can seek help from commune or district veterinary officers by calling Zalo for advice on how to prevent and treat livestock diseases. If after one or two days the animal shows no signs of improvement, the commune or district veterinary officer will come to examine and treat the animal.

For Kho mu households in the village that raise livestock on a small scale, when livestock stops eating or gets sick, they will let the animals recover on their own or they will go to the veterinary pharmacy to buy medicine for the animals to drink or inject. Or they can tell the veterinary pharmacist about the symptoms of the animals’ illness such as diarrhea, rashes or foot and mouth disease... The pharmacist will suggest medicines that the livestock owner can buy to inject or give to the sick livestock. In case the disease still does not go away, they will report to the president of the farmers’ association or the village chief or the commune or district veterinary officer to support them in treating the family’s livestock.

#### **4.6. Social relations of livestock farming households with the market**

##### *4.6.1. Social relations between livestock farming households and traders*

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the selling price of buffalo and cows was relatively high, around 20-30 million VND/one, but after the Covid-19 pandemic, the selling price of these livestock was only half, traders explained that because China closed the border gate, they could not export as many buffalo and cows as before. Traders in Cao Bang province, Do Luong district, Nghe An province still regularly contact livestock farmers to discuss buying livestock, however due to unstable output, livestock farmers are often forced to lower prices by traders.

##### *4.6.2. Social relations of livestock farming households with local associations*

Most of the livestock farming households in the village today participate in a social organization in the commune such as: Farmers' Association, Women's Association, Veterans' Association... The district's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development often coordinates with the commune's Farmers' Association to organize training courses on how to care for and prevent livestock diseases for association members.

In addition, the association also supports members in completing procedures to borrow capital from banks to develop livestock farming. "In the village, 60/83 households borrow capital from banks to develop livestock farming. Each member of the Farmers' Association can borrow from 30-100 million VND to develop livestock farming" (Interview Village official).

### **5. Discussion**

*Firstly*, the commune and village veterinary officers provided support as soon as the livestock farmers reported that their livestock were infected, at the same time injected disinfectants and fully vaccinated all livestock in the commune against anthrax and foot and mouth disease. However, epidemics still occur in some livestock households and small farms because the Kho mu people are only familiar with small-scale livestock farming of a few to a few dozen animals per household according to traditional livestock farming methods, so when switching to large-scale livestock farming, farm owners do not have enough knowledge about barn hygiene as well as knowledge about disease

prevention and treatment for livestock. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen training for livestock owners on barn hygiene, disease prevention and treatment for livestock.

*Secondly*, due to unstable output, livestock farmers are often forced to lower prices by traders when selling livestock. It is necessary to support Kho mu livestock farming households to sign contracts with frozen food processing factories or support them to process livestock meat into OCOP products that can be sold in supermarket systems nationwide to increase income for livestock farming households.

*Thirdly*, the district Department of Agriculture and Agricultural Extension plays an important role in mobilizing, guiding and supporting people to grow elephant grass and build barns for livestock so that people can switch from the traditional form of livestock farming of letting livestock roam freely during the day to raising livestock in barns at night and feeding cattle elephant grass. However, there are still some households in some villages that let their livestock roam freely to find food for themselves and have not built barns to keep their livestock out of the cold, so their livestock still die from disease. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to support and mobilize households to grow elephant grass and build barns for livestock to avoid the cold in winter.

### **6. Conclusion**

It can be said that from small-scale livestock households to Kho mu livestock farms, everyone benefits from social relationships. However, for livestock farming to develop more strongly, there needs to be a close connection between livestock farming households and farms with the veterinary system, market, support from local authorities, banks, women's unions, farmers' associations,...

In order to help livestock households, especially livestock farms, actively participate in the market, the commodity chain needs more active support from the livestock and veterinary systems, social organizations, local authorities, banks,... Currently, livestock farmers mainly rely on their social networks with brothers, relatives and neighbors without participating in formal livestock associations such as the product supply chain of canned meat processing plants or cooperatives. Livestock households and farms need support from cooperatives so that they can bring their livestock products into the supermarket system in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

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## QUAN HỆ XÃ HỘI CỦA CÁC HỘ GIA ĐÌNH NGƯỜI KHƠ MÚ TRONG CHĂN NUÔI HIỆN NAY Nghiên cứu trường hợp tại huyện Kỳ Sơn, tỉnh Nghệ An

**Đặng Minh Ngọc**

Viện Dân tộc học; Email: [dmngoc@gmail.com](mailto:dmngoc@gmail.com)

Nhận bài: 05/9/2024; Phản biện: 22/9/2024; Tác giả sửa: 28/9/2024; Duyệt đăng: 28/10/2024; Phát hành: 20/11/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54163/nctd/351>

Quan hệ xã hội đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc giúp các hộ gia đình người Khơ mú ở huyện Kỳ Sơn, tỉnh Nghệ An phát triển các hoạt động sinh kế, trong đó có hoạt động chăn nuôi để phát triển kinh tế hộ gia đình. Bài viết xem xét các mối quan hệ xã hội của các hộ gia đình người Khơ mú trong chăn nuôi gia súc thể hiện trong mối quan hệ với hệ thống thú y, thị trường, sự hỗ trợ của chính quyền và các mối quan hệ này có tác động như thế nào tới hoạt động chăn nuôi của các hộ gia đình người Khơ mú. Vai trò của quan hệ xã hội của các hộ gia đình trong từng hoàn cảnh sẽ cho thấy khả năng chuyển đổi hình thức chăn nuôi của người dân. Kết quả nghiên cứu góp phần làm rõ đặc trưng quan hệ xã hội của các hộ gia đình người Khơ mú trong chuyển đổi hình thức chăn nuôi ở bản Khánh Thành, xã Nậm Cắn và bản Bình Sơn 2, xã Tà Cạ, huyện Kỳ Sơn, tỉnh Nghệ An.

**Từ khóa:** Dân tộc Khơ mú; Quan hệ xã hội; Chăn nuôi gia súc; Huyện Kỳ Sơn; Tỉnh Nghệ An.