

Preservation of the Central Highlands Culture in the Context of International Integration

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Abstract: *The Central Highlands have a strategical role to play in Vietnam's socioeconomic and cultural development. Not just forming a natural corridor along the borders with Southern Laos, Northeastern Cambodia, and the Central Coastal Vietnam, the region is also home to distinctive cultural values of indigenous ethnic minorities. Therefore, formulating comprehensive policies for the Central Highlands to serve multiple purposes, like narrowing the development gap with other regions and improving people's living standards while preserving traditional cultural values, has been of great significance. The paper provides clarification of some achievements in preserving the Central Highlands culture over time, presenting current challenges as well as some suggestions for preserving and promoting traditional culture of ethnic minorities in the coming time.*

Keywords: Preservation, Central Highlands, Culture

1. Introduction

Located in geographical coordinates from 11°45' to 15°27' (North latitude) and from 107°12' to 108°55' (East longitude), the Central Highlands (hereafter referred to as the Highlands) consist of five provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. The Highlands is one among Vietnam's seven ecological-economic zones with a natural area of 54,638.4 km² (16.8% area of the whole

country^(*)), of which forests of all kinds account for 3,140,000 ha, equivalent to 36.3% of the country's forest reserves^(**). There are 61 administrative units at district level, including five cities (Buon Ma Thuot, Pleiku, Da Lat, Kon

^(*) The natural areas of provinces in descending order: Gia Lai 15,536 km², Dak Lak 13,125.3 km², Lam Dong 9,773 km², Kon Tum 9,689 km², Dak Nong 6,513 km² (2013 Statistical Yearbooks of Central Highlands provinces).

^(**) Five administrative units of the Central Highlands in 2015.

Tum, and Bao Loc), four townships (An Khe, Ayun Pa, Buon Ho, Gia Nghia), and 52 districts. The total number of administrative units at commune level is 722, consisting of 77 wards, 48 towns, and 597 communes. Among 7,824 villages and residential groups, there are 2,764 hamlets and villages of ethnic minorities^(*).

The Highlands are the land of cultural diversity with precious tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Given the current international economic integration, the preservation and promotion of cultural values of indigenous ethnic minorities as well as the effectiveness of the state management over cultural and ethnic minority issues are two sides of a coin. At the same time, they are also pressing tasks to be addressed, involving the values of socioeconomic and cultural development of the country in general and ethnic minorities in particular.

Recognizing the importance of preserving the cultural values of the Highlands, many policies and mechanisms have been particularly tailored by the Party and the central government for the region besides general development policies for ethnic groups and mountainous areas. These preferential policies aim at facilitating the region's socioeconomic and cultural development while ensuring the national security and improving people's living standards.

(*) Vietnam's seven economic zones include Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas, Red River delta, North Central Coast, Central Coast, Central Highlands, South East, and Mekong delta.

Nevertheless, the preservation and promotion of cultural values of ethnic minorities in the Highlands still face difficulties in policy formulation and implementation due both to subjective and objective reasons. Further studies and evaluation are required to provide scientific base for policy making and more appropriate and effective programs and projects in the future.

2. Achievements in preserving indigenous culture of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands

a. Central Highlands - the land of distinctive cultures

Owing to geological and historical characteristics, the Highlands is known not only for its natural beauty but a wide range of cultural heritages, representing the cultural identity of the ethnic groups here. Among those, the space of Gong culture is unique for serving ritual ceremonies and traditional festivals of the ethnic communities, including buffalo stabbing, welcoming newborns, celebrating victory, sowing seeds, harvesting, ceremony to bring rice into the warehouse, worshiping water wharf, worshiping the rice god, worshiping the buffaloes and cows, and so forth.

The Highlands is also famous for its variety of local epics - the fundamental form of the folk culture - as they regulate various combinations of expressions. The folk culture here include folk songs (tơpun), folk poetry (pơ đuk), sung poetry (avòng), stories (tơ roi) (including legends, myths, and parables), jokes (blao), singing conversations (hori), long poems (hơ amôn) (Truong Quoc Binh, 2016: 5).

