

Research Article

## Researching the Development of Linen Production of H'mong Tribe in CAT CAT Village, SAPA, LAO CAI Province, Vietnam

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### Abstract

Linen production is one of the long-standing traditional crafts and plays an important role in the economic and cultural life of the H'mong tribe. In the socio-economic activities of the H'mong tribe in Cat Cat in particular and in Sa Pa in general, although traditional crafts are not the main income-generating occupations, they are religious activities of the H'Mong tribe and contribute to the creation of products that serve daily garment needs. Currently, linen production as well as many other traditional crafts of H'mong tribe has been focused on development and conservation by the local authorities and people. It has been turned into unique and attractive tourism products that make practical contribution to economic activities and cultural preservation of the local community.

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*Keywords: H'mong, Cat Cat village, flax, linen production, traditional craft.*

### Introduction

Cat Cat village - a village of H'mong tribe was formed in the late 19th century - early 20th century, located about 2 km from Sa Pa town. This is the living area of about 600 people belonging to 100 households of the H'mong (Black Mong) ethnic group. Cat Cat village is not only known for its unspoiled natural landscape, but also a place to preserve and preserve the unique cultural beauty of H'mong people. Moreover, H'mong tribe in Sa Pa also have many plentiful and diverse traditional occupations, such as brocade linen weaving, silver carving, agricultural tool production, indigo dyeing, beeswax painting, etc. Today, many traditional handicrafts of H'mong people have become a unique cultural tourism resource, exploited into unique and attractive tourism products, attracting the attention of a large number of national and international tourists.

Linen production (Weaving flax fiber/linen weaving) is one of the long-standing traditional crafts and plays an important role in the economic and cultural life of H'mong people. There is an old saying of the H'mong people that said: "If you are hungry, don't eat rice seed, if you live in poverty, you must have a linen shirt to wear when you die". Linen is seen as an indispensable item in their daily life. It is associated with the life cycle of each H'mong ethnic group as well as their religious life. Currently, in the context of social changes, especially the strong impact of the fourth industrial revolution, many traditional crafts of ethnic minorities in general and of the H'mong in particular are no longer valued and kept as original as before. The number of H'mong people in Cat Cat who still preserve their jobs is not much, mainly middle-aged women and the elderly who do not have stable jobs. The younger generation of H'mong mostly pays little attention to the traditional occupation of their nation and often works in other localities. Therefore, many traditional occupations of H'mong people, including the linen weaving, have gradually disappeared and changed rapidly, and there is a shortage of people to transfer and develop this profession.

In order to continue to preserve and develop the traditional craft of linen weaving of H'mong people in the modern rhythm of life, it is necessary to have a specific study on the development status of this traditional profession. On that basis, it is necessary to find out the right direction, conservation and development solutions to improve the livelihoods of H'mong people. At the same time, promoting the value of this traditional profession in tourism development and preservation of local culture is required.

## Material And Methods

1. Field trip: We had a field trip in Cat Cat village, Hoang Lien commune, Sa Pa town, Lao Cai province in 2020.

2. Interviews: In order to implement this article, we conducted interviews with commune officials, leaders of Cat Cat Travel On Member Company Limited, H'mong households doing linen weaving and some other people in Cat Cat village.

3. Other resources:

We consulted the following documents:

- Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee: (1) Plan No. 254/KH-UBND signed on September 28, 2020 "Development of tourism products in Lao Cai province in the period of 2021 - 2025, vision to 2030"; (2) Decision No. 1558/QD-UBND signed on May 9, 2017 approving the project "Protecting and promoting the value of the national intangible cultural heritage in Lao Cai province in the period 2017 - 2020".

- Reports: "Flax and the process of processing flax into yarn/fiber of the H'mong people in Cat Cat village, San Xa Ho commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province", "Folk shaping and decoration techniques on costumes of H'mong people in Cat Cat village, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province", (Report of the project "Investment in preserving traditional H'mong ethnic villages in Cat Cat village, San Sa Ho commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province" - Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism)

## Results And Discussion

### 1. The development status of the H'mong linen production in Cat Cat village

#### 1.1. The change in the area of flax cultivation of H'mong people in Cat Cat village

Up to now, the flax plant has always played a special role in the material and spiritual cultural life of H'mong people and is considered a symbol of H'mong culture. H'mong people often choose relatively fertile, flat and windless plots of land to grow flax for weaving. Flax plot of the H'mong in Cat Cat can be near or far from home, depending on the terrain, geology and climate. Several crops or more can be grown in each plot, depending on the fertility of the soil.

