

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURE AND RELIGION OF RAGLAI PEOPLE IN THE CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Abstract: *Basing on the data field survey in the southern central provinces of Vietnam such as Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, Khánh Hòa, the article introduced the changes in culture and religion of the Raglai race at present. The article indicated some discussion on economic and social development, but still preserving the traditional culture and religion of Raglai people in the future.*

Key words: *Culture, Raglai people, religion, transformation, Vietnam.*

1. Introduction

The Raglai language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian linguistic system. The total population is approximately 90,000 inhabitants, ranked 19th of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. They primarily live in Ninh Thuận (57,442 people), Khánh Hòa (35,000 people), Bình Thuận and Lâm Đồng (2,000 people). From 1975 to present, the Communist Party of Vietnam and State have had policies for socio-economic development in the Raglai region as the Resolution 22 of the Politburo, the Sedentarization Program, and the Programs N°.134, N°.135, N°.137, etc. Therefore, the life of Raglai has had a significant improvement, electricity in many villages, roads, schools and health clinics. Besides these achievements, there has been the emergence of drawbacks in the process of development. This article mentioned a small part of the transformation of culture and religion in Raglai people in contemporary Vietnam.

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2. The cultural change of Raglai at present

Raglai people have had their own cultural identity for a long time ago. They usually live in the village (Paloi), and in a stilt house. Women wear dresses, sleeveless blouses, and jewelry like copper, silver, beads and earrings. Men wear loincloths, shirtless. The girls at 16 years old and the boys at 18 years old who do not have blood relation and kinship, have the right to marry with a wedding (Bong bu).

Raglai people follow the matriarchal regime; wife marries her husband; their children have the mother's surname, and the youngest child inherits the property and worships the ancestors. The dead are given a grave-leaving ceremony (Podhi) by their family. They often organize the rite of new rice (Yang akaok padai) in the annual Lunar New Year occasion. Each village has its own customary laws called Adat, shaman (Pojaou) sacrifices and healing for people.

However, the living area of Raglai was the revolutionary base (from 1954 to 1975), thus, Raglai culture was influenced Kinh (Viet) people. Especially after the liberation in 1975, under the impact of the sedentarization policy, and new lifestyle, Raglai culture has strongly changed according to the Kinh culture in many dimensions. At present, some traditional cultural values were considered obsolete and the State policies oriented Raglai people to a new culture.

The Raglai village has not operated under the customary law; they have to comply with the State laws. The role of the village elder was replaced by the local government apparatus. When a guest goes into the village, he/she does not present the village elder but he/she only presents the village and commune authorities.

The Raglai traditional costumes are almost disappeared now, the Kinh costumes replaced. Women wear blouses and pants. Men wear trousers, shirt. Some young Raglai today like to wear jeans, T-shirt, and earrings (an ear) as the American minority influenced the Kinh people, to dye hair. The Raglai traditional costumes appear only during the mass entertainments which are organized by the district or the commune authorities.

The Raglai wedding is affected by the Kinh's culture; they have not maintained the customs and the traditional rites, and they have spent

more time for eating. In the past, if a couple did not marry yet, but the woman was pregnant, the couple would have to eat at the pig trough (be bak njak laboh un) as the order by the village elder. But today, this phenomenon is normal, the wedding is organized¹.

In the wedding, the folk songs performed by Raglai people are replaced Vietnamese and Western music. The bride and groom haven't worn the traditional costumes. In particular, the traditional cuisine has not been at Raglai wedding, the Vietnamese and Western dishes instead of it. The new type wedding is favored the youth of Raglai. Many families cannot afford the modern wedding, so they should sell their property for children wedding.

In the past, the traditional wedding Raglai just needed a pig, a few chickens and a few jars of wine (ruợu cần- alcohol with a bamboo pipe). People went to the wedding with gifts, but they were just a bottle of wine or a chicken to congratulate the happiness of the bride and groom. At present, because of a large investment for the wedding, parents want people who attend the ceremony donate money for the bride, groom, at least 50 thousand to maximum 200 thousand Vietnam Dong². Thus, weddings have become the business occasion of Raglai people. It has been a drawback that the State had to issue an instruction to limit it³.