Along with intangible cultural heritages, there are important historical and cultural relics in the Highlands. Above all, the Lung Leng archaeological sites (discovered in Lung Leng village, Sa Binh commune, Sa Thay district, Kon Tum) are the most remarkable complex of relics and artifacts. They demonstrate dynamic characteristics of the Highlands' prehistoric society between 3,000 and 2,500 years ago. Together with them, the prehistoric relics found in Gia Lai (An Khe commune), Dak Lak, and Lam Dong are proofs of ancient Highlands of nearly one million to 2,500 years ago. (Pham Duc Manh, 2016: 207)

Many historical relics in the Highlands also represent the epic periods of national building and protection. The Tay Son Thuong Dao relics, including six historical sites in An Khe mountainous area (An Khe town, Gia Lai province), testify to the Tay Son uprising and the heroism of Quang Trung-Nguyen Hue. Lac Giao Communal House in Buon Ma Thuot city is the evidence of a fascinating residential mix of Viet people and other ethnic groups in this basalt Highlands. A number of prison relics in the Central Highlands such as Buon Ma Thuot Prison (Dak Lak), Kon Tum Prison, Dakglei Prison (Kon Tum) are reminders of the loyalty and undaunted courage of the communist revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives for the national independence. The presence of other relics of the revolution and resistance war like Kroong Hoa fighting village, Dak To - Tan Canh relic, Ho Chi Minh Trail, and dozens of relics of the Great Victory in Spring 1975 demonstrates the strategic

importance of this region and also serves as the evidence for the participation of the ethnic groups in Central Highlands in the great wars of resistance of our nation (Truong Quoc Binh, 2016: 6).

b. The current status of the preservation of traditional culture of indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands

* A number of policy documents of the Party and State for the preservation and promotion of traditional culture of indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands:

Cultural preservation in the Central Highlands has been regarded as an important task by the Party and State since the national unification. Especially after the initiation of renewal (Doi moi) policy in 1986, this task gained even more urgency. Decision No. 656/TTg dated 13th September 1996 of the Prime Minister on *Socio-economic development of the Central Highlands for the period of 1996-2000 and up to 2010*^(*) states "To eradicate bad customs and superstitions; to develop different types of popular culture and arts and folklore; to ensure the cultural enjoyment of people of all strata...". *Decision No. 184/1998/QĐ-TTg dated 24th September 2014 of the Prime Minister approving the Socio-economic development master plan of the Central Highlands up to 2010*^(**) stipulates that "To practice civilized lifestyle; to

(*) Refer to: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Dau-tu/Quyet-dinh-656-TTg-phattrien-kinh-te-xa-hoi-vung-Tay-Nguyen-1996-2000-va-2010-40012.aspx>

(**) Refer to: <https://luatvietnam.vn/chinh-sach/quyet-dinh-184-1998-qd-ttg-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-6739-d1.html>

preserve cultural identity; to improve the living standards for the people in remote, far-flung and border areas. To build equal and civilized society and healthy communities; to eradicate bad customs and social evils". *Decision No. 168/2001/QĐ-TTg dated 30th October 2001 of the Prime Minister on long-term directions, 5-year plan for the period of 2001-2005 and major solutions for socio-economic development of the Central Highlands*^(*) specifies that: To attach importance to the investment into cultural facilities, radio and television systems, sports facilities, cultural houses, traditional community hall (nhà rông) in villages for serving ceremonies and festivals; to promote cultural traditions and ethnic identity. To organize cultural exchange among areas and in the region, and traditional festivals of ethnic groups. To preserve and promote tangible and intangible culture of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. To enhance grassroot cultural facilities in hamlets and villages, implementing the regulation for democracy at grassroot level...

Particularly, on 18th January 2002, the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued *Resolution 10-NQ/TW (9th tenure) on Socio-economic development and national defense and security in the Central Highlands for the period of 2001-2010*^(**). The Resolution stipulates

that: To build cultural facilities in hamlets and villages on the principle of "state and people working together". To establish organizations and facilities for studying and preserving cultural heritages of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. To eradicate bad customs and superstitions as well as outmoded lifestyle. To broaden the television coverage and enhance the quality of television programs; to expand the community radio broadcasting system in communes and groups of communes; to increase the time of broadcasting in the languages of ethnic minorities.

On 24th October 2011, the Politburo issued *Conclusion No. 12-KL/TW on the continued implementation of Resolution 10-NQ/TW of the Politburo (9th tenure) on the development of the Central Highlands for the period of 2011-2020*^(*). As far as culture is concerned, the Conclusion stipulates: To focus on building new cultural lifestyle and meet the cultural demands of ethnic minorities on the basis of preserving the virtues of traditional culture; to step-by-step develop new cultural and arts values and establish civilized lifestyle and cultural families. To continue investing into grassroot cultural facilities; to study, collect, and restore cultural heritages and writings of ethnic minorities.