The data collected during the survey shows that: The total area of flax fields in Cat Cat village today, compared to 20 years ago, has almost no big changes when considering in the village scale. However, in terms of household size, this variation is very large. 20 years ago, in Cat Cat village, there were less than 30 households with more than 100 people (about 5 times less than today). Even so, the average area of flax field of each household was 450 m<sup>2</sup>/household. Households planted an average of about 15 kg of seeds every year in the past. Now, the area of flax cultivation of households in the village has decreased by an average of 250-300 m<sup>2</sup> compared to before. Even up to 15 families in this village (accounting for about 21% of the households in this village) currently do not have their own linen fields but share with another family, usually parents or siblings [1]. It is the decline in the area of flax cultivation field that has greatly affected the maintenance and development of the traditional craft of linen weaving and weaving of the H'mong here.

#### 1.2. The process of linen production

There are many complicated stages to process flax into yarn and this work must be based on the experience and skillful hands of H'mong women. In the whole weaving process, yarn making takes the most time and takes a lot of effort. The division of labor in the process of creating raw materials for linen weaving of H'mong people in Cat Cat depends on gender and age. Normally, men are involved in the tillage, planting and harvesting of flax while the women in the family do all the fiber production.

Table 1: The process of linen production

No	Stages	Detail content
1	Stripping flax bark	After harvesting flax, people will bring the trunk of the flax plant to dry in the sun, dry enough dew and then strip the bark. 4 long fibers can be usually stripped with a flax plant, then each long fiber is stripped into 2 - 3 parts and the final result is 8 - 12 fibers/plant. The stripping time of each family is usually about 20 days.
2	Pounding	Flax bark after stripping is tied up in equal bundles, put them in a

	flax fiber	mortar and pounded for about half an hour to soften to make it easier to join without leaving any joints. The pulping process usually takes 4-5 days.
3	Splicing flax fiber	This step takes the most time to be carried out. H'mong women often join flax fibers whenever their hands are free. With a roll of raw flax at the waist, on the way to the fields, to the market, ... even when receiving guests by the fire, they always join the yarn.
4	Spinning flax fiber	After splicing the flax fiber by hand, the yarn is spun on the spinning wheel again. In order not to break, these fiber bundles are dipped in water for 15 to 20 minutes before spinning to soften and increase toughness. Spinning process is carried out in about 5 days.
5	Collecting flax fiber	The yarn after spinning has achieved the necessary softness, suppleness, roundness, twisting and strength, but at this time, the yarn is only rolled into each small bobbin. In order to carry out the next stages, people must collect the yarn into large bundles with a spinning reel. Yarn collection was carried out within 7 days.
6	Boiling – incubating - washing flax fiber	This stage has the effect of whitening the fiber. People soak the fiber bundles with water mixed kitchen ash and then boil until the green skin is peeled off. After each time of boiling the yarn, it will be incubated with kitchen ash for 5 days. After that, it is wash it and put on the spinning reel to dry. Next, the yarn is boiled and incubated with kitchen ash for 3 more times. Particularly for the last time of boiling, people also add a little beeswax for white, smooth and tough fibers.
7	Rolling flax fiber	People use a round log as a roller, a smooth hewn stone or a wooden plank, about 1 m long, about 0.3 m wide. People put the yarn on a round log, take a stone or a plank to put it on this round log, then stand on the stone and then roll the yarn.
8	Gathering flax fiber	After rolling, the yarn is put on the spinning reel for easy removal. The way to gather the yarn is very simple, people put the yarn end into the bottom of the basket and then rotate the spinning reel, unloading the yarn and gradually dropping it into the basket. When gathering the yarn, do not allow children to approach it, as they will mess up the yarn if they play with it.
9	Arranging flax fiber	After gathering the yarn, it is time to thread yarn on a loom by spindle. Each one consists of only 10 or 12 strands. There need be 2 people to thread yarn: One person grabs the flax fibers and goes from one end to the other by hand to pin the yarn to wooden stakes on the floor, one person looks after the yarn to keep it from tangle.
10	Linen weaving	Put the flax faber on the loom to start weaving and create linen costumes

