

A COMPARISON OF THE LIFE CYCLE RITUALS OF THE MNONG ETHNIC GROUP IN DAM RONG DISTRICT (LAM DONG PROVINCE) AND DAK SONG DISTRICT (DAK NONG PROVINCE)

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Abstract

The Mnong are an ethnic minority of the Central Highlands concentrated in Dak Nong, Dak Lak, and Lam Dong provinces. In their long residence in these regions and with continuous creativity, the Mnong have created cultural characteristics shown in their customs, beliefs, and festivals. Life cycle rituals are one of them. From a comparative perspective, this article delves into the spiritual beliefs in two areas where many Mnong live, Dam Rong District (Lam Dong) and Dak Song District (Dak Nong), to find similarities and differences in the beliefs and expressions of their life cycle rituals. On that basis, some solutions are proposed to help preserve their ethnic identities through the life cycle rituals with the purpose of preserving the cultural diversity of the Mnong residents in the Central Highlands.

Keywords: Dak Song; Dam Rong; Life cycle rituals; Mnong.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mnong are an ethnic group that has lived in the Central Highlands for a long time. Over the course of their history, due to their scattered residence and limited ethnic cohesion, many Mnong groups have formed in different localities. However, these groups share a common cultural background that creates unity despite their ethnic diversity. One of the foundations that govern the culture of the Mnong is their belief system, especially their belief in spirits. This belief system shapes their ritual system throughout their lives, from the time they are fetuses to the time they return to the land when they die.

Life cycle rituals are a common ritual system in the life of many ethnic groups in Vietnam and around the world. For the ethnic groups of the Central Highlands, especially the Mnong, life cycle rituals are an indispensable part of creating cultural characteristics. They are also the fulcrum for the spiritual life of residents. However, due to differences in residence and other objective factors, life cycle rituals are not the same among Mnong groups, although there are common patterns in beliefs and expressions. Therefore, understanding the rituals that take place regularly and closely with Mnong residents' lives is an effective way to deepen the understanding of their lives and worldview during the ethnic development process.

The life cycle rituals of the Mnong have been studied by authors such as Do Hong Ky (Đỗ, 2012), Truong Bi (Truong, 2006, 2007), and To Dong Hai (Tô, 2010). However, there have been no previous studies that delve deeply into their life cycle rituals from a comparative perspective to identify cultural values in terms of both beliefs and expressions.

By means of ethnographic fieldwork, comparison, synthesis, and analysis, the article focuses on understanding the spiritual beliefs of the Mnong, which are the foundation governing their life cycle ritual system. On that basis, we can clarify the similarities and differences in life cycle ritual practices of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, specifically the Dam Rong (Lam Dong) and Dak Song (Dak Nong) districts where a large number of ethnic Mnong people live. From that, there is a basis for proposing appropriate conservation solutions, especially now when the issue of preserving cultural diversity in ethnic unity is a matter of great concern.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. Overview of the Mnong ethnic group in Lam Dong and Dak Nong

According to 2019 statistics, there are 127,334 Mnong in Vietnam, residing mainly in Dak Nong and Dak Lak provinces. In addition, part of the Mnong population lives in Lam Dong, Binh Phuoc, and Quang Nam provinces. The Mnong are divided into several groups, such as the Preh, Nong, Nâr, Prang, Biăt, Dip (mainly residing in Dak Nong), Chil, Gar (Lam Dong), and Rlam (Dak Lak), but the difference between the groups across the country is not large, and most of the Mnong can understand each other. In general, these groups are similar in terms of economy and culture as well as social organization.

In Lam Dong Province, the Mnong live mainly in Dam Rong, a mountainous district located in the Northwest. Currently, this district has a population of 54,217, of which the Mnong ethnic group accounts for 10,055 people¹ living mainly in Da M'rong, Da Tong, Da Rsal, and Ro Men communes. The main group in this area is the Mnong Gar, but a few residents belong to the Mnong Chil group. The Mnong in Dak Song (Dak Nong Province) live mainly in Dak N'drung, Truong Xuan, and Dak Mol communes with a population of 7,732² people, belonging to the Nâr and Nong groups. (The district population is 81,254.) Dak Song has a diverse topography, with many rivers and streams evenly distributed throughout the region. The topography affects, to an extent, the economic and cultural characteristics of the Mnong residents in this area.

2.1.1. Economic activities

The traditional economy of the Mnong relies entirely on nature and consists of slash-and-burn and dry farming. They do not know how to use fertilizers intensively, so they have to rotate crops in an area of forest large enough for the land to recover. Hence, they deforest but still take care of the forest to ensure that their community's living environment is not destroyed.

Besides farming, their main source of food supply, the Mnong also hunt and gather wild fruits and vegetables to serve their family's daily meals. Bamboo shoots, mushrooms and rattan buds cooked with fish, shrimp, or tiny shrimp caught in rivers, streams, and ponds are the main foods of the Mnong. However, "fishing is not the main source of animal protein, and neither is hunting. They rarely fish, and they even trap more than they hunt. The same goes for animal husbandry. Only when they sacrifice do people slaughter chickens, ducks, pigs, dogs, and buffaloes. It can be said that only when there are religious ceremonies do people eat meat" (Condominas, 1997, p. 193).