(*) Refer to: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Xay-dung-Do-thi/Quy-dinh-168-2001-QĐ-TTg-dinh-huong-dai-han-ke-hoach-5-nam-2001-2005-giai-phap-phat-trien-kinh-te-xa-hoi-vung-Tay-Nguyen-49566.aspx>

(**) Refer to: <http://www.cema.gov.vn/2014/02/19/958c1c8043519e16b414b78c82b67edf-cema.htm>

(*) Decision No. 276/QĐ-TTg dated 18th February 2014 of the Prime Minister on the Implementation Plan of Conclusion No. 12-KL/TW dated 24th October 2011 of the Politburo on the continued implementation of Resolution 10-NQ/TW of the Politburo (9th tenure) on the development of the Central Highlands for the period of 2011-2020, Refer to: <http://www.cema.gov.vn/2014/02/19/958c1c8043519e16b414b78c82b67edf-cema.htm>

On 18th July 2012, the Prime Minister promulgated *Decision No. 936/QĐ-TTg on approving the Socio-economic development master plan of the Central Highlands up to 2020*^(*) which clearly sets down the development directions for culture: To build the system of cultural facilities to the grassroot level; to preserve and restore cultural and historical relics.

** The implementation of the policies on preserving traditional culture of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands:*

On the basis of Party and State policies, the provinces in the Central Highlands conducted surveys and assessment of culture of indigenous ethnic minorities. Proposals for “The preservation and promotion of cultural values in festivals, patterns, Gong and musical instruments of indigenous ethnic minorities” were formulated. Under the framework of the target program on preservation of intangible culture, with the funding from central and local budget, the provinces in the Central Highlands implemented a number of programs which included research activities and promotion of traditional cultural identity of indigenous ethnic minorities through the media. Besides, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism in the provinces organized various activities at regional, provincial and district levels aimed at preserving and promoting ethnic cultural values such as culture-sports events, festivals of ethnic

musical instruments, festival of folk music and dancing, display of ethnic costumes... Generally, thanks to the appropriate policies of the Party and State and the determination of provinces in the region, substantial results have been achieved in the preservation and promotion of cultural values of the Central Highlands. The cultural life of the local people has been enriched; the preservation, restoration and promotion of traditional cultural heritages have been enhanced. The system of cultural facilities from provincial to grassroot levels have been step-by-step developed; some customs, practices of indigenous ethnic minorities have been documented and restored. Investment from state budget has been made into the construction of many cultural community halls in Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Dak Lak, Dak Nong. A model cultural village has been established in Lam Dong province. In addition, the festival of elephant racing, Gong festival, cultural festival Truong Son - Central Highlands have become annual festivals of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Some traditional festivals of indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands such as buffalo stabbing, new rice celebration, water worshipping, spirit worshipping, health celebration, praying for rain... have been documented and restored. The preservation, collection and dissemination of cultural research materials and artifacts of the Central Highlands have been underway.

However, some limitations with the policies and implementation process remain as follows:

- Although many policies have been promulgated by the Party and State for

(*) Refer to: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Xay-dung-Do-thi/Quy-dinh-936-QĐ-TTg-nam-2012-phe-duyet-Quy-hoach-tong-the-phan-trien-kinh-te-143877.aspx>.

cultural preservation and promotion in the Central Highland, some policies are more about general directions without specific considerations of the situation. The lack of resources is a significant obstacle to the implementation process, given the fact that local budget is limited and the amount of contribution from individuals and organizations and foreign sources is insignificant...

- To date, there has not been a proper policy for preservation of culture of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, especially the indigenous ethnic groups. The coverage of the current policy is fairly broad, failing to specifying the most distinctive cultural heritages of each ethnic group for focused preservation efforts.

- The preservation of traditional culture of the Central Highlands, especially of indigenous ethnic minorities did not pay due attention to the daily cultural life of the people, tilting towards "performance, exhibition and cultural propaganda". Therefore, the preservation works at times and in places do not take the villages as the center, failing to mobilize the proactivity of the local residents. As a matter of fact, some local authorities become the main actor in preserving traditional culture, instead of local residents. That way, the utility and sustainability of the cultural heritages in preservation is limited...

3. Challenges to the preservation of traditional culture of local ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands

The integration and modernization process has led to profound changes in the cultural life of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Firstly, along with the change in living environment from traditional to modern society, the economic stratification process has produced great impacts on the cultural life of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Under the influence from other cultures and the market economy, many precious cultural values of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands such as: Gong, epic poem... are fading away. Even ethnic people become less interested in their valuable cultural assets. The spiritual life of people has gone out of balance when the old culture is gradually eroding yet the new culture has not gained an established position. This fact also adversely affects the confidence of the local people in the Party and State which used to be very positive in the two resistance wars against France and America.

Secondly, rapid deforestation led to the disruption of the traditional cultural architecture of inhabitants in the Central Highlands. Land, forest and fields always play a critical role in the cultural life of indigenous ethnic minorities. Forest land and fields are regarded as the root of the spiritual life. Without forest land and fields, indigenous ethnic people and communities would lose the deepest foundation of their culture. It is the close-knit relationship between human beings and nature, relationship among human beings and relationship among communities...