Source: Field survey, [1]

In general, the fabric of the H'mong people in Cat Cat village often has a non-fixed width, depending on the frame of the person being measured, the fabric is wide or narrow, but the most common size is still from 20 - 40 cm. To weave a cloth 10m long, 40cm wide, it usually takes 20 hours continuously. On average, for each fabric-making season, each H'mong woman with normal skills can weave about 40-60m of fabric [2]. When the cloth is finished weaving, it will be dyed indigo, dried, cut and sewn.



Rolling flax fiber



Spinning flax fiber



Linen loom

Figure 1: Some steps of linen weaving process

### 1.3. The development of linen production

Throughout the nation's history, flax and linen weaving have always been an indispensable part of every H'mong people. Wherever they settle down, the H'mong always spend a fertile, moist land to sow flax seeds and weave cloth in their spare time. Most of the black H'mong women up to the age of 15 are proficient in growing flax for weaving.

Currently, 54 households out of nearly 100 H'mong households living in Cat Cat village still maintain the traditional craft of linen production. Because H'mong women only do this work in their spare time and labor productivity is not high, output products are not stable. For many households, they still maintain brocade linen weaving but this is not the profession that maintains income for the family. H'mong people are better aware of preserving and promoting the traditional craft of weaving only since the formation and development of Cat Cat tourist area.

With the support of Cat Cat Travel One Member Company Limited, 14 H'mong households have developed the traditional craft of weaving and turning into a unique and attractive tourist product. This job not only creates a highlight for visitors to visit, but also creates products to sell to tourists.. Therefore, the traditional craft of weaving is preserved and actively promoted, and the life of H'mong people in Cat Cat is gradually improved. The income of these households is less than 10 million VND/month from selling products to tourists Most of the manufactured goods are sold directly to tourists in Cat Cat village or indirectly to tourists through the supply to souvenir shops in Sa Pa town and surrounding areas.

Table 2: Some products from linen weaving and some information about H'mong households doing linen weaving in Cat Cat village

I. Name of products from linen weaving	Price
Clothes	1,500,000 đ – 3,000,000VND
Towel	200,000 VND
Bags, notebooks	30,000 đ – 250,000 VND
II. Some information about H'mong households doing linen weaving	Detail content
- Number of households doing linen weaving in Cat Cat village	- 54 households
- Number of households doing linen weaving which are supported by Cat Cat Travel One Member Company Limited (14/54 households)	- 14 households; Income: 7-10 million VND/month/household
- The number of artisans and skilled workers performing their craft at Cat Cat Travel One Member Company Limited.	- 7 people; Income: 4-5 million VND/month/household

Source: Field survey (1 USD ≈ 23,134 VND)

In the current context, the traditional craft of silk weaving of H'mong people in Cat Cat is also facing strong competition of the market economy; many products of the same type are produced by modern industrial techniques. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values of this profession need to pay the attention of local authorities and tourism companies.



Linen sheets are dyed indigo and painted by beeswax



Costumes of H'mong tribe are made from linen weaving



Products from linen weaving are sold in Sa Pa market

Figure 2: Some products are derived from linen of the H'mong people

#### 1.4. Factors affecting the development of linen production

The first is the change in socio-economic conditions. The traditional Hmong economy was formerly a relatively closed economy, with completely self-sufficient food and clothing sources. Nowadays, when the commodity economy develops, people can buy cloth at the market to make clothes, which is both cheap and convenient, and does not take as much effort as weaving linen. According to results of the field trip, in order to get yarn as a textile material, it is necessary to spend the family's land fund to grow flax, the H'mong here have to spend 3 months on growing flax and also about 3 months for harvesting and processing flax into yarn. Then it takes much more time to make complete costumes to wear.

