

Culture of Muong People Shown in the Traditional Marriage Rituals

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Abstract: Muong (Mường) people constitute one of the ethnic groups in Vietnam. They live in almost all provinces of the country, but a majority resides in Hòa Bình Province. The cultural value of Mường people in Hoa Binh was formed a long time ago, based on 4 large Mường (villages), including Bi, Vang, Thàng, and Động. Besides common cultural characteristics, Mường people in each local area have different activities involved with the marriage ceremony. The paper focuses on analyzing and recognizing cultural identities of Mường people in Hòa Bình Province shown in their traditional marriage rituals.

Key words: Mường people, marriage, culture, ritual.

1. Marriage rituals of Mường people

1.1. Conception of marriage

According to the conception of Mường people, marriage is especially significant not only for individuals but also for their family and clan. For a man, marriage is a transitional step to become the household head (*đức cả*), who represents the family in activities of the clan and the village. For a woman, marriage marks her maturity; i.e. she can give birth to maintain the continuity of the family line. For a married couple, marriage is carried out on the basis of love; it is a foundation for family happiness afterwards; it is also viewed as a way to perform the duty towards their families and clan. For families and clans, particularly the groom's family, marriage of a young couple plays an important role in affirming the position of the families and clans in the community.

1.2. Marriage criteria

The marriage age of Mường people is influenced relatively a lot by their traditional

conception. They take the initiative in marrying their children off, hoping to get more laborers and grandchildren, who will maintain the continuity of the family line. A wife is viewed as ideal for Mường people, when she is industrious, skillful at doing housework, and courteous towards parents, siblings, and relatives. Mường parents often advise their sons that it is necessary to see how she lives and works; whether she is industrious; and how she treats other members in the family, before deciding to get married with a woman. In the meanwhile, a husband is viewed as ideal, when he has good health and he is skillful at tilling land and weaving household tools. One of the criteria to choose a son-in-law is to see the family origin, in order to avoid those who have bad repute or a hereditary disease.

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Criteria in marriage of Mường people show the power and sustainability of their traditional customs and rituals, to which every person, every family and every community has to conform. They also reflect the culture, lifestyle and behavioral norms of this ethnic group.

1.3. Rituals in the wedding

1.3.1. Match-making

After learning carefully information about a girl and her family, the groom's parents ask a go-between (*Chí mớ* in Mường language) to do matchmaking work. For Mường people, the go-between plays a decisive role in achieving success for the matchmaking and future life of the couple. He will manage directly all activities involved with marriage rituals afterwards. The go-between is, therefore, selected carefully with high respect (Nguyễn Thị Song Hà, 2010, Vol.3: 34, 43).

1.3.2. Proposal making

On a lucky day, the groom's family prepares some offerings, including a bottle of rice wine put in a bag called *túi nhắng*, a bundle of green tea wrapped in banana leaves, and 2 sugar canes, to be given to a go-between. The go-between takes those things to the bride's family, making a proposal for marriage. In the past, there was clear differentiation between aristocrats and commoners. Green tea is inherently a favorite drink of Mường people. It is, therefore, served in marriage rituals, since they think it manifests the desire for long-lasting happiness. The two sugar canes symbolize sweet, happiness and non-separateness. The bride's father directly

talks with the go-between about how to carry out marriage activities. If he already died, the bride's eldest brother, who has got married, will be undertake the task on behalf of the bride's family.

