

Book Reviews

**Rituals and Customs of Ethnic minorities
in Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands)**

Ngô Đức Thịnh (ed), Khoa học Xã hội Publishing house, Hanoi, 2006, 464 pages

In 2001, the Institute of Cultural Studies at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences carried out the project of “Investigate, collect, translate, publish and preserve Tây Nguyên’s treasure of epics. As the project was running, a problem arose: there had to be a staff of ethnic people who would participate in almost every activity, especially the task of research, preservation and promotion of cultural heritages in future. The protection and develop the heritage of epics in particular and folk culture in general must be foremost the duty of ethnic minorities in Tây Nguyên, with the support from the State, and the participation of the nationwide scientists.

Understanding the importance of postgraduate education and training for ethnic minorities, the Institute of Cultural Studies, thanked to sponsorship by Ford Foundation, opened the postgraduate course (2003-2005) of folk cultural studies for 12 students from the Ê đê, the Mnông, the Xtiêng, the Bana, the Xê đăng, the Hrê and the Giarai. After the course, under professors’ guide and supervision, students had defined their graduate thesis. Mostly they focused on themes of Central Highlands’ ethnic minorities’ belief, rites, customs and festivals that are essential issues in the shift from traditional to modern society. Finally, ten theses had been selected to be published in a book named *Rites and Customs of the Central Highlands’ ethnic minorities*.

Beside *Introduction, Preamble and Conclusion*, the book consists of 10 key papers which make its main content .

The first paper is *Conception of soul and related rites by the Xo teng in Tu Mo Rong* by Phạm Thị Trung. This paper presents various conceptions regarding quantity, names, and forms of the soul, the dual mode of the soul and the body or the state of the soul after the death of the body. Related rites are birth ceremony, taking the soul, extruding evils, or enjoying buffalo’s meat. In rites relating to the state of the soul after the death of the body, the author describes rituals of funeral, changing village and Kona which is considered a form of ancestor worship.

The Ede's rite of life circle in Tria commune by Ychen Nie reveals rituals for giving birth to and raise children, asking for good health, marriage and funeral with various expressions and deeply embedded with the daily life of the Ede.

Whereas Y Tuyn Bing attracts readers by details of a traditional funeral of the Mnông Rlăm in Uôn Dêi. When a person has a good death, there should be offerings with meat and the relatives should spend a certain time to be in mourning for him. But if he had a bad death, a sudden death for example, there must be some taboos that the Mnông Rlăm has to follow. Regarding the funeral of the Xơ Teng, Phan Văn Hoàng presents their conceptions of the world of deities, of soul and world of the dead, and taboos. Meanwhile, Kpă Tô Nga analyses the tradition of "leaving the tombs" of the Gia Rai Chor in Ta Li commune (Đăk Lăk) with various rituals such as "liberating", "washing away", etc. At the same time, Y Hồ introduces funeral of the Ca Dong in Nước Vua village with interesting conceptions of universe, the death, and soul and rituals for the dead by disease, young dead, or sudden dead, etc.

Lê Thị Thanh Xuân with thesis of traditional wedding ceremony of the Mnông Gar in Bon Rchai A commune shows the readers the period of time to choose a life partner and traditional procedures and even the rituals needed after the ceremony. She also presents the special cases of wedding ceremony for those who want to remarry, to get married to a pregnant girl, to an adulterer or to an outsider.

Trung Thị Bích Thủy, Đinh Thị Quyết and Điều Huỳnh Sang finds their own way by investigating into traditional agricultural rituals of the Bana, the Tơ Dră and the Xtiêng respectively. Rich rituals relating to agricultural activities of these peoples have been presented in details.

In the *Preamble*, the writer Nguyễn Ngọc has summarized: "To me, these theses amazingly introduce discoveries. They focus on customs and traditional rituals of specific ethnics in the Central Highlands. Significant scientific summaries, especially in the field of Ethnology, can definitely originate from such detailed studies. These theses make a precious contribution to the documentation of one of the most important, the most mysterious and the richest area of ethnology in Vietnam: the South of Trường Sơn Tây Nguyên."

Finally, Ngô Đức Thịnh, a key lecturer of the course, has his important remark in the Conclusion as follow: "Life style and society which rely on economy of fields on the mountains are premise for foundation of a system of rituals and customs of the minor ethnics in the Central Highlands".

Lê Đức Hạnh