In recent times, with the introduction of modern technology, the Mnong have used a number of machines, such as plows and water pumps, in production and agricultural vehicles for transport. They no longer farm by crop rotation as before but choose companion planting. They start new crops in an area where a crop is about to be harvested and develop the household economy by cultivating high-value crops such as peppers, coffee, cashews, and fruit such as avocados and durians.

2.1.2. Social organization

The Mnong follow the matriarchal system, meaning that the woman plays the main role in the family. The family is the main unit of economic and spiritual life and of property ownership. Currently, the clear power distinction between men and women is

¹ Cục Thống kê tỉnh Lâm Đồng (2019), Table 2: Preliminary population by ethnic group, gender, and administrative unit (April 1, 2019).

² Chi cục Thống kê Đắk Song (2020), Official report on the population of Dak Song District by ethnic group (prior to December 31, 2019), Report No. 17/BC-CCTK.

almost gone, but other matters, such as marriage and inheritance, etc., still clearly show matrilineal characteristics.

The *bon* is the basic social unit of the Mnong, consisting of people residing in the same area as neighbors and with many families related by blood. A small *bon* has less than 30 houses, and a large *bon* has over 50. A *bon* includes residential land, rivers and streams with wharfs, sacred forests, forest for swidden cultivation, hunting and gathering areas, grazing areas, and burial sites. *Bons* are defined by conventional natural boundaries and are respected and protected by everyone. In general, a *bon* is the “social space” of the community (Condominas, 1997).

2.1.3. Cultural life

Traditional Mnong live in longhouses, which are usually the residence of several matriarchal families. Each family in the longhouse has an independent kitchen, living space, and space for activities, but all are under the management of a landlady. The Mnong have two types of houses: stilt houses and ground floor houses, but most are ground floor houses.

In terms of dress, the costumes of Mnong men and women are similar to those of other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. The difference is usually in the patterns and colors of the loincloths and dresses. Both men and women wear pullovers. Traditional women’s costumes are quite simple. They usually wear wrap skirts (a cloth wrapped twice around the waist) and short-sleeved shirts. The hem, collar, sleeves, and skirt are embroidered with long red thread. Men wear loincloths (also known as *troi*), long-sleeve shirts, and their clothes are often embroidered with bird, mountain, and tree patterns.

The meals of the Mnong depend on nature. They usually eat clay pot rice with wild vegetables, fish, or game. Every house raises cattle and poultry, but mainly to serve worship rituals or to treat their guests. During festivals or worship occasions, people often cook *com lam*, bamboo-cooked rice (called *prung mbêt* in the Mnong language). They drink *ruợu cần* (*ndrănh yăng*), which is made of fermented glutinous rice (*nép*) mixed with several kinds of herbs, including leaves and roots from the local forests, as do several ethnic groups in Vietnam.

The Mnong people have diverse customs and festivals. Annually, they celebrate the harvest festival when the crops have been harvested and the rice has been stored. During the festival, people eat rice and meat and drink *ruợu cần*; they dance and play gongs for many days and nights.

The culture and art of the Mnong are quite varied, including oral literature with many different genres, such as myths, legends, ancient stories, epics, rhymes, proverbs, folk songs, and traditional music. A unique type of Mnong folklore is the epic (for example, *ot n'drong*).

In general, the existence and development of Mnong residents clearly show their adaptations to the natural environment as well as community development to satisfy a variety of physical and mental needs. Therefore, the Mnong in the Central Highlands have had a fairly stable life for a long time. In the modern era, they still affirm and transmit unique cultural values. Moreover, the Mnong continue to have an important role and position in the socioeconomic development of both Dak Nong and Lam Dong.

2.2. Comparison of the life cycle rituals of the Mnong ethnic group in Dam Rong (Lam Dong) and Dak Song (Dak Nong)

2.2.1. Animism – The basis that dominates the life cycle ritual system of the Mnong

Animism is a popular belief form of the Mnong people. In Latin, *animus–anima* means spirit, soul, belief in the soul, or the spirit world. S. Freud said that “animism, in the narrow sense, is a treatise on soul ideas. In a broad sense, it is the doctrine of spiritual essences” (Hội Khoa học Lịch sử Việt Nam, 2006, p. 123). Thus, the above view affirms the existence of an element other than the body: the soul, which is more important than the body and can govern the existence of the body. Everything in the world has a soul; people attach souls to everything to explain the cause of life of all species. In this research, we only focus on understanding the “theory of soul ideas,” the animism in the narrow sense, as emphasized by S. Freud. Specifically, the research clarifies the concept and belief about the human soul and the manifestations of that belief expressed through the life cycle ritual system of the Mnong.

By considering their “behavior” toward the soul, we will realize the beliefs that dominate this creed. The most obvious sign is the worship of spirits. These can be the souls of ancestors, meritorious people, or even evil spirits and demons that always harm people. The purpose of this worship is to avoid bad things or to pray for “blessings” because a spirit can bring good luck as well as bad luck to people.

The Mnong have certain taboos regarding their belief in the soul. For instance, they believe the soul slips out of the body when someone goes to sleep, so they are not allowed to draw on the face of a sleeping person for fear the soul, when it returns, will not recognize the body. Another example is the taboo of abstaining from suddenly waking up a sleeping person. When the soul returns, the body is “distorted,” which is believed to cause bad consequences such as losing or changing one’s mind or to cause certain defects such as mouth distortion or shoulder dislocation (Nguyễn, 2007).

