

# Marital rituals of the Ma Lieng People (The Case Study of Rao Tre Village, Huong Lien Commune, Huong Khe District, Ha Tinh Province)

**Pham Khac Lanh**

MA., Researcher of the Center of Social Sciences and Humanities of Nghe An

Email: khaclanhnv@gmail.com

Received 2 October 2017; published 5 June 2018

**Abstract:** *The Ma Lieng is known as one of the few ethnic minority groups in Ha Tinh who still preserve many traditional traits of culture, including marriage rituals. The article selectively introduces a case-study of marriage rituals of the Ma Lieng in Rao Tre village, Huong Lien commune, Huong Khe district, Ha Tinh province in terms of beliefs, pre-wedding and wedding ceremonies, and post-marital residence; thereby emphasizing the crucial need for preservation of cultural identities in the face of cultural integration.*

**Keywords:** Traditional rituals, Marriage rituals, Ma Lieng people

## 1. Introduction

The Ma Lieng is one of five local groups (including the Sach, May, Ruc, A Rem) that make up the Chut ethnic group, which is classified into Viet - Muong linguistic family, Austro-Asiatic linguistic system (Vien Dan toc hoc, 1987: 54-86), with the total population is around 12,000 people<sup>(\*)</sup>, residing mainly in Quang Binh and Ha Tinh provinces. In Ha Tinh, there

are 41 households with 145 people, living at Rao Tre village (Huong Lien commune, Huong Khe District). For generations, the Ma Lieng people have considered marriage is a great important matter in maintaining their descents and family happiness. They have distinct conceptions, customs and rituals of marriage, which partly bring about the multi-color picture of ethnic minorities of Vietnam.

Until today, the Ma Lieng people have been mentioned in numerous studies, however, most of those mainly focused on residential locations, ethnic origin, population or economic, social and

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Adapted from the List of ethnic minorities' households of Trong Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Thanh Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province; Huong Lien commune, Huong Khe district, Ha Tinh province.

cultural situations,..., while the aspect of marriage rituals with valuable meanings are not paid much attention. This paper focuses on marriage rituals of the Ma Lieng people in Rao Tre village, Huong Lien commune, Huong Khe district, Ha Tinh province, by which emphasizes special cultural traits of the ethnic group that need to be preserved and promoted in today context.

## **2. Marriage perceptions**

Young people of the Ma Lieng, male from 15 to 16 and female from 13 to 14 years old, are allowed freely to learn about and love each other, but marriage must be approved by parents. The ideal standard for spouse selection is the family of the partner that has many siblings and relatives. The Ma Lieng people conceive that a family having many siblings and relatives will easily help each other while facing with difficulties, risks and in productive activities. The ideal female partner is the one who's industrious, good at domestic chores, behaving courteous to her parents, siblings, relatives and villagers. The ideal male partner is the one who's healthy, good at slash and burn cultivation, collecting firewood, having animal hunting and trapping skills, and caring about the future wife's family. The Ma Lieng people also have the conception of "suitable marriage alliance," especially in term of family behaviors. Due to similar living conditions, families of the Ma Lieng people are not different from each other in term of material resources, therefore "suitable marriage alliance" in term of economic condition is not very important and not given much priority in marriage.

## **3. Period prior to wedding**

### **\* Custom of uxorilocality (Co ma tem)**

Uxorilocality is a must custom for young male of the Ma Lieng people before marriage. After finding a girl whom a boy satisfies and wants to conduct uxorilocality in order to come to marriage, he has to go into forest to collect a bunch of firewood and then place in the front of the girl's house. If agree, the girl's family will take the firewood for cooking; if not, they will leave it intact. The period of uxorilocality practice often lasts from two to three years; the daily works of the future groom are doing slash and burn cultivation, trapping wild animals, collecting firewood, giving help to the girl's parents, or going to forest with the girl to gather wild products, to hunt. During the period of uxorilocality, the boy has to observe several taboos: can only stay at a corner outside of the left chamber of the house, must not eat with the family, must neither enter the house by the right stairs of the house nor sit closely to the central fireplace of the house. The practice of uxorilocality is a meaningful traditional custom of the Ma Lieng people, in order to pay bride wealth in form of labor to the girl's family, partly help the boy and the girl know how to work, then they can be independent and live by themselves after the wedding. This is also time period for the groom's family to prepare offerings and gifts for the wedding.