Thirdly, the spontaneous migration into the Central Highlands causes conflict in land use on a regular basis. The ethnic composition of migrants into the Central

Highlands include Kinh, Tay, Nung, Dao, H'mong, Muong^(*),... On the one hand, the convergence of migration flows has increased the cultural diversity in the region. On the other hand, it has brought about complications in practicing rituals and customs... This fact is closely related to the issue of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Fourthly, in the market economy and the current international integration, the culture of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands has shown the signs of being mixed and distorted. Formerly, the costumes of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands were made by dexterous indigenous people with bright and colourful patterns. But now, young generations of Bana, Ede, Ma, K'ho... ethnic minorities wear jeans and t-shirts, ride motorbike, drink western alcohol... Charnel-house statues are also heavily affected. For profit, modern technology has been introduced into the process of statue sculpting. The statues made in this way appear to be gleaming and neat with standard-like dimensions. They lose the original beauty that lies in the simple and elegant expression.

Fifthly, the influence from evangelical religion has diminished the traditional cultural practice of the indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, including Gong culture, tube wine (ruou

can) culture... In the Central Highlands, most of cultural folklore activities take place around rituals and ceremonies. However, with the increasing penetration of religions, in many places in the Central Highlands traditional rituals have been replaced by religious ceremonies. In those places, Gong are even regarded as the tools of evil spirits which are thrown away or sold.

Sixthly, the indigenous people themselves also play a part, as manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, some local ethnic people in the Central Highlands self-deprecate their own culture and become inactive in preservation efforts. On the other hand, the cultural needs of the locals also alter under the changing environment, economy and society. Some people therefore show less interest in the cultural values once cherished by their ancestors.

4. A number of measures for the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands

Basic cultural values of the Central Highlands lie in the human-to-human relationship and the relationship between human beings and nature. To preserve and promote the virtues of traditional culture in the Central Highlands in the current context of integration, some recommendations are put forward as follows:

Firstly, it is imperative to identify the strategic objectives and policies for the sustainable development of the Central Highlands that ensure the harmonization between human beings and nature in the industrialization and modernization process.

(*) Between 1976 and 1986, the population of the Central Highlands increased by 64%, mainly due to migration. In 1993, the total population of the region was 2,376,854 people belonging to 35 ethnic groups. The ethnic minorities accounted for 44.2% of the regional population with 1,050,569 people (Bui Minh Dao, 1999: 83).

Secondly, it is necessary to focus on improving the cultural environment, especially in the areas of indigenous ethnic minorities. Investment should be made into power provision, road building, grassroot cultural facilities. Cooperative efforts should be put into preventing social evils and fighting with signs of ideological deviation.

Thirdly, languages and writings of indigenous ethnic minorities should be preserved and promoted along with the use of national Vietnamese language and writings because the disappearance of language is the shortest way leading to the loss of the cultural ethnic identity.

Fourthly, special policies should be put in place to connect education with culture, raising the awareness of the young generation about the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values of the Central Highlands. Issues related to ethnic culture should be introduced into school curriculum; university and college students should be equipped with sufficient knowledge about the culture of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Fifthly, there should be special mechanisms and policies to develop cultural tourism in villages and to mainstream the preservation of Central Highlands culture into the daily life so that cultural values can be promoted in a sustainable way. It is necessary to build models of homestay tourism, engaging indigenous ethnic minorities in tourism development in the Central Highlands. Doing so would increase the ownership of local people in tourism development,

improve their material and spiritual life and strengthen their awareness of the preservation efforts and promotion of cultural values of the Central Highlands to domestic and international tourists.

Sixthly, it is necessary to conduct systematic research on the traditional knowledge of each ethnic group in the Central Highlands; to conduct survey and make inventory of traditional knowledge of indigenous ethnic minorities; and on that basis to establish a database on the ethnic traditional knowledge and make those materials available for government officials and people for preservation purposes.

5. Conclusion

Issues related to culture and the preservation of ethnic culture in the context of international integration have posed challenges for the Party and State, especially the operational staff of cultural policy at central and local levels as well as the indigenous ethnic people themselves. The Central Highlands is full of potentials for economic development and cultural values of different ethnic minorities. The region is characterized by cultural distinctiveness and diversity but prone to disruption under the pressure of economic growth. Therefore, the Central Highlands needs a tailored approach with proper standards and value system. The Central Highlands cultural heritages are of great significance not only to the indigenous ethnic minorities in the region but also to the culture of Vietnam and the Southeast Asia □

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