

SOME ARTISTIC SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE XO DANG EPIC AND THE BAHNAR EPIC

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Abstract

The epics told by two ethnic groups, the Xo Dang and the Bahnar, belong to the Central Highlands epic region and have similarities in content and form. This article introduces some basic general features of the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics in terms of theme, plotline, and characterization, and analyzes the cause and meaning of the similarities. We use comparative, interdisciplinary research methods to clarify the similarities in the epic art of the two ethnic groups, thereby showing the unity in the diversity of the epic region of the Central Highlands.

Keywords: Central Highlands; Characters; Epic; Plotline; Theme.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sharing the same region as the epic genre of the Central Highlands, the Xo Dang epic (*Hm'uan*) and the Bahnar epic (*H'mon*) belong to the Bahnar-Xo Dang epic sub-region in the North Central Highlands. These epics have clear similarities in theme, plotline, the depiction of the main character, and the supporting character system, etc., thereby creating a unity in the epic region that is not easy to find in other epic areas. This study uses comparative, typological, and interdisciplinary methods to survey the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics. The Xo Dang epics include *Dam Duong was captured and made a servant*, *Dam Duong saved his wife Bar Ma*, *Dam Duong turned into a tiger*, *Dam Duong in the guise of an old man*, *Duong followed the god Tung Gur*, and *Duong as a leader*. The Bahnar epics include *Giong went hunting*, *Giong and Gio were orphaned since birth*, *Tre Vat is jealous of Giong*, *Poor Giong with eight wives*, *Rich Xet got gold*, *Giong built a tomb*, etc.

In this study, we use the following terms:

- *The Central Highlands epic region*. We agree with Ngô (2009, p. 112) 's determination that an epic region is a cultural genre area where ethnic groups have created and handed down epics within a particular territorial space. These epics show unity and similarity in content, plot structure, artistic features, method of performance, transmission, and nuances of expression, which create a primitive epic culture passed down through generations.
- *Hri h'mon* is reciting or singing an epic. It means performing the epic by reciting, singing, or half reciting and half singing (Phan, 2006, p. 31).
- *Ho m'uan* is a form of storytelling through the medium of songs. Without making gestures or movements, artists deliver their performances using the tone of their voice (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2007, p. 20).
- *The independent epic (standalone)* associated with the group of Austronesian language speakers is a separate work. The hero character has fame, a career, actions, and feats. Typical examples of this epic form are found in the Ede and Jarai ethnic groups.
- *The continuous epic (linked and genealogical)* is associated with ethnic groups using the Mon-Khmer language, which belongs to the Austroasiatic language group. This type of epic consists of relatively independent works. Heroic characters have stereotypical character traits, as do other epics in the same system. The similar characters differ in content and details. Typical examples are the Bahnar, Xo Dang, and M'ngong epics.

2. SIMILARITIES IN THEME AND PLOT BETWEEN THE XO DANG AND BAHNAR EPICS

We know three common themes: war, labor, and marriage, based on a survey of epics belonging to ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. Most of the epics of the Xo Dang and Bahnar ethnic groups refer to the subject of labor. The epics have details and images depicting the labor and production by heroes and the community to ensure life's necessities and enrich the village. There are many depictions of economic activities: hunting, gathering, clearing land, and burning fields to plant rice, corn, gourds, etc. These activities reflect the usual economic activities of the Central Highlands people, which are mainly nature-oriented. With full consciousness about the meaning and importance of labor productivity, the Xo Dang people remind themselves that "working brings life. If you choose to do nothing, there is no way to survive. If we are lazy, we will not have food to eat" (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2006, p. 944). Therefore, they carry out various forms of labor, such as clearing forests for farming, hunting, gathering, knitting, etc. These activities are described frequently, creating one of the most prominent motifs of the epic and highlighting the achievements of the hero and his village. The hero Dam Duong becomes more like a deity when he shows his productivity. "Dam Duong is casting a fishing net. He looks brave and fearless. Every time he casts and pulls it up, the net is full of white fish" (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2006, p. 851). When he went to clear the fields "that whole night, the trees fell loudly. Dam Duong cleared a large patch of field. In the morning, the villagers were surprised to see that the new fields were so vast" (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2009, p. 459).