Table 3: The process of creating a traditional garment of the H'mong in Cat Cat

No	Steps for creating products	Time
1	Growing flax plant	About 3 months
2	Harvesting flax plant and spinning flax fiber	About 2-3 months
3	Linen weaving by loom and cut fabric for a set of clothes	About 1 month
4	Decorating patterns (drawing beeswax, embroidering colored threads, joining colored fabrics, attaching beads, metal)	About 12 months
5	Sewing clothes	About 1 month

Source: Field survey, [2]

The above statistics show that the time to create garments according to the traditional method of H'mong people is very long. That makes the cost of these costumes also much higher than the industrial brocade woven products of China with diverse, eye-catching designs and cheap prices. Many H'mong people believe that with such time, if they buy available materials (yarns, fabrics) from the market, they can shorten the time to create garments with higher economic efficiency. This has led to the formation of different forms of garment production in H'mong community in Cat Cat village.

Table 4: Forms of garment production of the H'mong in Cat Cat village

No	Forms of production
1	Growing flax plant – Processing flax fiber – Linen weaving – Dyeing – Decorating patterns – sewing clothes
2	Buying industrial fiber - Weaving – Dyeing – Decorating patterns – sewing clothes
3	Buying white industrial fabric– Dyeing – Decorating patterns – sewing clothes
4	Buying black or other colors industrial fabric – Sewing clothes

Source: Field survey, [2]

On the other hand, H'mong people also realize that because of rudimentary production techniques and simple patterns, the products have not yet meet the needs of customers. Many H'mong women are also

gradually replacing traditional costumes with more compact and convenient ones. Therefore, when implementing the conservation of traditional linen production of H'mong people here, there need to be more solutions to help them maintain their traditional profession in order to achieve the goal of sustainable development.

Secondly, the pressure on population is increasing rapidly, while the land fund for cultivation in general and flax cultivation in particular has not increased. After only 20 years, the H'mong population in Cat Cat village has increased 5 times (from more than 100 people to more than 500 people). Many families, after their children split up to live separately, they divide the area of flax field for their children. Therefore, the family's flax area is reduced. In many families, because they do not have no large area of flax field to share with their children, their children after living separately still share the same piece of land of their parents [1]. Due to the small area of flax field, the amount of yarn collected is not enough to produce cloth for family, so many people have turned to buy cloth at the market to make costumes. That is an objective reality, which is taking place in some H'mong households in Cat Cat village.

The third is the change in aesthetic tastes. Our survey in Cat Cat village shows that most of the H'mong people still like to wear their own traditional costumes. However, a fact that has been happening in Cat Cat for many years now is that the H'mong women of the younger generation clearly express the opinion that they do not like to wear the traditional dress because it is very heavy and they only wear it when they are brides. And that dress has been replaced by wide-leg velvet pants that only cover the knees. Some young men also said that they like to wear their traditional clothes, but they will wear some kind of shirt other than indigo-dyeing linen because indigo color is easy to fade, especially in rainy days.

The changes in the source of garment materials, the concept of dress, and the development of the traditional profession of H'mong people in Cat Cat are now a reality that has been happening more and more strongly. Although this change has not completely lost the traditional features in the costumes of the H'mong here, it has taken place in the direction of innovation and blending between tradition and modernity. The problem is how to be able to combine tradition and modernity harmoniously, both keeping the traditional identity of the costumes and being suitable for the socio-economic changes. It is a big problem, which needs attention from local authorities.

### ***1.5. General assessment of the difficulties in the development of linen production of the H'mong in Cat Cat village***

In the context of the strong development of the market economy, the preservation and development of traditional crafts in general and the traditional craft of linen weaving of H'mong people in Cat Cat village in particular are worth facing many difficulties and challenges.

- Market demand: The prosperity of a traditional craft depends on the ability to supply products in accordance with changes in the market. That requires handmade products to be flexibly changed to meet the needs of designs, colors, and materials required by the market.

In fact, at present, the linen production has not really been given proper attention for the development. Due to social changes, the concept of traditional costumes of the H'mong has changed. When the industry has not yet developed and industrial fabrics have not spread on the market like today, the costumes of the H'mong people still depend entirely on the hands of the woman. Today, when industrial fabrics gradually invade the market, the H'mong people are not completely dependent on traditional linen and brocade fabrics to produce daily clothes as before. They can buy fabric from the market to make clothes for the family. Linen is now only used according to traditions on important occasions such as for the bride and groom on the wedding day, important holidays or for wearing at the time of death. Normally, they have many choices of materials and designs such as ready-made clothes at the markets. The loss of essentiality leads to the disappearance of this profession becoming more and more obviously, the flax tree gradually decreases its sacredness and important position in the life of the H'mong.