The specific manifestation that most clearly reflects the spiritual beliefs of the Mnong is the organization of life cycle rituals, which are strongly dominated by animism. Through rituals, especially funeral rituals, the Mnong concept of the soul is revealed, as can be illustrated with an example of how the Mnong Gar worship the dead. They make “a fake stove with some firewood that has been extinguished. On top of the stove is a pot with a handful of rice soaked in water, and next to it is a smaller pot with a few green vegetables inside. In the underworld, all of these things will appear as a real

fire with rice and vegetables being boiled, and a resin fire shining” (Condominas, 2008, p. 303). This ritual is intended to prepare for the future life of the dead in the afterlife.

The spiritual beliefs are concretized by the belief in an afterlife and in the concept of “the alive dead,” as noted by Marx Ebecte. “Initial worship for the dead is nothing other than the continuation of social obligations beyond the confines of death” (Tocarev, 1995, p. 189). Because death is not the end, but just a turning point to change the state and position of the soul from one world to another.

2.2.2. *Life Cycle Rituals – Similarities*

The Mnong believe that man has a soul and a body. There are three types of souls: *Trâu* (*Rpu*), *Nai* (*Yun*), and *Dé, Càò Càò* (*Ler, Srah*). The three types of souls are named after animals or insects: buffalo, deer, and crickets/locusts, respectively. Of the three, the *Trâu* soul is the main soul. If it is healthy, the man will be healthy, and vice versa. The *Nai* and *Dé, Càò Càò* are subordinate souls. If these spirits leave the body, get lost, or are eaten by ghosts, people will get sick. In these cases, the family must invite the fortune-teller to recall the spirits. When the soul returns to the body, the person will be cured.

The belief in the soul creates a system of behavior toward the soul and things believed to be related to the soul. Specifically, through the following life cycle rituals:

When a baby is born: The Mnong believe that the souls of the dead in the clan will reincarnate into their descendants. When a baby is born, the family holds a naming ceremony (*moh sāk*) and a soul worshipping ceremony (*mpih kon yôn*) to find and receive the ancestral soul returning to the baby. In addition, the ear piercing ceremony is also a ritual reflecting belief in the soul. When the child is about three or four years old, the family will hold an ear piercing ceremony to mark a new stage in the child’s life. The deep meaning of this ritual is to make the child’s soul happy; otherwise, the soul will be sad and go back to the ghost village, after which the child will die (Truong, 2004).

- The wedding ceremony is a remarkable event in Mnong personal life. It plays an important role in their life cycle rituals in both Dam Rong and Dak Song. We rarely see the manifestation of spiritual beliefs in most of the rituals related to the wedding ceremony. The hidden beliefs dominate many rituals because the wedding ceremony is not only the social connection of two families and two people but also the soul connection between two ancestors. Celebrating the wedding rites carefully not only creates a good memory for the living but also prays to the ancestors to witness and bless for a happy and long-lasting marriage.
- In old age: According to the traditional custom of the Mnong, when parents are 60 years old, the eldest child will hold a longevity ceremony. This is a health celebration, but more solemn and special than other celebrations. During the ceremony, the parents will drink seven bowls of alcohol after alcohol has been poured three times on his feet by a priest. The Mnong

people believe that if they do not drink all seven bowls, they will not be healthy and live long, and the soul will not be energized and strong.

- After death: Depending on the death case, the deceased will receive appropriate funeral rites. The Mnong believe that organizing the funeral in the wrong way will cause a disaster for the family and the community. This belief comes from the Mnong concept that the souls of the dead can punish living people. There are two kinds of death in their conception. A good death is caused by sickness or old age. In this case, the soul will go down to Bon Phan, the place where the soul of the dead person lives. Bad deaths are caused by accidents. The souls, in this case, cannot go down to Bon Phan and have to wander. Every day before the burial, the Mnong offer food to the dead at the door. When burying the dead, they must divide their wealth with the dead and go to the grave to talk with them. After seven days, the Mnong perform the “soul farewell ceremony” for the dead. After three years, they celebrate the “soul forever farewell ceremony.” After this ceremony, the family returns to normal activities. There are no further taboos or rituals related to the dead.

In general, the Mnong believe that death is only a temporary separation between the soul and the body in which the body dissolves, but the soul remains. The soul will live in a separate world like the human world. Everything in that world is the opposite of the human world. Therefore, they have the custom of dividing property and of breaking gongs and jars when offering them to the dead for their use.

It can be seen that the life cycle rituals of the Mnong in both Dam Rong and Dak Song are based on spiritual beliefs. Therefore, it is inevitable that there are certain similarities in the life cycle rituals of the Mnong from infancy to old age and death in the two lands.

2.2.3. Life Cycle Rituals – Differences

As discussed above, the belief in the soul has created a system of dealing with the soul through the life cycle ritual. However, there are many differences in behavior among the Mnong groups in Dam Rong and Dak Song.

In the naming ceremony for newborn babies, the Mnong in Dam Rong have a very popular method of fortune-telling. The father mixes pig’s blood with alcohol and dabs it on the child’s forehead, and while dabbing, he recites the rhyming name with the ancestor’s name (called finding *yôn*). He keeps doing that until the child stops crying, which means that the ancestral spirit has entered the child.