The Xo Dang epic reflects an ardent and bustling work life that incorporates significant human inventions and discoveries, using many methods to conquer and appropriate products from nature. The epic, *Duong followed the god Tung Gur*, describes several scenes: catching fish in the stream six times, going hunting fourteen times, picking vegetables in the wild five times, and collecting firewood three times. *Dam Duong in the guise of an old man* mentions catching fish in the stream fifteen times, picking vegetables seven times, going hunting thirteen times, and collecting firewood two times. The Bahnar epic describes the character of Giong, who can be incredibly productive. "He is strong. He can cut trees on both sides at the same time" (Phan, 1996, p. 234). Giong shows competence and skill in making a beautiful and practical tomb to help Bia Phu in *Giong built a tomb*. Even though the two characters, Giong and Gio, in *Giong and Gio were orphaned since birth* were abandoned at a young age, they still worked, cleared the forest for farming, built a tall communal house, and ensured a prosperous life for themselves. In the end, the results they received were very satisfactory. "Riches are as numerous as bamboo leaves/ Things are plenty like forest leaves/ Gongs are as numerous as banyan leaves/ Cattle are as numerous as ants and termites" (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2009, p. 1408).

The most typical theme that creates the primary focus of the Bahnar, Xo Dang, and other human epics is war. "A popular and prominent theme in the heroic epics of the Central Highlands ethnic groups is the fierce, continuous, and persistent wars between villages" (Võ, 1983, p. 363). Wars in the epics of these two peoples vary in causes and magnitude. The hero and his village wage war to claim land, wealth, and people as slaves. At other times, it can be a war of self-defense against vandalism and looting by outside chiefs or rival villages. Other

fighters protect family and marriage, collect debts, take revenge, or regain stolen wives and valuables. The Xo Dang epics describe wars waged regularly for various purposes. The hero Dam Duong has to wage revenge wars (*Dam Duong was captured and made a servant; Dam Duong became a tiger*). He also wages wars to reclaim what was stolen from him and for self-defense (*Duong as the leader; Dam Duong in the guise of an old man*). His purpose is to protect his wife (*Dam Duong saved his wife Bar Ma; Dam Duong in the guise of an old man*). In the Xo Dang epic, the battle between the hero and his opponent is described as a hurricane revolving around the universe:

Let me turn the shield that generates the storm. Look at this. Then a violent storm came and ripped out the stumps of the trees and swept them up to the ninth cloud. On the ground, layers of large and small rocks were exposed. Termites, ants, worms, and crickets in the caves could not stand the shaking. The squirrel, the weasel, and the rat all had to run out to find a place to hide. There was a fierce rumbling like a landslide from the sky. The fire rose and burned down all rocks with another turn (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2006, p. 318).

The Bahnar epic has four main themes and plots: (i) battles to save the beauty (*Todam PoLa stole Giong's wife; Giong challenged; Giong trampled the mountain; etc.*); (ii) the war of dispute and protection of his wife (*Poor Giong with eight wives; Elephant Brong; Giong, Gio fought the enemy since childhood; Giong, Gio were orphaned since birth*); (iii) the battle to reclaim and revenge (*Giong, Gio demanded PuPung return the gongs; Giong went hunting; Elephant Brong*); (iv) the war of revenge, restoration, and self-defence (*Giong, Gio fought the enemy since childhood; Rich Xet got gold; Giong sharpened knives; Poor Giong with eight wives*) (Phan, 2006, p. 38). In *Giong built a tomb*, three wars took place to contend for beautiful women between Giong, Gio and Jrai, Lao; Gio's fight for self-defence against the assault of Jrai, Lao; War of revenge of leader Giong against the Jrai, Lao. Wars in Bahnar epic were described with great exaggeration:

When Giong turned his shield to block the sun, the whole world suddenly became dark. Thousands of dark clouds appeared. The wind was howling. Bamboo and bambusa procera in the forest exploded. Mountains collapsed and rocks moved. The wind and fire spewed out from the shield, causing trouble for Jrai, Lao, Pu Pung, Xor Mam, and some of Jrai and Lao's henchmen (Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 2005b, p. 28).