### **\* Ceremony of marriage proposal (O xa anh)**

After the period of uxorilocality, if accepted by the girl's family, the boy informs his parents and asks them to come over to

the girl's family for marriage proposal. Parents and older brothers often on behalf of the groom family; if parents are not available, his uncles and older brothers can be the representatives. Offerings and gifts the groom's family bring including: a bottle of wine, a dish of betel and areca, cigarette and a bunch of green tea. In this ceremony (talk exchange), two families reach to agreement of wedding time, steps of rituals and ceremonies, participants, gifts and offerings. If the groom's family has economic difficulty, they should explain and persuade the bride family to reduce gifts and offerings. They also consent on who will be the representatives and other matters related to the marriage. Ceremony of marriage proposal is the first time the two families formally meet and talk about the marriage but very important because this is the only time that parents of the two families meet and directly talk the marriage. After this, all sequent rituals and ceremonies will be taken by the representatives, not by the two families.

**\* Selection of representatives for the groom and bride families**

The representatives of the groom family are two men, Mr. Rung - forest (so called Mr. Ca Pa - Ca Pa, a basket that is often carried by a man who is going into forest, tied at the hip and used to contain gatherings) and Mr. Cau (so called Mr. Ga - Ga is a closely-woven basket). Mr. Rung must be a man who is highly respected by villagers, having great general knowledge, deep understanding of local customs, rituals, customary law, well-spoken, and having healthy wife

and children. Mr. Cau is an old aged man of the groom family, usually an uncle of the groom, having good understanding of local customs and habits, especially having good experience of buying wedding necessities. In the betrothal ceremony, Mr. Cau is the one who undertakes activities under Mr. Rung's ideas, prepares or supplement gifts as required by the bride family.

The representative of the bride family is called Mr. Thao Ke, a member of the bride family, usually an older uncle or stepfather of the bride. He is well-spoken and having good knowledge of customs and habits. The rules set for selecting the representatives of the Ma Lieng people is not rigid but flexible, their roles can be changed upon certain wedding rituals. In the betrothal ceremony, Mr. Rung and Mr. Cau are the representatives of the groom family who ask the bride family for marriage; however in the ritual of handling the bride, Mr. Rung and Mr. Cau are the representatives of the bride family who accompany and hand the bride over to the groom family. In the ritual of worshipping to ghosts of kitchen, forest and house, it must be witnessed by Mr. Rung and Mr. Cau.

**\* Betrothal ceremony (Ha anh)**

Usually, after the ceremony of marriage proposal about 1-2 weeks, the Ma Lieng people will hold the betrothal ceremony. This is the most important marital ceremony of Ma Lieng people because although in the ceremony of marriage proposal the bride family had accepted the wedding but in this ceremony they may change their mind and refuse, or make it

difficult to the groom family. Mr. Ho Nam (born in 1987, Rao Tre village) told that: In 2004, in the betrothal ceremony of himself and Ms. Ho Thi Khiem (born 1989, Ca Xen village, Quang Binh province), the bride family made trouble to his family because in the period of uxorilocality he had made several misconducts and been drunken many times. To solve the problem, Mr. Rung had to kneel, holding a bowl of lighting wax candle, asked for forgiveness, and paid some money as a fine, only then the bride family accepted offering gifts and the wedding.

The delegates of the groom family consist of: Mr. Rung, Mr. Cau, the groom, parents of the groom, several siblings, uncles and aunts. On the bride family's side, there are Mr. Thao Ke, parents of the bride and some closely related persons. Time for holding the betrothal ceremony is in the late afternoon (after 6 pm), and the groom family must be show up at the bride house before 6 pm. The delegates of the groom family who take part in the betrothal ceremony bring offering gifts with them, including: 2 pigs (one big, another small); chicken (at least, one); 10 rice bowls; 2-4 big bowls; 3 cooking pots; 3 knives; one axe; one piece of cloth, one set of clothes, one dish of betel and areca, pipe tobacco, wine (at least one bottle), sticky rice, a bunch of fresh green tea. Besides, the groom family may offer some money to the bride family but not too much. These offering gifts are used for rituals, eating and drinking during the wedding, and as dowry for the couple.

As the bride family accepts offering gifts, Mr. Rung invites the bride and groom

to eat betel and areca, then announces that they are formally husband and wife. Father of the bride receives the dish of betel and areca and brings it into the altar chamber to inform the event to the house ghost, and asks ancestors for permission to let the both families to organize the wedding for their children.