1.3.3. Betrothal

To carry out this ritual, the groom's family has to prepare some offerings to be taken by the go-between to the bride's family for discussion about the wedding ceremony. For Mường people in Lạc Sơn District, the offerings consist of 12 *bánh chưng* (square glutinous rice cake) and 2 bottles of rice wine. In the meanwhile, in Kim Bôi District, the offerings consist of 4 *bánh chưng*, 2 bottles of rice wine, 2 packets of *bánh khảo* (sweet cake made of glutinous rice flour), 20 areca nuts, and 20 leaves of betel. In Tân Lạc District, the offerings consist of 2 bottles of rice wine, 2 chicken, 2 packets of cakes, 10 croissants, 10 areca nuts, and 20 betel leaves. In Cao Phong District, the offerings consist of 2 bottles of rice wine, 2 chicken, 20 areca nuts, 20 betel leaves, 8 *bánh chưng*, and 8 cakes of *bánh nếp* (glutinous rice cakes filled with green bean and lard). In the opinion of Mường people, those *bánh chưng* must contain neither salt nor stuffing. When the *bánh chưng* contains stuffing, it means the bride used to get married or she has a pregnancy before the wedding. If the *bánh chưng* contains salt, the two families will have struggles against each other in future.

1.3.4. Wedding challenge

On a lucky day, the groom's family prepares some things, depending on the economic conditions of the groom's family

and whether they are aristocrats or commoners. Those things are then brought by the go-between to the bride's family for discussion about how to hold a wedding for the couple. Usually, they consist of a pig weighing about 20 kilos, 2 bottles of rice wine, 50 areca nuts, 100 betel leaves, 40 *bánh chưng*, 40 *bánh khảo*, 20 kilos of cooked glutinous rice, and 2 cocks. Those, who go to the bride's home, include: a go-between, a younger sister of the groom, and 4 single men.

According to the opinion of Mường people, the wedding gifts demanded by the bride's family as a challenge show the gratitude of the groom's family to the bride's family for bringing up the bride well; in addition, the gifts are viewed as a contribution of the groom's family to the wedding party. Traditionally, the challenged gifts consist of: 6 loads of glutinous rice (about 60 kilos), 1 pig weighing from 40 to 60 kilos, 2 bronze pans, 1 buffalo, 1 roll of canvas (about 20 meters), silver coins or money equivalent to a pig weighing 60 kilos, 80 to 100 *bánh chưng*, 60 *bánh khảo* (a particular dish of Mường people. It is made of glutinous rice that has been thoroughly pounded after cooking. Ones have to fry or bake the cakes again before eating), 2 loads of steamed glutinous rice, 1 jar of *rượu cần* (wine fermented with leaves in a jar and drunk out through pipes), 1 or 2 jars of rice wine, 1 coupe of chicken (1 cock and 1 hen), white shawls, and 1 jar of *dup wine* (the jar is made of ceramic with 4 knobs next to the mouth bound completely with a red cloth). Those gifts show a cultural

particularity of the ethnic group and they are closely attached with daily life of agricultural people. Apart from the above-mentioned basic gifts, the groom's family has to prepare food to be used in the bride receiving party with participation of relatives and neighbors, who come to make a wish to the young couple.

1.3.5. Wedding appointment making

On a lucky day, the go-between leads a group of people representative for the groom's family, including the groom, a younger sister of the groom, and 8 young men. They bring the wedding gifts to the bride's home. After the go-between and the above-mentioned representatives sit down at the bride's home to have tea and talk with the bride's family members, on behalf of the bride's family the head of the bride's family line opens the baskets, checking the gifts to see whether there are enough everything as challenged. At that time, the go-between gives a haversack containing a silver necklace, 8 pieces of home-made fabric, and a blanket, which the groom's family gave to him before, to the bride's parents to be put in the ancestor worship altar. The bride's parents take the haversack away. Only after the young couple has the first child, will they give the haversack to the grandchild, hoping that he or she will get a lot of luck. After that, the bride's family is informed of the date and time the groom's family will come to get the bride.