In these mythological wars, heroes have capabilities beyond those of ordinary people, building a monument to the majestic and mighty hero who symbolizes the strength of the community.

Marriage is one of the typical themes of the epics and is closely related to the two topics discussed above, especially the topic of war. Besides wealth and strength in battle, the hero's reputation also involves gaining a beautiful wife. In the epics of both ethnic groups, marriage is associated with violent events and actions, such as wars to steal a wife, protect a wife, or regain a stolen wife. By overcoming these challenges, the hero is eventually able to marry a beautiful girl and live happily ever after with his beloved wife

in a prosperous village. A hero's three central relationships are his relationships with his community, his wife, and the enemy. These three relationships complete the development of the main character. In any relationship, the hero always holds a unique position. Marriage in the epics of the two ethnic groups is also a way to convey the social ideal of integrity in the feats of Duong and Giong, which is the unification and harmony of the relationships mentioned above.

In terms of plot structure, the Xo Dang epic is a continuous epic. Still, each epic has a relatively independent plot, constructed to highlight the heroic qualities of the character, Duong. Each epic is separate, with many events and action sequences depicted quite thoroughly in some portions of the plot. The plot structure has a standard folklore line: opening-problem-development-climax-ending, but it includes many smaller subplots within that plot. After examining many epics, we agree with many epic researchers in the division of the plots into two types: single plot structure and complex plot structure. The second plot type is more complicated, with many main epic scenarios and indirect epic situations. For example, in *Dam Duong was captured and made a servant* (simple plot structure), there is only one primary epic situation: Dam Duong herded buffaloes, the buffaloes ate the rice and sugarcane of Duong Nang; Duong Nang captured Dam Duong, made him work as a servant, and sold him to Laos; Dam Duong's brothers attacked Duong Nang in revenge; Dam Duong married Bar Ma and lived a happy life. In *Dam Duong saved his wife Bar Ma* (complex plot structure), the character Duong is placed in more complicated situations and conflicts. These additions require actions to create primary and indirect conditions: the devil Te To chased Bar Ma; Dam Duong defeated the devil and married Bar Ma; orangutan Gluih, Ho Ma No Nang, and Tre Wet Krong Bung planned to steal Duong's wife; he fought the would-be thieves to protect his wife; and finally, he lives happily with Bar Ma. This work can easily be separated into two small, independent stories. One story is that Dam Duong fought the devil Te To to save Bar Ma and then married her and lived happily. The second is that Dam Duong has a wife named Bar Ma; he beat the orangutan Gluih, Ho Ma No Nang, and Tre Wet Krong Bung to protect his wife, and they then lived happily. However, if the story line is such, then perhaps there is no need for plots since they are just fragmented stories separated from the continuous structure of the epic.

The Bahnar epic also has the two types of structures mentioned above: single and complex plot structures. In addition, there are cases of exceptional plots, i.e., epics with a more complex and synthetic plot structure with different stories related to the behavior of the central character (Phan, 2006, pp. 40-45).

Table 1. Types of plot structure in the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics

	Simple plot structure	Complex plot structure	Exceptions
The Xo Dang epic	Dam Duong was captured and made a servant; Dam Duong turned into a tiger; Dam Duong as the leader	Dam Duong saved his wife Bar Ma; Dam Duong in the guise of an old man	Not found
The Bahnar epic	Giong went hunting; Todam PoLa stole Giong's wife; Rich Xet got gold	Tre Vat is jealous of Giong; Giong and Gio were orphaned since birth	Elephant Brong; Giong challenged

This division (Table 1) is due to the research of Nguyễn (2018, p. 48). Dam Giông is not a monolithic work but is instead a system consisting of many epic pieces. This work is a continuous epic with multiple volumes and serial compositions. It is also considered a conjugated epic, a genealogical epic, a series epic, and an endless series of *H'mon* epics.