The Mnong in Dak Song have expanded this custom to find the ancestral names of acquaintances and neighbors in case their souls entered their children. Interestingly, this rite of finding *yôn* to name the baby is still quite popular in Dak N’drung (Dak Song) and Truong Xuan communes, although those areas have more or less lost their

traditional culture. The ear-piercing ceremony, a ritual marking the transitional stage of life, also differs between these two regions. If the Mnong in Dak Song can decide the time of the ritual within the family, the Mnong in Dam Rong can only carry out ear-piercing after obtaining witnesses and the consent of the community.

According to Mnong residents in Dam Rong, when a woman is pregnant, the family will hold a ceremony to pray for the health of both the mother and the fetus. Besides this worship ceremony, pregnant Mnong women in Dam Rong have many abstentions in order to have a favorable pregnancy, such as abstaining from eating monkeys and apes for the fear that their children will be born naughty. Or they will abstain from eating turtles for fear that the child will be as slow as a turtle. The Mnong in Dak Song, specifically in Truong Xuan, hold this ceremony twice when the pregnant woman is six months pregnant and after the baby is born. But they do not have the same abstentions as the Mnong in Dam Rong.

While the Mnong in Dam Rong have a ceremony to pray for the souls of newborn babies, the Mnong people in Dak Song do not have this ceremony; they hold another ceremony to pray for pregnant women right after they give birth. With the belief that during childbirth the bleeding mother will pollute the land of the gods, the Mnong people in Dak Song perform a ceremony to pray to the gods to remove their sins and not punish the family and the whole village.

One day after giving birth, the Mnong in Dam Rong give their child a fake name for fear that the dead person would take the baby's life. After a week, they conduct the naming ceremony.³ Usually, grandparents will name their grandchildren. If grandparents have passed away, parents will name their children. In contrast, in Dak Song, the parents are the ones who directly perform the naming ceremony (finding *yôn*) for the child. The ceremony will be held within one month after the child's birth.

Marriage life of the Mnong in Dam Rong and Dak Song is boldly matrilineal. The marriage process has a deeply traditional character, as shown from the proposal, engagement, and wedding ceremonies. Rituals include many elements, such as offerings, rites, celebrants, and customary laws according to ancient regulations to form a complete ceremony. The Mnong marriage ceremony in Dam Rong is different. There are a number of additional rituals, such as the head-butting ceremony in which the couple's heads are shoved together to show the harmony of the two and the chicken-toss ceremony, which has the purpose of inviting everyone to join the fun and also serves as an apology if the family is negligent in the wedding.

The longevity ceremony in Dak Song is often held in the whole village. Mnong people usually offer a buffalo in this ceremony. Therefore, the correct name of this ritual is "eating buffalo to celebrate health" (also known in the Mnong language as *bu brah n'hai sǎk bu ranh ăk num*). While the Mnong in Dak Song celebrate the longevity

³ To avoid disaster caused by evil spirits, it takes a year for the family to perform this ceremony in some cases.

ceremony at the age of 70, the Mnong in Dam Rong organize it when a member of the family is 60 years old. In general, the celebration of longevity in Dak Song is larger and held longer than in Dam Rong.

If there is a bad death, the Mnong in Dak Song will offer the dead five white furry animals during the funeral. It is different in Dam Rong where the Mnong will conduct offerings of ducks, dogs, and goats. During the funeral rites, after performing procedures to worship the soul, a Mnong woman who is close to the dead person in the family will cut her hair to put on the dead person's chest.⁴ Once the coffin is closed, no more hair is cut. When conducting the *Nhập Quan* (interring the coffin) in Dam Rong, the Mnong make more offerings than in Dak Song. In addition to the common offerings of pigs, chickens, and sticky rice, in Dam Rong there must be additional offerings of a pot of rice, a pot of porridge, a gourd of water, a bowl of cigarettes, and a tobacco pipe. They believe that the dead must have enough luggage to live in another world. In the funeral rites, there is another worship ceremony to entrust the coffin to the gods (*cúng quan tài*) to ask the gods to bring the dead back to their ancestors. Next, family members will make offerings to the dead by pouring wine into a jar (called *ché*) placed on top of the coffin. This wine jar will be buried with the dead. They also perform a major ceremony before burial with the sacrifice of a buffalo, pig, or goat, etc. And there is a ritual to regain the soul of the dead, which can later enter newborn babies in the family.

The Mnong mourn for seven days. During this time, everything related to production is suspended. There is a remarkable difference between the two regions in the way they bid farewell to the soul. After seven days of mourning, the Mnong in Dak Song hold the "soul farewell ceremony" for the dead. After three years, they celebrate the "soul forever farewell ceremony." After these celebrations, the Mnong in Dak Song can forget the dead. In contrast, the Mnong in Dam Rong only perform one ceremony, also known as the soul forever farewell ceremony, after seven days, and afterward, the living and dead no longer have a relationship with each other.

In general, the life cycle rituals of the Mnong in Dam Rong and Dak Song do not differ much. The main differences are in the timing, the offerings, the performer, and the rite. Thus, through comparison, it is possible to confirm the diversity in a unified culture of the ethnic groups residing in Dak Nong and Lam Dong provinces.