1.3.6. Wedding ceremony

Weddings are often held in January, February, November and December in Lunar Calendar, because at that time crops

have been completely harvested and whether is favorable. Mùròng people abstain from holding a wedding in March and July (in Lunar Calendar), because July is viewed as unlucky month. In the meanwhile, March and April is a between-crop period; and, in May and June, weather is hot. The wedding ceremony is carried out, based on the past calendar of Mùròng people. It is different from the calendar used by Kinh people at present. Days in the past calendar of Mùròng people are one day behind the corresponding days, but months are ahead of the corresponding months in the calendar of Kinh people; for instance, if today is 20 June in the calendar of Kinh people, it will be 19 August in the past calendar of Mùròng people. Traditionally, all activities involved with life of Mùròng people must be carried out according to the past calendar. Mùròng people are relatively careful to choose the date and time for a wedding, as they hope the married couple will get long-lasting happiness, a lot of children and a lot of wealth. They divide lucky days into two groups named *cây trong* and *cây tha* (*Cây trong* are lucky days for in-home activities; whereas, *cây tha* are lucky days for business and travel). Late days of a month are not chosen, as they are viewed as the end. Mùròng people abstain from holding a wedding in the same day they used to set up the kitchen in the floor of their house as well as the same day they used to bury their dead parents or grandparents. In addition, they abstain from having a wedding in the 14th and 15th of a month, as those days are considered unlucky for the young couple.

1.3.7. The day to bring challenged gifts to the bride's home

Mùròng people bring challenged gifts to the bride's home a day before the wedding day. It is called as a day of the relatives' work; i.e. relatives come to help the host family do cooking, welcoming guests, and doing other preparations for the wedding. According to the customs of Mùròng people, every relative or every household, who come to do such work for the host family, has to make a contribution to the host family. For the groom's home, every household has to contribute 1 to 2 kilos of rice, 1 bottle of rice wine, and some money. For the bride's home, every household has to contribute money. This is a particular feature of Mùròng culture, which shows the community unity and mutual-help, when a household has a happy or unhappy event.

The group going to the bride's home includes following people: the go-between, uncles, the groom's younger sister, two male friends of the groom, and some others, who carry the challenged gifts. The groom has to carry a load that contains 2 capons; in the meanwhile, the groomsman carries a load containing cooked glutinous rice. The bride's family sends people to welcome at the stairs. Some gifts such as a buffalo, a cow, a pig, and chicken are tied under the floor; other gifts are brought upstairs to be placed by the wall and between two windows. The head of the bride's family line checks the gifts as well as the way to arrange them. At this time, the go-between informs the bride family about the time to receive the bride and the list of members on

behalf of the groom's family, who will come to receive the bride.

1.3.8. Wedding day

The bride receiving group includes following members: the go-between, a teenager carrying two sugar canes, two uncles, the groom, two groomsmen, and a younger sister of the groom. The members are selected carefully according to the customs of Mường people. The number of the group members cannot be odd. Regarding to the composition of the bride receiving group and the gifts brought to the bride's home, there is a difference between the custom of Mường people in Hòa Bình and that of Mường people in Ngọc Lặc (Thanh Hóa Province), Thanh Sơn (Phù Thọ Province), and Phù Yên (Sơn La Province). For Mường people in Thanh Hóa Province, the bride receiving group consists of the go-between, the groom, the groom's father, a teenager carrying 2 sugar canes, 4 old people, who represent the paternal and maternal family lines of the groom, friends of the grooms, and any others, who want to join the group. For Mường people in Hòa Bình, in the meanwhile, the members of the group are strictly regulated; older brothers, older sisters are forbidden to take part in the bride receiving ceremony.

After coming to the bride's home, the go-between gives a bottle of rice wine, a packet of betel, and a bunch of area-nuts to representatives of the bride's family, asking them to open the gate. The representatives of the bride's family receive those gifts and then an aunt is asked to receive the two

sugar canes. The bride's family does not open the gate immediately, but they ask the bride receiving group to do antiphonal singing. After several antiphonal sentences, the bride's family opens the gate, letting the group come in. Members of the bride's family throw repeatedly alcoholic yeast to the group. The more members of the group become dirty with the yeast, the happier the bride's family will be, as they think the young couple will be happier and will have more children in future.