Previously, when a Raglai died, the body was placed in a coffin (Baoh atau) made of wood of the tree Tiên (Kayou Klan), buried in the cemetery (Pano paneh atau). Then, family members came back home to organize the rite including a bowl of rice, a pig and wine (alcohol with a bamboo pipe), a month later, the tomb (Sang atau) has been built. After the harvest, family members did a rite called the grave-leaving ceremony before giving up forever (that means no sacrifice, but the ancestral spirits were just invited during the family rites). Today, a majority of Raglai people, especially the revolutionary cadres are learning the Kinh's customs such as the dead is put in a coffin (like Kinh people), set up the ancestral altar. Most of the common people, especially, who are the beneficiaries of the policy in state-building, the ancestral altars have been available in their houses as Kinh style with the dead pictures, vases, incense burners, etc.. This type of culture has been strange to the traditional culture of the Raglai; it has just appeared since 1975.

Once upon a time, Raglai people have had their own festivals such as worship the fields, the forests, especially eating new rice (Bong akaok podai atau) which took place annually during the 11th -12th months, after harvesting. Specifically, when the paddy was nearly ripe, cut two sheaves to bring home, dried, and then pounded paddy into rice before cooking. Offerings included rice, chicken or pork, a bottle of wine. Offerings were brought home to continuously worship after the rice field rite. When the worship finished, family members and relatives ate together. Each family organized their own rite; it was not necessary to worship in one day. Thus, the ritual occasion lasted for one month. This ceremony was held to thank the ancestors, the god of the land, the god of the forest, the god of rice that gave Raglai people crop and health⁴.

However, it is similar to many other ethnic minority groups, rites of Raglai people were prohibited by the State because of the superstitious reason. Although the State promulgated the Resolution N°. 5 on preservation and promotion of the national cultural identity, Raglai people have not held any large annual festival to manifest their traditional cultural identity. To solve this problem, instead of helping people restore “the eating new rice festival”, the State organizes and guides Raglai people “eat Tết Nguyên Đán” (New Year festival according to the Lunar calendar) as the Kinh style. On the Lunar New Year occasion, the local governments distribute food for Raglai families such as rice, wine, tobacco, Tết cakes, noodles, cooking oil, and candies. As a habit, Raglai people have established the ancestral altar in the Lunar New Year days. The Raglai people in Phước Thắng, Phước Kháng, Phước Chiến communes, Ninh Thuận province eat Tết Nguyên Đán like the the Kinh people during the wartime such as Raglai men wear army clothes, women wear “áo dài” (long dress); they establish the ancestral altar, burn incense, worship.

The problem were mentioned above which clearly showed the impact of the State policies and the strong influence of Kinh people, especially the mass media has made the change in the traditional culture of Raglai according to the “new culture”, essentially the Kinh culture.

3. The transformation of Raglai people’s religion at present

The traditional religion of Raglai is the worship of the ancestor (Mok kei, awei ama), the god of land (Yang tanah), and the god of the forest

(Yang lakaik) through the annual rites which associated with cultivation season and the life cycle of humankind. During the wartime, especially after 1975, the campaign against superstition, decrease the sacrifice ceremonies and festivities that made the traditional religions to fade in the minds of Raglai people. Thus, Raglai people have a few chances to worship their gods.

Therefore, Raglai people are looking for a new faith to their mental support. Some Raglai people have been Catholics or Protestants (before 1975) in Bà Râu and Bà Rom villages, Ninh Thuận province; Cầu Bà village, Diên Khánh district, Khánh Hòa Province. In recent years, they have still kept their religions, but the amount of believers has been negligible. For example, there have been 2,972 people/ 648 households in the Khánh Phú commune, in which 336 Protestants/ 68 households and 284 Catholics/ 60 households⁵. In fact, the Protestants and Catholics do well business and their families are in order. In particular, the Raglai Protestants do not drink wine and smoke (the two social issues in this ethnic group). The Raglai people have been willing to walk for a dozen of kilometers across the forest to take part in the church Mass every Sunday.