On the other hand, the traditional crafts of H'mong people in Cat Cat in general and linen production in particular are mostly taking place at the family level, served the family's needs. The production scale is small, not yet highly commoditized and still depends on the output factors for the product. The products cannot be sold that will not bring income to the family, leading to them not wanting to do this profession



any more, they switch to other these profession themselves. When the economy of Vietnam moved to a market economy, it has drastically changed the traditional crafts of local people.

- The level of education and technical expertise of the H'mong people who work in the traditional craft of weaving linen here is still limited. There are not many good artisans and craftsmen in the village, so it limits the ability to apply new technical advances in production and business. Most of H'mong women here have no high level of education and technical expertise, so the application of new technology to the working stages might hardly happen.

- Technology application in the development of traditional crafts: This is a decisive factor to labor productivity, product quality, and the existence of traditional crafts in the process of industrialization and modernization. With the traditional manual production method to create a product, H'mong people have to spend a lot of time and effort, leading to low labor efficiency and low income. Meanwhile, products manufactured by industrial methods are increasingly diverse in design, product quality, and low in price that makes them easy for people to choose to buy products anywhere. Currently, the introduction of industrial products to the market has invisibly lost the core values of traditional linen weaving products. This makes many difficulties to preserve and develop the profession and the risk of losing this profession is increasing.

- Capital for the development of traditional handicraft profession contributes to determining the production scale and quality of local handicraft products. Cat Cat village has 54 H'mong households that do linen weaving but the scale is very small. The premise for production of linen weaving products is mainly houses of households and depends on the self-capital of households. Some households only work seasonally. In this village, there are only 14 households are supported by the capital of Cat Cat Travel One Member Company Limited, so the production is invested more methodically, and they face less difficulties in finding production materials and output for the products, income is also more stable than other households. Difficulties in capital make great impediment to the expansion of production scale, the increase in the number of workers, the industrialization of many stages in accordance with the standards of domestic and foreign markets.

- Mechanisms and policies on the development of traditional crafts: The open-door policy to integrate our country's economy with the region and the world has created favorable conditions for market expanding of traditional handicraft products. Domestic handicraft products in general and brocade linen textile products in Cat Cat and Sa Pa in particular have the opportunity to be exported to many countries around the world. However, in the process of integration, if there is no reasonable development policy, harmonious combination between tradition and modernity, these brocade linen textile products will gradually no longer gain a foothold in the market.

## **2. Solutions to preserve and develop the traditional craft of linen weaving of the H'mong in Cat Cat village**

The traditional crafts in general and the linen production of the H'mong people in Cat Cat village in particular are constantly changing and strongly influenced by the market economy. In order to make traditional crafts of the H'mong to be not only a space to preserve the H'mong ethnic culture but also a source of livelihood to help them increase their income and improve their lives, we would like to propose solutions:

- Forming a concentrated material growing area and ensuring the local source of raw materials: That aims to serve the needs of developing linen weaving for the H'mong community. First, it is necessary to have the combined participation of local authorities and political organizations such as farmers' associations, women's unions, agricultural cooperatives, etc. to mobilize H'mong people to participate in programs of raw material development. These organizations can support varieties and science and technology for H'mong people when planting flax and indigo plant; select the land fund for growing these plants, etc. to form material growing areas.

- Improving the quality of human resources: It is necessary to promote the recognition of "Folk Artisan" for talented people and continue to make a dossier for recognition of the title of "Excellent Artisan". Besides, local authorities need to ensure the remuneration as well as increase funding for the Folk Artisan Association at all levels, especially at the commune level. That helps for ensuring long-term human resources for the development needs of the above traditional professions. Socializing the funding source to

increase the remuneration paid to artisans performing, empowering the next generation are also ways to be consulted [3,4]. Along with that is the implementation of policies on vocational training for young H'mong workers through vocational training classes.