1.3.9. Ancestor worshipping ceremony

Two sedge mats are placed in two areas for the worship to the groom's ancestors and the bride's ancestors. In each worship area, there are 12 trays containing glutinous rice, wine, meat, areca-nut and betel, water, and money etc... In the area of worship to the bride's ancestors, there are some challenged gifts such as fabric, bronze pans, *bánh chưng*, *bánh khố*, and silver coins. At this ceremony, an older uncle of the groom makes a ritual to ask the tutelary god and ancestors to allow him to give a new name and allocate an area of land in the ancestor cemetery to the bride. Afterwards, the groom brings a jar of wine bound with a red cloth to be placed under the ancestor worship trays so that the uncle can use to make a ritual on inviting the tutelary god and ancestors of the both families to drink wine. At a lucky time, the go-between asks the bride's family to allow them to take the bride to the groom's home. In some areas in Kim Bôi (Hòa Bình Province), the number of people in the group from the bride's family must be two people more than that

in the bride receiving group from the groom's family; and, the teenager carrying 2 sugar canes must be a girl. The two sugar canes in the wedding symbolize a future of growth and sweet happiness. The fact that a teenager from the groom's family carries two sugar canes shows the desire that the young couple will get an eldest son. In the meanwhile, the fact that a teenager from the bride's home carries two sugar canes shows the desire that the young couple will have a lot of children, including both sons and daughters.

After the bride is taken to the groom's home, the most important ritual starts. Both the groom and the bride have to present themselves before the ancestors. This ritual is done by the same way as that in the bride's home. Yet, this time, the bride must wear a red traditional long skirt; she has to untie the shawl and let her hair down. When the ritual has been done, the bride goes into the bedroom to change clothes. This time, she wears a white traditional long skirt. After that, the head of the groom's family line gives the bride a new name. The bride and two bridesmaids have to prostrate themselves before the head and other members of the family line twice; and then, the bride gives gifts to them. Usually, the bride has to give the grandfather in law a blanket; the grandmother in law a blanket and a skirt; each of the parents in law two pillows, two blankets, and two mattresses; in addition, the mother in law also gets a skirt. And then, the bride gives ants and sisters in law a hem of the skirt; uncles and brothers in law a silk belt made on her own.

After all the rituals have been done, the groom's family gets food and wine to entertain everyone at the wedding. At the meal, the go-between solemnly declares that he has accomplished his task, wishing the young couple long-lasting happiness. On behalf of the groom's and the bride's parents, the head of the groom's family line makes a speech to express gratitude and then gives gifts to the go-between.

1.3.10. Newly-weds' revisits to the bride's family

Three days after the wedding, the groom and the bride have to go to the bride's home to do a ritual called the newly-weds' revisits. For the first revisit, the groom's family prepares 24 *bánh chưng*. The young couple, the bridesmaids and the groomsmen bring the *bánh chưng* to the bride's home. They stay in the bride's home for 3 days. During the 3 days, the groom and the groomsmen have to take part in doing farming work for the bride's family. After the three days, the bride's family prepares 12 *bánh chưng* to be taken by the young couple and the groomsmen to the groom's home.

After three days, the couple pays the second revisit to the bride's home. This time, they have to bring some gifts and stay at the bride's home, like the first revisit. For the last revisit, the groomsmen stay in the bride's home for only one day; whereas, the couple have to stay there for 2 more nights. After the couple comes back to the groom's home, the family prepares food to entertain the groomsmen and gives them some gifts, including: 12 *bánh chưng*, 1 basket of cooked glutinous rice, 1 bottle of white

wine, 1 basket of cooked meat, and 1 shoulder of a pig (or a chicken).

Only after doing the three revisits to the bride's home, can the couple start the nuptial chamber with gay candles. Before the couple lives together, the groom's parents have to choose a lucky day and invite a wizard to do a ritual connecting the astral souls of the couple. According to the opinion of Mường people, the male astral soul is located in one door; whereas, the female astral soul is located in the other door; it is therefore necessary to do a ritual to join them together into one; afterwards, they can live together in harmony and will have children and get rich; after they die, their astral souls will be affectionate towards each other.