Nguyễn (2018) has interpreted Ngô Đức Thịnh's opinion of the character relationships to point out two primary structural forms of the Central Highlands epic. In the first form, the name of the heroic character is the same as Giông (Bahnar epic) and Duông (Xo Dang epic). The only difference is that each work is about a different sequence of epic actions. In the second form, the number of heroic characters is not one, but many. These individuals have different personalities, yet have genealogical relationships (Tiàng, Tang, Yang, Lenh, Kong, Mbong, etc.) in the M'ngong epic. Particularly, in the first form, "through the actions of the characters Duông and Giông, a massive series of continuous works was created" (Nguyễn, 2018, p. 49).

Thus, regardless of the type of plot structure, the epics of the Bahnar, Xo Dang, and other Central Highlands ethnic groups have unity in the actions and outstanding merits of their heroes. The typical plot in the Dam San epic mainly revolves around action against Cue Nue – a traditional customary law in Ede marriage. This custom stipulates that when her husband dies, a woman has the right to demand that her husband's family provide a brother-in-law to be her husband, and vice versa, when the wife dies, the husband must marry a girl from the wife's family, as long as she is single. This plot is also about fighting against theocracy, defeating the mighty Mtao, or the ultimate desire to marry the sun goddess. The Xing Nha epic plot shows the action of a battle against hostile forces. The field in the mythical M'ngong epic revolves around the cultural creation and military feats of the heroes Tiàng, Bong, Leng, etc. It is similar to a form of folk performance. Through the storytelling method, the authors have been creative in constructing the plot with many events challenging the hero and his village. It is a simple plot structure (simple and independent) with only one conflict and action brought to an end. There is also a complex plot (genealogical, continuous, and linked) with many disputes and actions unfolding to embody the qualities of a hero.

3. SIMILARITIES IN THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE XO DANG AND BAHNAR EPICS

The most typical character of the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics is a hero with feats and achievements in labor productivity, construction, and protection of the community. The journey to create the accomplishments of the epic heroes of the Central Highlands progresses through a series of situations, conflicts, and epic actions from birth, labor, marriage, battle, debt collection, revenge, etc. The final image is the peaceful and prosperous scene of the hero's village. With a mythological and primitive way of thinking and the polytheistic belief that all things are animate, the support from gods and other supernatural forces is as important as the inherent strength of the hero and his village. The support creates "miracle births," the necessary assistance when the community encounters difficulties and tribulations, contributing to the hero's extraordinary strength and incredible feats to protect villages and production activities. This is why the

achievements during the hero's career become greater and go beyond the common level, earning everyone's respect. The prestige of the hero and his community spread throughout the community.

The Xo Dang and Bahnar epics reflect the lives of the ethnic groups in the epic era, expressing people's thoughts and aspirations for a peaceful, prosperous, and happy life. These ideas and desires are the reason they have created images of incredibly talented and magnificent heroes, representing people and their ideals. According to Phan (2001, pp. 603-677), a hero is, first of all, a fine person. Then, he must be healthy and talented in many ways to show his ability, especially in fighting. The hero has an essential virtue: courage. Additionally, the hero should be indomitable, resilient, skillful, wealthy, and well-mannered in social relationships. In the Xo Dang epic, the hero is Dam Duong – the heroic character throughout the epic. In the Bahnar epic, the heroes are Giong and Gio, in which the hero Giong is “the number one character of the heroic epic” of the Bahnar people (Phan, 2006, p. 59). They are males described as healthy, strong, and more intelligent than other people. Their names are associated with feats in labor and battles as talented leaders who lead the community and village to conquer nature, the enemy, and to build a better future. Therefore, the hero is the center of grandeur and the central expression of epic heroism.