According to our research, the similarity in the life cycle rituals of the Mnong residents of the two regions can be easily explained from their common ethnic origin, and especially from the similarity in their living environments, namely, farms, mountains, and forests. However, the differences in tradition come from many reasons, both subjective and objective. Firstly, the different traditions are due to the social environment of the communities. The Mnong originally resided in *bons*. Each *bon* is a relatively complete and independent social organization whose operation follows

⁴ We do not have an explanation for why this ritual exists but infer that it may be similar to the Ma ethnic group's concept of helping the dead to have roofing materials in the afterlife.

customary laws recognized by the community. Each *bon* will have principles in accordance with the population and economic conditions of the inhabitants to ensure local order. Therefore, it is understandable that certain cultural differences exist. Secondly, although natural environments have created cultural similarities, these environments also make cultural differences. For example, in the course of fieldwork, we found that the water element forms a great deal of the Mnong's ritual organization in Dak Song, whereas the Mnong in Dam Rong focus on the forest element. According to the village elders, the environment of the Mnong residents in Dak Song is associated with the water element, such as streams and waterfalls. Thus, this factor cannot be missed when organizing ceremonies. They must invite the water god or even go to the headwater to hold their ceremonies, such as the coming of age ceremony, for example. The Mnong in Dam Rong are surrounded by forests. Although water is essential for their life, the forest god occupies a more important position in their mind and rituals. That is the explanation for the prayer for the forest god's presence in Mnong life cycle rituals in Dam Rong, especially the funeral ceremony. They believe that the deceased will be "returned" to the forest and then move on to a new life from there. Another important cause for the differences is the coexistence and cultural exchange of the Mnong with other ethnic groups of the Central Highlands, such as the Ede, Ma, Co Ho, and the Vietnamese (the Kinh). Especially recently, along with the development of society, when the distance between regions and ethnic groups has gradually been erased, the community and cultural exchanges have become stronger than ever. The most recognizable sign is that the cultural change of the Mnong in two areas, both of which more or less reflect the cultural closeness formed from their coexistence among other ethnic groups: the Ede and Ma for the Mnong in Dak Song, and the Chil for the Mnong in Dam Rong.

2.2.4. Cultural values in life cycle rituals of the Mnong

Ethnic culture, which always contains certain values, is the result of the relationships between humans, nature, and the social environment. As for the life cycle rituals of the Mnong ethnic group, three typical types of cultural values can be identified.

The first type is human values. Life cycle rituals express the concept of humanity's role in life. The life cycle ritual begins when a woman gets pregnant. The coming birth is a very important event, creating different emotions for many people. The pregnancy brings worries about the formation and birth of the baby, as well as the toughness and strength of the mother, which plays an important role in a healthy delivery. Performing rituals, such as the pregnancy worship ceremony or the fetus protection ceremony, affirms the importance of the new member in the family and the community.

The rituals carried out from the birth of the child to adulthood are also important. This period, during which the child has to overcome many obstacles before becoming a true member of the community, is not an easy time. Rituals are organized to help the child gain strength from the family and community. When the child grows up, the wedding ceremony is a milestone showing the importance of family. Many rituals

are carefully prepared, focusing on creating integration and highlighting the meaning of the transition of people to a new environment with new roles and positions.

When someone dies, some extraordinary funeral-related rituals and behavior occur before and after the dead soul's farewell ceremony, such as separate decoration for the tomb and separate musical instruments for the funeral, etc., expressing belief in the reincarnation of the soul. It can be seen that the funeral rites do not emphasize death and separation, but rather the way people behave with others and the natural world. Therefore, they show profound human value.

In addition, life cycle rituals also show human relationships with other social groups, such as clans and villages. When participating in rituals, especially great ceremonies such as weddings and health celebrations, everyone in the village contributes wine and meat. The act of sharing creates an environment of equality in the community and an emotional connection between generations. It is the same at a funeral when everyone shares, contributes, and encourages each other, fulfilling their emotional obligations toward the deceased. Therefore, whether in traditional or modern society, life cycle rituals are held more or less for "keeping the symbolic value of community strength and creating community cohesion" (Ngô, 2007, p. 343).

The second type is spiritual values. Spiritual values are evident in the relationship between the living and the dead and between the living and the gods. In the relationship between the living and the dead, people believe that death is not the end, but rather the transition from the physical state to the metaphysical, and then back again in a new material state. This concept governs how to deal with the dead in funeral rites. After the dead soul's farewell ceremony, villagers believe that the soul will be reborn, totally cutting off ties with the living. Thus, when the ceremony ends, everyone forgets the dead completely, does not worship, and does not celebrate the death anniversary, leaving them to continue their new life routine. Through this behavior, the Mnong show a clear distinction in the spiritual relationship between the living and the dead. When the soul has not yet regenerated, the relationship is still there and will end with the ritual held.

In the relationship between humans and the natural world, life cycle rituals play an important role in creating a firm belief that the rituals performed will help the family receive divine protection to ensure a safe, peaceful, and happy life. Because, through those rituals, the members perceive the contrast between the sacred and the profane. A concrete example is the gong. The gong's sound, with its power, has the sacred meaning of forming a "bridge" between the visible and invisible worlds. Life cycle rituals are associated with the sound of gongs that are present throughout the cycle of birth and death, from the ear-blowing ceremony welcoming the baby to the burial ceremony bidding farewell to the dead. The sound of gongs carries a profound spiritual meaning about the connection, witnessing, and harmony of the human and divine worlds that seem far away but are very close. In summary, with the belief in the soul and the relationship between humans and gods, the performance of life cycle rituals has partly satisfied the needs of people's spiritual life as the second life, the state of "sublimation" from the mundane, existing life (Ngô, 2007, p. 101).