2. Cultural features of Mường people shown in the marriage rituals

Firstly, one of the opinions of Mường people is that children have to get married, after becoming adults. This is viewed as a responsibility of parents towards their children and their ancestors as well. In addition, to get married is also seen as a duty of children towards their parents and family line. Parents, therefore, always try their best both materially and spiritually to help their children get married. Only after the children get married, can they feel relieved as they have done fully their responsibility. To make it possible to hold a traditional wedding for children in accordance with the community customs and rituals, parents have to prepare material conditions; in addition, they have to work hard to enhance economic conditions of the family

and live in harmony with neighboring people. One of the proverbs disseminated popularly among Mường people is that "to get a daughter in law, the mother has to be overloaded with work". Besides, there are specific criteria relating to selection of a son and a daughter in law in the community. Thus, parents have to educate their children everything since the childhood so that they will be helpful, industrious, courteous, and tolerant, when they are mature. In the marriage rituals of Mường people, we can see not only a picture of an individual household, but also a picture of the whole community, where everyone always shows responsibilities, sacrifice, harmony and mutual-respect.

Secondly, in marriage of Mường people, *Chí mò* (the go-between) represents the groom's family in undertaking all rituals involved, from the first step (learning about whether the bride's family agrees to marry her off) to the last step (the wedding has been accomplished successfully). This cultural particularity of Mường people is relatively different from cultural characteristics of other ethnic groups, such as Dao people, Thái people, and Kinh people inhabiting the same area of residence. For Mường people, the groom's parents entrust a go-between with the major task in managing all activities of marriage rituals. The go-between has to organize everything properly so that all requirements are satisfied, showing a desire that the young couple will get long-lasting happiness; they will have a lot of children; and they will achieve success in life. A key role played by the go-

between through all the rituals is to build the sense of mutual respect and mutual responsibility between the young couple and the groom's and well as the bride's family; at the same time, he plays the role of creating a close relationship between the two families. The fact that after the wedding, the two families express gratitude and give gifts to the go-between as well as the fact that the young couple pay revisits to the bride's family shows a virtue of Mường culture on living with respect and filial piety.

Thirdly, according to the opinion of Mường people, to marry children off is not undertaken solely by one family, but it should be done with participation of many others from the same family line. The relatives have to share work under the direction of the family-line head. The role played by the family-line head and material support as well as effort contributed by the relatives partly show solidarity, mutual support, and development of the family line. This is a really significant factor involved with cultural life of this ethnic group.

Fourthly, to have two sugar canes in the wedding is a long-standing custom, showing a significant image in cultural life of Mường people. In the marriage rituals, the two sugar canes present when they go to the bride's home to make a proposal; when they go to the bride's home to get the bride; and, when they take the bride to the groom's home for the wedding ceremony. The sugar canes are always carried by teenagers at the first row of the procession. They symbolize the desire for long-lasting

and sweet happiness for the young couple; in addition, they are used to commemorate ancestors and hope their spirits come to share the happiness. For a long time, sugar cane is considered as a special crop of Hòa Bình Province. In the meanwhile, to hold a wedding means to build a new family. To place sugar canes in the wedding, therefore, maybe shows an aspiration that young couples will continue the traditional cultivation of the ethnic group; at the same time, it reminds them to remember the moral principle of "being grateful to benefactors".

Fifthly, the gifts demanded by the bride's family as a challenge are full of the ethnic cultural identity. The gifts are divided into three groups: the first one consists of food for the wedding such as chicken, wine, pork, rice, and *bánh chưng* etc.; the second one consists of what used in daily life such as buffalos, cows, bronze pans etc.; and, the third one consists of those of spiritual value such as white shawls, fabric, jars of wine etc. Looking at the wedding gifts, we can realize a close relationship between the lifestyle, economic activities of Mường people and agriculture; cultivation of wet rice and animal husbandry are the major economic activities. *Bánh chưng*, *bánh khố* are indispensable at the wedding, as they carry a profound significance. These two cakes are attached with the legend of "*Bánh chưng- bánh dày*" at the time of the Hùng Kings, which symbolize the heaven and the earth. In addition, the custom, according to which the bride's family commands silver coins as a wedding challenge (which are then paid back to the groom's family in