The Xo Dang epic describes the hero Dam Duong as having a divine lineage (the son of Gleh, the grandson of Kai Dai Kai Ke, and the great-grandson of To Ro – the god of thunder. Kai Dai Kai Ke and To Ro are considered “the first people” – the ancestors of the Xo Dang people of the To Dra group). Dam Duong has an outstanding physique and a kind heart. He has more talents and strengths than ordinary humans: talented in using weapons and shields, skilled in music and transformation, and powerful in battle and production. His name has spread far and wide. With the simile and exaggeration of the epic genre, the hero is “plated” with gold and silver so that his body exudes a magical, iridescent look. “Two hands white like snow/ Arms of a hero, like gold/ That shiny skin like silver/ No beauty beyond this ever” (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2009, p. 458). Duong is also described as having a unique talent for using a shield in battle. The sound of Dam Duong's shield when it howled made the wind become a storm and flashed bright flashes of lightning. Rocks of all sizes flew up everywhere. He kicked Tre Wet Krong Bung with force. The enemy staggered back and forth, bleeding profusely from nose to eyes (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2006, p. 1104). When he went to clear the fields, “many fields with up to eighteen hills were cleared” (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2006, p. 1051).

With such qualities, Duong helped the village become wealthy and powerful. He defeated many opponents who harmed and stole his wife and even destroyed and invaded his land, such as Dung Nang, Tre Wet Krong Bung, Tur Gok, Mang Lang, Ding Grang, Ho Ma No Nang, the devil Te To, the orangutan Gluih, a striped tiger, a squirrel, a dragon, and the giant python. Therefore, many beautiful girls daydream of Dam Duong, wishing to “eat from the same bowl, sleep on the same mat.” His prestige resounded. “Praise about Dam Duong echoed far and wide in Laos, Yuan, and other places. Everyone mentions Dam Duong as ‘a handsome and generous hero’” (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2009, p. 711). Thus, the hero Dam Duong has become a symbol among the Xo Dang people

because of his impressive background, glorious achievements in life, and the feats he accomplished.

Similarly, the Bahnar epic emphasizes that Giong is a descendant of the god Koi, who created heaven and earth and is considered the ancestor of the Bahnar people. Giong is an excellent person in all respects, with an attractive appearance and muscular body. He is a hero with kindness, strength, courage, and extraordinary abilities, such as breaking boulders and cutting down big trees. He mastered martial arts and could drink heavily without getting drunk. He fought his enemies in great battles that shook the earth; his career was full of feats to protect his community (Phan, 2006, pp. 59–78). Hero Giong in *Giong and Gio were orphaned since birth* showed intelligence, agility, courage, and talent in production and fighting. He had to wage two wars: one with Glaih Phang to protect Rang Nar and one with Jrai, Lao, Pu Pung, and many other formidable enemies for revenge. Despite the power of the enemy, he won with the qualities of a leader. In a battle with an opponent, “the storm surged with all its strength, causing storms to rise, mountains to collapse, seas to swell, water to rise and flood downstream, etc. Where Giong fought, mountains have to collapse and stones have to roll down fearlessly” (Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 2005a, p. 27). Thus, the heroes in the epics of the two ethnic groups are exaggerated in many ways, being given absolute power and invincibility like gods, which shows that the mythological nature is still deeply embedded in these two epics.