The third type is moral values. For the Mnong, the role and position of each individual in the community are revealed quite clearly through ritual practice. So are the elements of ritual, which are always in a fixed order and not easy to change. Rules and standards are always principal. The whole community implicitly acknowledges and complies, avoiding disaster and misfortune coming to the family or the community. Thus, the community always comes first. Therefore, rituals strongly reflect cultural relations with moral values of the above and below, the before and after, the family and the village, and the individual and the community. It is evident from alcohol drinking. Stem liquor (tube wine) is a prime component of the ritual, an indispensable offering. After making offerings, the village elder or celebrant drinks first, the next is the hostess, the guests (if any), and then everyone, regardless of men and women, young and old, having fun together, not being polite, and drinking in the open air. The atmosphere is sociable, enthusiastic, dedicated but not challenging, bustling but still orderly, within discipline and standards. When drinking, the ways of holding the straw, sitting, or passing the straw, etc., all follow certain principles.

Moral values are also revealed through the behavior of members of the family and community. At the wedding, the bride and groom always have gifts for the parents and all members of the two families with the meaning of sharing joy, thanking everyone, and expressing gratitude to their parents for giving birth and nurturing. Funerals are the same. Those are the occasions for the proper behavior of the living toward the dead, showing the piety of the descendants to ancestors, grandparents, and parents. The moral value of funerals lies not only in the behavior toward the deceased, but also in how people behave toward each other in the same community.

The celebration of longevity shows respect and good manners toward the elderly. Through rituals, the younger generation has more lessons about respecting people, and someday the next generation will pass on that behavior to the following generation, as stated: "Life cycle rituals of the Mnong ethnic group exude an incisive social meaning. Every time a family celebration is held, there is the attention of relatives, village elders, and the whole community, showing a strong spirit of cohesion, cooperation, and mutual help. Every occasion, whether small or large, focuses on educating children about eating and living habits, creating diligence, honesty, and the living style responsible for family and the community" (Tô, 2010, p. 137). In short, all three cultural values of the Mnong life cycle rituals are more or less abstract and sometimes difficult to define clearly. However, it is undeniable that these values have formed a steady foundation to help maintain the tribal cultural identity throughout history.

2.3. The issue of preserving and promoting the value of life cycle rituals in the cultural life of the Mnong

2.3.1. Changes in the life cycle rituals of the Mnong in Dam Rong (Lam Dong) and Dak Song (Dak Nong) today

Over time, the traditional rituals related to the spiritual beliefs of the Mnong people in Dam Rong (Lam Dong) and Dak Song (Dak Nong) have undergone many

changes to adapt to new conditions. The transformation process has taken place quite comprehensively in terms of concepts, perceptions, and methods of implementation. Specifically:

Changes in childbirth and nurturing: The biggest and most obvious change is the change in religious beliefs. The Mnong are now mainly Catholic or Protestant. This change brings about differences in concepts and expressions.

The survey shows that the change is not the same between both groups of the population. We temporarily divided the Mnong into two parts: one group consisting of the Mnong who are Catholic or Protestant and the other group consisting of the rest who follow traditional beliefs. In the group of Catholics and Protestants, the change was faster and stronger than in the other group.

In the past, during pregnancy and after giving birth, women had many taboos. They had to make offerings, especially to the child's soul, to ensure that the child was easy to raise and the spirit did not abandon the child. Nowadays, pregnant women are less abstinent,⁵ especially with the development of the local health system. Many Mnong women in pregnancy go to clinics for antenatal check-ups and periodic ultrasounds, so the rituals of soul worship for mother and child are almost gone. According to the survey results from Dam Rong, this ritual was performed in only two cases and it was greatly simplified.

While living with the Kinh people, the Mnong interacted with them and were influenced by Kinh customs and traditions. Therefore, many rituals have become similar to those of the Kinh people. In the past, when the child was seven days old, the family performed the worship and naming ceremony. But now, many families wait up to a month to do the full-month ceremony and to name the child. Catholic families baptize their children at church on the first Sunday of the month. They also invite relatives on both sides to share the joy and to celebrate, welcoming the new member. The guests come bringing money, clothes, etc., to cheer the child. The ceremonies of opening eyes for children, blowing ears, naming, and finding souls according to the old custom have been abandoned in Dam Rong. In Dak Song, specifically in Dak N'drung, the belief in the reincarnation of the ancestors in the child still exists, and they still organize to find a *yôn* to name the child.

In short, we found that, in giving birth and raising children, the Mnong people in the two localities have greatly changed their beliefs as well as the way they organize and conduct rituals.

Changes in the wedding ceremony: For Catholics and Protestants, the wedding ceremony takes place in the church on Sunday. After completing the ceremony at the

⁵ The current abstinences are mainly related to eating and drinking for fear of affecting the baby's and the pregnant woman's health; there are no cases of abstinence related to spiritual beliefs.

church, the families will hold a wedding ceremony at home. Rented wedding theaters, wedding services, and dishes are similar today to those of the Kinh people. On the wedding day, the traditional costumes have changed to suits and wedding dresses. Attendees bring “envelopes” to cheer the bride and groom. For some nonreligious families, the wedding ceremony takes place according to the traditional sequence of steps but is greatly simplified or similar to the Kinh ceremony. Religious families also organize in the same way, welcoming guests, hosting the program, pouring wine into the glass tower, and congratulating, etc. The only difference is the presence of a pastor or priest when performing the ceremony.