Researching on the attraction of the Catholicism and Protestantism towards Raglai people, we realize that the dignitaries of these religions were well educated, fluent in speaking and writing and customs of Raglai people. For example, the priest of the Diên Khánh church is good at Raglai, Êđê, Chin languages. All of this is in order to service the missionary work. When implementing the community development projects, the missionaries of those religions have been mindful of inheriting production practices and indigenous knowledge of Raglai people. The Bible has been written in Raglai language; the folk songs of Raglai have been often inserted into the ceremony music. Raglai people have been encouraged to wear traditional costumes in the ceremonies. In the Masses, the priests or the pastors often visit each person and family; give a gift for each person such as rice, noodles, confectionery, medicines, etc. The dignitaries of these religions also support the capital for some families or a group of family in developing the economy; visiting at the hospital and helping expenses for medical care; believers' children to go to school when they have difficulty, etc.⁶

Although the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State issued many policies on developing the ethnic minority area, the process of implementation showed drawbacks, as a result the ethnic minority area is still retarded. Generally, local officers, especially the communal level, were not trained professionally, were not much interested in learning language, customs, indigenous knowledge of the ethnic minorities. Therefore, they commonly propagated the State policies in Vietnamese language, with the official words that made confusion for people. Besides, there are some other limitations such as a large investment, but it was scattered and leaky; in particular, the designing project has not appropriated with the customs of ethnic minorities; it has created many civil conflicts, etc. Those are the causes that lead to the conversion to the new religion, especially to Catholicism and Protestantism, in the ethnic minorities in general, in Raglai people in particular.

4. Some initial reviews for conclusion

The Party and the State have had many policies on the economic and social development and the cultural preservation of the ethnic minorities. However, the process of implementing these policies has lacked the contributions of scientists and researchers. Thus, many projects did not only bring the unexpected results, but they also created a large gap between policy and practice.

Some local authorities have focused on the developing economy, but they have not paid much attention to preserving the ethnic minorities' traditional culture. Therefore, some researchers and local officers thought that the economic development leading to the cultural change was inevitable. If preserving traditional culture without social and economic development which was a disadvantage for the people, they will be always in poverty. In my opinion, it needs to note that the policy of the CPV and the State on the ethnic minorities in general, on Raglai in particular must be implemented to develop the economy as well as to preserve the traditional cultural identities. It is impossible if the socio-economic development causes the assimilation and losing origin.

This issue will be seen clearly if we overlook the other countries in the world and in the region. In the trend of sustainable development, some Southeast Asia countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore,... have grew their economy with their own identity. For instance, Malaysia is a multi-

ethnic country; they still preserve and develop the culture of each ethnic group, such as Malays, Chinese, Indian as well as the economic development. Those ethnic groups are harmonized between tradition and modernity that creates their own cultural identity. This is an experience for Vietnam in making policy of development for Raglai people in particular and the ethnic minorities in general in the renovation and the integration period at present.

To achieve the sustainable development objective in the Raglai region at present, the expeditious work is the preservation of the ethnic culture as well as the economic development. It will help to preserve the cultural identity of Raglai in the current integration process and in complying with the Resolution N^o.5 of the Communist Party of Vietnam to build and develop the Vietnamese culture with the advantages and the imbued ethnic identities./.

NOTES:

- 1 The interview with Mr. Chiêu, 65 years old, at Sơn Thành village, Khánh Phú commune, Khánh Vĩnh district, Khánh Hòa province, on 2nd May 2010.
- 2 The interview with Mrs. Cao, at Giang Mương village, Khánh Phú commune, Khánh Vĩnh district, Khánh Hòa province, on 28th April 2010.
- 3 Directive N^o.27-CT/TW dated 12th Jun 1998 on the implementation of a civilized lifestyle in wedding, funerals and festivals.
- 4 The interview with Mr. Cao, Mr. Cao La, Mr. Chiêu at Khánh Phú commune, Khánh Vĩnh district, Khánh Hòa province, on 2nd May 2010.
- 5 The report on the economic and social situation of the first 6 months of the year and the affairs at the last 6 months of 2010 of the People's Committee of Khánh Phú commune, Khánh Hòa, N^o.072/BC-UBND, on 10th June 2010.
- 6 The interview with a group of Raglai Protestants at Mr. Cao's house, 75 years old, Nước Nhĩ village, Khánh Phú commune, Khánh Vĩnh district, Khánh Hòa province.