- Creating a close connection between the development of traditional crafts and the development of local tourism [5]: Traditional crafts are considered as living museums, where the treasures of tangible and intangible cultural heritage are both rich, diverse and specific; They contribute to the value system of the national culture and a unique cultural tourism resource. This is the factor attracts the attention of tourists, especially international tourists. Visiting and learning about the traditional crafts of the H'mong people in Cat Cat in particular and the communities of other ethnic groups in Sa Pa in general is an opportunity for visitors to satisfy their interest in discovering the traditional cultures through the daily life of the local people. In these places, they have direct contact with artisans and craftsmen; experience first-hand the stages of crafting and even directly do a few stages of product production. This will connect the traditional linen weaving of H'mong people in Cat Cat to more markets. At the same time, this is also an opportunity to affirm the role and value of traditional crafts in promoting local tourism development.

- Promoting search to expand product consumption markets: In order to find output, traditional handicraft products must be especially sophisticated, unique, and delicate in each pattern, etc. In fact, the production scale of the linen production of households in Cat Cat is still small and techniques are rudimentary. Therefore, it is necessary to have a capital support policy to help households access new techniques in production. Thereby creating quality, competitive products that are suitable for consumer tastes, while the core values of the traditional craft is still retained.

Currently, brocade linen weaving products are mainly sold to domestic and foreign tourists when they come here by H'mong women and children in Cat Cat. This form of local export also needs to be further promoted to maintain and develop this profession. On the other hand, it is possible to sell these products by Craft Link – “a non-profit and fair trade organization, working with the aim of supporting ethnic minority groups, disability groups and traditional craft village groups”. This organization helps to restore cultural traditions, develop handicraft production, and increase income for the community. Besides, it helps to connect potentially for the traditional handicrafts of H'mong people in Sa Pa in general and Cat Cat in particular to the world.

- Strengthen propaganda to raise awareness about conservation and development of traditional crafts. Under the strong influence of the market economy, it is difficult to preserve intact all traditional crafts. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve and promote the cultural identity, unique features and core values of these traditional crafts as well as the products they has created. First, it is necessary to create a sense of pride in the nation's traditional costumes for H'mong people, especially the younger generation. Especially, helping them understand deeply about the value and role of flax as well as linen material in the cultural life of their nation. From there, the H'mong people will gain the right awareness, appreciate the values of their traditional crafts and maintain the habit of using traditional linen clothes in daily life. In addition, local authorities need to focus on propagating and replicating good practices, new models that combine tradition and modernity, and bring high economic efficiency to H'mong people. That helps them maintain and develop their profession. At the same time, it is necessary to improve the qualifications and capacity of cultural workers and managers to meet the needs of preserving the core values of traditional professions and promoting the value of cultural heritages in the new era.

### **Conclusion And Recommendation**

Nowadays, the traditional craft of linen production as well as many other traditional crafts of H'mong people in Cat Cat have become unique cultural tourism resources that are favored by local authorities and travel agencies for investment and exploitation to serve the sightseeing needs of domestic and international tourists. At the same time, it is also the profession, which brings income for H'mong community in Cat Cat. However, in the context of the strong impact of the market economy and the influence of tourism activities, the development of traditional linen production of H'mong people in Cat Cat faces many difficulties and challenges.

The traditional craft of linen production of the H'mong people in Cat Cat or each of the traditional crafts of other ethnic groups are products of knowledge, skills and techniques accumulated thousands of generations



ago. Each traditional handicraft product contains stories, fairy tales, and contains the teachings and knowledge of the ancestors,...[6]. Therefore, the preservation of traditional craft is also the preservation of indigenous knowledge and precious folklore treasures of the ethnic groups.

In order to preserve and develop this traditional craft, it is first necessary to:

- Create the right and appropriate mechanisms and policies to promote and develop this profession. The development of traditional handicraft products must be suitable for social life and production; must be associated with the consumption market. It is necessary to have supporting policies associated with the propaganda and promotion of products and brands; associate traditional crafts with landmarks, cultural tourism addresses, and local tourism activities.

- Cultural organizations also need to implement appropriate policies and mechanisms to honor traditional crafts and artisans who have maintained these professions, help them to realize the value of the heritage they are holding [6]. At the same time, it is necessary to create conditions to bring traditional handicraft products to different regions, to domestic and foreign tourists. Since then, traditional crafts will be preserved, preserved and developed, contributing to improving the economic, cultural and social life of ethnic minorities.

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