Particularly, in the wedding custom of the Mnong people in Dam Rong, we found that, although there are several changes in organization, they still spend the day before the (simpler) wedding ceremony performing some traditional wedding rites. These include wearing traditional costumes, beating gongs, and relatives bringing gifts in kind to celebrate.⁶ The bride’s family also prepares bowls and beads as gifts for the groom’s relatives who are attending and vice versa.

Changes in the longevity and funeral ceremonies: The celebration of longevity is a beautiful traditional cultural ritual of the Mnong to pray for the soul to be healthy and to aim for a long healthy life. Today, this ceremony is still held mainly as a simple celebration, encapsulated within the family and clan. Although not large, the longevity celebration is not only held when the family member is 60 years old but also at milestones of 70, 80, and 90 years of age. However, many families with elderly members do not celebrate this ceremony. The main reason “depends on the family’s economy. If you have enough, you can do it; if you don’t, it’s okay.”⁷

The funeral rites are also now much simplified. The elements of the ritual have gradually changed toward integration, influenced by the Kinh culture. In the past, the Mnong in Dam Rong thought that death meant being back with their grandparents and ancestors. Now, Catholics and Protestants believe that death is going back to God and that the soul will be received and saved by God. The funerals of Catholic and Protestant Mnong are performed with rites of praying and singing hymns under the direction of a pastor or priest.

The custom of distributing property to the dead still exists today, but it is only a symbolic ritual. Valuable daily items of the dead are mostly not buried but left for family members to use. There is no longer a distinction between a good and bad death, and the funeral arrangements for the dead are the same. However, many rituals have been discarded, and many abstinences, such as not going to work when there is a funeral in the village, bathing, and performing cleansing rituals after attending funeral ceremonies, no longer exist. Today, many Mnong families can afford to build graves (and also engrave holy names on the graves for religious people), set up altars, burn

⁶ During fieldwork, we realized this term had disappeared for the Mnong in Dak Nong.

⁷ The fieldwork in Ro Men Commune, 2017.

incense, make sacrifices, and visit the graves every year as in the Kinh custom. It is true that “until the end, the traditional value as a product of a bygone society will not be able to remain in its original form because the new society has its harsh demands. However, this transformation is not mainly due to the destructive power of its companion but depends on its intrinsic kinetics” (Đoàn, 1997, p. 161).

In summary, the life cycle ritual culture of the Mnong people in Dam Rong and Dak Song is associated with and reflects the human perception of existence and the role of the soul in life. As the environment and social context change, those perceptions will change as well. However, from any angle, the cultural and ritual characteristics of the life cycle under the influence of spiritual beliefs are not lost but still exist based on changes appropriate to the values of the new era, continually influencing the life of every Mnong person in Dam Rong and Dak Song, in particular, and the Mnong community in general.

2.3.2. Some proposed solutions to preserve and promote the value of life cycle rituals of the Mnong

In economic: It can be affirmed that economic development is one of the prerequisites for preserving and promoting ethnic culture. Because when the economy is stable, people will have the conditions to improve their material and spiritual life and to organize rituals, especially the typically large life cycle rituals needing careful preparation such as the wedding ceremony and the longevity celebration.

For Mnong residents in the two localities, it is interesting to develop production in both quantity and quality of goods, focusing mostly on quality. At the same time, it is necessary to promote economic development by investing extensively to stabilize life, complete sedentary settlement, and create jobs for Mnong residents based on their strengths in farming, brocade weaving, and knitting, etc. In general, economic development will be the basis for people to focus on spiritual life, especially in Dam Rong, which is one of 62 poor districts of the country. When the economy is stable, Mnong residents will be interested in other issues, such as developing and preserving cultural values, including the life cycle ritual system. In other words, the economy has a very strong impact on culture, as they confided, “If you don’t have money, you can’t organize a ceremony. It’s very costly. Whatever can be left out, let go. Where’s the money to buy offerings?”⁸

However, a stable economy also needs orientation so that conservation is also in the right direction. For example, when organizing wedding ceremonies, funerals, and birthday celebrations, it is not necessary to hold a grand ceremony or to spend a lot of money like a wealthy family, but to avoid waste and respect community customs while ensuring that the ceremonies are appropriate for the times. Of course, to do this, it is necessary to have a synchronous combination of cultural and social solutions in general.

⁸ The interview with Thi Mai (Dak N’drung Commune, Dak Song District) on 16/3/2014.

In Social: There is a great concern to preserve the cultural space of the village – the *bon*. A *bon* is a social organization operating on the principle of self-governance and based on customary law, thereby performing economic, social, and cultural functions. Therefore, in the past, present, and possibly in the future, it remains a sustainable traditional unit in the community’s consciousness. To serve the goal of preserving life cycle rituals, it is very important to harness the power of this form of social organization. In addition, it is also necessary to pay attention to the family cultural space, i.e., the place to conduct the opening ceremonies for people’s lives, the ceremony to mark maturity, the marriage ceremony, the health celebration, and the funeral, etc.