form of the bride's dowry. The dowry becomes property of the young couple, but it is legally possessed by the bride), is also meaningful for the community, as it is considered to join the two young people together and to ensure their long-lasting relationship in future. After they live together, if the husband leaves the wife, he will lose the silver and other valuable things; at the same time, he will be condemned by the community; he will be accused of being disloyal to the parents, as they spent a lot of materials and efforts undertaking the wedding rituals. If the wife leaves the husband, she will have to pay all the wedding challenged gifts to the husband's family. At the same time, both the families have to give back each other the white shawls. Owing to this custom, in addition to efforts made by the go-between, the number of divorces in Mường community has been very limited. According to the custom of Mường people, the gifts given by the bride to members of the groom's family as well as things brought by her to the groom's home for daily use must be made on her own. This demonstrates her sincere heart, honesty, and filial piety to the parents in law. It also shows the skill and hard work of the bride specifically and Mường women generally. Thereby, we can realize that Mường people have been doing the cotton planting and weaving for a long time and this job is really important for Mường community.

Sixthly, the custom of doing antiphonal singing at the wedding is an original cultural activity, reflecting a diversified folk

culture of Mường people. On the basis of songs, verses, prayers to ancestors and wine worship, Mường people would like to remind their next generations about the origin and traditions as well as advise them how to live in harmony with nature and people.

3. Conclusion

Marriage of Mường people reflects clearly the conception on love and marriage. The customs of Mường people are different a lot from those of other ethnic minorities. Those customs have, therefore, become cultural particularities of Mường people, making a contribution into diversification of Vietnamese culture. Looking at the marriage rituals, we can find love, respect of children towards their parents and ancestors. We also realize devoted care and support provided by members of the family line for married couples as well as modest and delicate behavior of Mường people in life. In addition, marriage rituals of Mường people shows the sense of preservation and promotion of ethnic cultural values such as culinary values, traditional costumes, arts, and folk knowledge ... Traditional marriage rituals of Mường people reflect obviously their opinions, thinking, lifestyle and manners. They help to bind people together, creating more power for the community.

Nowadays, there have been a lot of changes in marriage rituals of Mường people, making them more appropriate to the new cultural life of the country and helping them to get step-by-step integration and development. In the context of integration, marriage is no longer limited within an ethnic group. More and more

Mường people have got married with those of other ethnic groups. There are, even, some Mường people getting married with foreigners (mainly Chinese and Korean). Consequently, marriage rituals have been more diversified. Cultural particularities of Mường people, however, are still maintained via marriage rituals. Besides, marriage of Mường people has been influenced a lot by cultural factors of Kinh people. As a result, some cultural particularities of this ethnic group has somewhat faded. According to findings of our surveys on marriage rituals of Mường people, we have realized that Mường people in some areas such as Hòa Bình and Thanh Hóa provinces have been more influenced by culture of Kinh people. Many customs, which were viewed as cultural particularities of Mường people; for example, the presence of two sugar canes in the wedding; or the antiphonal singing between the groom's family members and the bride's family members at the bride receiving day; or the revisits to the bride's home after the wedding, have been no longer carried out in practice. Those rituals may be maintained just by Mường people in remote mountainous areas. In the meanwhile, Mường people in Dak-Lak Province are trying to revive traditional marriage rituals that were ever conducted in the place of origin (Hòa Bình Province). They hope to revive and develop the cultural tradition, while still keeping the appropriateness to the present time. In the wedding, mothers and old women wear the traditional costumes and they maintain the antiphonal singing as well etc... Furthermore, Mường

people in Dak-Lak also get married with those from other local ethnic groups, especially the matriarchal ethnic groups such as Ê-đê and Bana. Consequently, there have been many changes in marriage rituals specifically and in the family behavior as well as relationships generally. It is, therefore, necessary to promulgate proper policies to preserve and promote cultural particularities of Mường people according to local specific conditions, contributing a part into making culture of Mường people diversified but united with obvious identities.

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