#### **4. Rituals in the wedding**

According to their customs, after the betrothal ceremony, the two families start to organize the wedding.

##### *\* Kitchen ritual (Cu mnych Po ta pe)*

Kitchen ritual is held in two ways: worshipping with raw and cooked offerings. In ritual of worshipping with raw offerings, the bride use to a pair of kitchen chopsticks (big chopsticks) to hit at the neck of the chicken 3 times, the groom takes several feathers on the back of the pig top put into fire place. This makes these animals squeal. The purpose of worshipping with raw offerings is to let kitchen ghost witness that the groom family prepares enough offering gifts and they hope that kitchen ghost would not punish them.

After completing ritual of worshipping with raw offerings, people of the both families kill the animals, take all internal organs and some meat for ritual of worshipping with cooked offerings. Offerings used for this ritual include: a pot of soup, cooked of vegetable with internal organs of the pig and chicken, and the head of the chicken, a pot of cooked rice. Father of the groom or bride takes 2 legs of the chicken and 2 legs of the pig, a string of beads of the bride's mother, and a pair of kitchen chopsticks; to binds them

all together as a symbol of union, then 4 people hold up in turn the pot of soup and pot of cooked rice while the parents of the bride pray to beg kitchen ghost to bless the couple lucks.

*\* Ritual of eating together*

Ritual of eating together is held at the kitchen section where the bride's parents often have meals. Offerings include: a basket of cooked rice and a basket of food. As holding the ritual, the parents and the bride, the groom sit at four corners, in turn, holding chopsticks, point to the baskets of rice and food, pretend to eat and say that from now on the groom has become a member of the family, can eat, drink together, live in harmony with the bride family, and they pray ghosts to bless them. After that, the parents push the basket of cooked rice to the couple, the couple push the basket of food to the parents in order to show that they care to much about each other, union and love in the family.

*\* Ritual of worshipping house ghost (Cu muych Co no)*

As to hold the ritual of worshipping house ghost, the groom must covered over his head with a piece of cloth or a white shirt, kneels with the bride in the front of offerings placed at the pillar where house ghost stays and they bow 3 times. After that, the bride's father brings these offerings into altar chamber, lights up wax candle, and informs ancestors that today is a good time for the both families to organize the wedding for their children, offering gifts is prepared properly, and prays ancestors to bless their children and their families good health and lucks.

*\* Ritual of worshipping forest ghost (Cu muych O gau)*

After the ritual of worshipping house ghost, the tray of offerings and the pig are brought to the outside of the house, at the yard or a side of the house for worshipping forest ghost. The one who proceeds this ritual can be any member of the bride or groom families, but this person must know well of praying texts and ghosts. This person covers over his shoulder with a piece of cloth or a white shirt, howls 3 times to call the ghost, heading to forest to bows 3 times and informs forest ghost about the wedding of the young couple, that the groom family has prepared enough offerings, and the two families have properly organized all rituals. At the same time, beg forest ghost to bless the young couple lucks in working and hunting, finding good plots of land for cultivation, having good crops, and that their crops are not ruined by wild animals and they do not meet any accidents in forest... After that, the both families have feast, drink until the next morning and the next days.

*\* Ritual of handing over the bride (Chao dau)*

According to Ma Lieng's customs, after the betrothal ceremony, rituals of eating together, worshipping ghosts of kitchen, house and forest, the groom and bride must stay at the bride's house for 5 days and 5 nights. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day, the two families hold the ritual of handing over the bride. The delegates taking part in the ritual consist of: Mr. Rung, Mr. Cau, Mr. Thao Ke, the bride and her parents. Gifts that are prepared by the bride family

include: 1 chicken, 1 plate of betel and areca, 1 blanket, 1 piece of white cloth, 2 bowls, 1 bottle of wine, and cigarette. As arriving at the groom house, the groom's mother or sister, sister in law will receive the bride and leads her by the right stairs to the kitchen. Steps of this ritual include: kitchen ghost, house ghost worships, ritual of eating together but there are some minor changes such as: the ritual of worshipping forest ghost is not held, no live pig used for kitchen ghost worship, and in the ritual of worshipping house ghost, only the bride performs....