In the new conditions, the Mnong’s preservation of the social space must make the role of family and *bon* dynamic. Each family and *bon* is an effective “barrier” to protect ethnic culture and to avoid “hybridization” when organizing rituals associated with spiritual beliefs.

Raising people’s educational level is something that needs special attention, especially developing a team of educated individuals who have the ability and knowledge to contribute to preserving the community’s culture, including spiritual beliefs. At the same time, it is necessary to train those who work with Mnong residents in Mnong culture and language to help them understand and participate in cultural conservation activities in general.

Currently, the majority of the Mnong in Dam Rong and Dak Song are either Catholics or Protestants. It is requisite to coordinate with religious leaders who have important voices in the community to mobilize the Mnong to understand the importance of preserving their culture in accordance with the times. Religion has many positive aspects, such as directing people to live a good life, to love, share, and forgive. Preserving life cycle rituals is not intended to limit or eliminate religious influences, but to create harmony in the acquisition and development of spiritual life in accordance with the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State’s policies on beliefs and religions. In the present life cycle rituals, the presence of religious leaders and religious rites for the child, the couple, the deceased, etc., do not lose the meaning of the life cycle ritual. Therefore, it is still possible to combine the role of religion with cultural characteristics, such as wine and gongs, to preserve spiritual, human, and moral values that are always present in life cycle rituals.

In Culture: The Mnong do not live in isolation but always have exchanges and acculturation with other ethnic groups. The cultural value of life cycle rituals in the Mnong’s life today is integrated not only with the ethnic groups of the Central Highlands, but also with the culture of the displaced population, including the Kinh, Ede, Tay, and Nung. For the Mnong to integrate sustainably in the Vietnamese ethnic community, it is important to help the Mnong identify and understand the cultural value of life cycle rituals created and preserved for generations. To do this, we can encourage and plan to carry out in-depth studies on ethnic culture for them. In fact, the cultural features of the life cycle rituals are now few and far between. From the above transformation analysis, it can be seen that the cultural changes of the Mnong residents are quite large. Therefore, instead of

promoting and restoring traditional rituals, there is a need to study and educate to point out cultural values in the rituals for pregnant women, children, brides, grooms, and the elderly so that residents recognize and comply with reality.

Local authorities need to develop programs and methods of promoting the national culture, especially the value of life cycle rituals, to help each Mnong person to be self-aware of the issue of preserving their ethnic culture. These methods and programs are carried out on the basis of building a new way of life. Firstly, eliminate outdated customs such as distinguishing between good and bad death, cumbersome rituals and taboos when there is a funeral in the village, or organizing a child's soul search. Second, promote community cohesion and reduce rituals in the direction of reducing time, costs, and offerings to avoid wasting money, effort, and adversely affecting the quality of their lives. In particular, although the wedding ceremony has been simpler recently, the gifts, money, and time spent on the wedding are quite a lot, leading to costly outlays. For example, the Mnong people in Dam Rong celebrate the wedding ceremony in both traditional and modern styles. This is good, but it should be integrated to ensure that customs are preserved while still being economical and not affecting family finances.

In order to spread the cultural values that have been preserved through generations, there is a need to strengthen the understanding, recording, and restoration of humanistic rituals such as the health celebration and the soul farewell ceremony, which are changing or fading away over time. When restoring life cycle rituals related to spiritual beliefs, it is important to consider choosing the good and the subtle characteristics that help bring people back to their roots. For example, keeping the head-butting ceremony in the wedding ceremony or the ear-piercing ceremony for the child, so that residents of the community can still be proud of the values in their ethnic culture. Thus, other cultures can hardly influence Mnong culture and conservation is truly meaningful.

3. CONCLUSION

Life cycle rituals are an important element reflecting the cultural identity of the Mnong in the spiritual culture. For the Mnong groups residing in Dam Rong and Dak Song, the beliefs and manifestations of life cycle rituals have many similarities, especially in the system of rituals that take place from pregnancy to death. The differences are mainly related to the time to perform the ritual, the offerings, and the implementation procedure, etc. Understanding the life cycle rituals of the Mnong residents in the two districts helps to realize the unity in the diversity of ethnic culture that is preserved and has developed throughout history.

Under the influence of many factors, such as the economy, society, and religion, the culture of the Mnong residents has changed over time. The life cycle rituals governed by the spiritual beliefs of the Mnong people in Dam Rong and Dak Song have also changed and integrated new values suitable for the times. Even so, this ritual system still asserts its role in helping individuals overcome mental anxiety at important

transitional times, such as births, weddings, and funerals. The preservation and promotion of M'Nong life cycle rituals have thus become a matter of great concern.

In general, depending on regional characteristics and economic, cultural, and social community conditions, the M'Nong cultures in Dam Rong and Dak Song have certain similarities and differences. Comparison is the way to prove it. At the same time, it also shows that the proposed solutions are only directional, conservation still needs to be flexible, based on the specific characteristics of each locality. The most important thing when preserving the culture of the same ethnic group in different areas is to pay attention to how to ensure unity in diversity, avoiding imposition, subjectivity, and one-sidedness, especially toward very typical cultural elements such as the life cycle rituals of the M'Nong people in the Central Highlands.

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