*\* Ritual of first visit of the newly-weds*

After the ritual of handing over the bride, the young couple has to stay at the husband's family for 5 days and 5 nights, on the 6<sup>th</sup> day ritual of first visit of the newly-weds to the wife family must be held. As to make the visit, the young couple prepares a chicken and a small pig. The ritual of first visit of the newly-weds to the wife family also consists of steps: kitchen ghost, house ghost worships, ritual of eating together. After the ritual is completed, the couple stays at the house of the wife family for 5 days and 5 nights, they come back to the husband family in the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> day. Since this point of time, they have completed all the rituals of marriage, and start a new life. Thus, a traditional wedding of the Ma Lieng people, from the ceremony of marriage proposal to the ritual of first visit of the newly-weds to the wife family, lasts for 15 days, consist of numerous rituals, ceremonies, and offerings.

## 5. Post marital residence

According to customary law of the Ma Lieng people, wedding ceremony is a must when a couple is about to get married. After wedding, the young husband and wife will live with the husband family until they have available condition to build their own house. A couple of husband and wife who has not yet held a wedding as to become ghosts of the some house, even though being accepted by the community, they must not live with the husband or wife families. They have to build their own house and live there until they can hold a wedding, then they are permitted to come back and live with their parents. Where to build their own house, near the husband or wife families depends on agreement of the young husband and wife couple. Mr. Ho Bac (born in 1965, Rao Tre village) told that Ma Lieng people like to live in their own house after wedding. Survey at Rao Tre village shows that there are 19/49 households that have parents but of which, only 4 households live with their parents: 1 household lives with the mother in law, 2 households live with the husband parents, 1 household lives with the wife parents; the rest 15/19 households live separately in their own house after wedding<sup>(\*)</sup>.

## 6. Out-wedding

According to conception of Ma Lieng people, in order to have a happy life and lucks, a couple of husband and wife must

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Statistics from fieldwork carried out by the author in July, 2017. This article also uses data of interviewing several people at Rao Tre village such as: Ho Do (born in 1955, Ho Nham (born 1963), Ho Nam (born in 1987), Ho Phuong (born in 1950, Ho Pac (born in 1965).

go through 2 time of wedding as they call in-wedding and out-wedding, but it is not strictly applied to everyone. The out-wedding is often held while the condition is available: in-wedding was held; father and mother (or one of them) of the wife are still alive; having economic condition. Time for holding the out-wedding is after the in-wedding from 5 to 10 years. The out-wedding is held at the house of the wife's parents, consists of rituals: kitchen ghost, house ghost and forest ghost worships, eating together but being held more simply than that of the in-wedding. The wedding offerings include: 1 pig and 1 chicken. After this wedding, the couple has to stay at the wife parents' house for 5 days and 5 nights; on the 6<sup>th</sup> day, the whole family organize the ritual of eating together, after that, the couple come back to their own house and finish the out-wedding. Main purpose of this wedding is to pray ghosts (or spirits) to bless their parents and children with good health and a peaceful life. Survey and retrospective interviews at Rao Tre village show that from 1976 up to present, 35/55 couples held the in-wedding but only 6/35 couple held the out-wedding.

## 7. Conclusion

Research of marriage of the Ma Lieng people in Ha Tinh province shows that, selection and getting marriage mainly depend on the couple on voluntary basis, and according to their conception, in order to have a happy marriage, a couple of husband and wife has to held 2 times of wedding. Holding wedding has effects on residence after wedding and is related to customs of belief of the people. Ma Lieng people believe that if a couple of husband

and wife has not yet held wedding, they still owe a big debt to ghosts and villagers. They may live in fear that ghosts would punish by making them sick, diseased and many difficulties in life.

Although there are some certain limited aspects, rituals of marriage of the Ma Lieng people has many good values that need to be preserved and promoted. Typical are fine patterns of behaviors of children to their parents. One of the main purposes of marriage rituals of the Ma Lieng people is beg spirits to bless the parents with good health, a long life, if the parents are dead, the out-wedding is not held.

Wedding ceremony of the Ma Lieng people can be said as the time of a great ceremony and festival of the people in the year, through which, beautiful cultural patterns of union, strong attachments to each other, reciprocity in everyday life. The wedding is attended by almost all of the villagers who support with whatever they may have, a bowl of rice, some fish, several wild bamboo shoots, a bottle of wine,... They even take part in the wedding without any gift but to help the hosts clean and prepare offerings. After completing rituals, everyone drinks and dances together through the night to celebrate for the new couple.

Special patterns of marriage customs of Ma Lieng people in Ha Tinh, which are a treasure of humanity values that make up culture identities of Chut ethnic group in particular and ethnicities of Vietnam in general, need to be preserved and promoted □

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