In addition to the main characters, the epics of the two heroes depict a rather diverse system of supporting characters. The character system in *Ho m'uan Xo Dang* is divided into groups. The first group consists of assistant characters, such as Duong's brothers, warriors, majestic and mighty generals, and brave, skillful swordsmen who helped the hero with production, fighting, and revenge. Beautiful, pure, faithful, courageous, and talented female characters also support Dam Duong in fulfilling his noble mission for the community, thereby embellishing the charm of the epic. Typically, Bar Ma (Dam Duong's wife appears in all six *Ho m'uan*) is described as a rare beauty: “How beautiful she looks/ Her skin is white and ruddy/ Her breasts have just grown like bamboo shoots/ Her cheeks are rosy pink/ When she smiled, fair white teeth were shown” (Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hóa, 2009, p. 1301). The assistant characters include a group of helpful characters who always side with Dam Duong. Although they do not directly fight, they are a great source of encouragement for the hero to overcome all obstacles and difficulties. The assistant characters are divine who help and teach Duong how to survive and work to become wealthy. The assistant characters are also animals that can talk to people, help people in farming, and give Duong miraculous skins for him to transform himself. Additionally, there is also a character system for the hero's opponent, consisting of bad-tempered, constantly insulting, thieving, quarrelsome, and blood-thirsty individuals excluded from the community. They can be dark demonic forces or magical animals, capable of transforming themselves and creating many difficulties and obstacles for the hero and his village.

The Bahnar epic includes characters belonging to the hero's family and relatives. They are loyal to Giong and Gio and are allied heroes helping Giong defeat the enemy. They can be feminine, beautiful, young, intelligent, and talented female characters, or the

village elders representing experience, tolerance, and kindness. The group of assistant characters, who are described as “an army of bees who merge like ants and run like termites,” are always warm supporters of the hero (Phan, 2006, p. 111). In addition, Giong’s rival character system and the corresponding character types represent hostile, brutal forces, including low-level opponents with talent inferior to the hero. Characters of equal status honor the hero’s victory. They are talented and lovable opponents who are willing to lower their shields to make agreements and connections. Other types and groups of characters include instigating and shameful mob characters, forest people, forest ghosts, ghosts, tigers, monsters, etc.

Table 2. Character system in the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics

	Main character	Assistant character				Rival character	
	The hero	Family, relatives	Other warriors	Female characters	Divine characters	Human characters	Devils, animals, and monsters
The Xo Dang epic	Dam Duong	Bok Glaih, Hla Ro Kong, Mang Lang, Dam Rok, Dam Gap, Dam Dia	Ding Grang, Ring Rong, Kroi Ko Pang, Rang Ko Tu, Trong Har, Glang Mam, Kroi Yang, Rang To Nang	Bar Ma, Wang Ri, Bia Ma, Hla Ro Kong, Bar Yang	To Ro, Kai Dai Kai Ke, Nhak Kan, Glang Jri, Yang Ngo, Tung Gur, Tang Guang, Yang Koi	Duong Nang, Ho Ma No Nang, Tre Wet Krong Bung, Tur Gok, etc.	Devil Te To, dragon Prao Ro Ong, lizard Nang Grai, crocodile Bia Hong, octopus Nhak Kan, orangutan Gluih, tiger, giant python
The Bahnar epic	Giong	Bok Koi Doi, Ya Kung Ker, Xet, Bia Xin, Gio, Ma Dong, Ma Vat, Xem Dum, Xem Treng, etc.	Todam Kial, Bok Glaih Tonong, Krong Yang, Klang Đar, Pha Hoeng, Treng Kong, Kram Ngai, Xe Kong, etc.	Rang Hu, Bia Boxech, Jen Yuon, Rung Reng, Xem Yang, Rang Nar, Bia Phu, Bia Lui, Xe Đak	Bok Koi Doi, Ya Kung Ker, Yang Kong, Yang Jri, Yang Đak, Kiek Bung Lung, Ya Dui Dai	Jrai, Lao, Todam PoLa, Glaih Phang	Jungle man Bok Tolum, Xok Yer, tiger couple Bok Xuh, Ya Xuh, divine python Prao, ghost man Todam Kiak

Among the types of characters listed in Table 2, the characters Dam Duong from the Xo Dang epic and Giong from the Bahnar epic are idealizations that reflect the eternal burning aspiration of the Xo Dang and Bahnar people for a prosperous life. They are indomitable before all enemies. They are heroes with extraordinary talent and strength, overcoming all obstacles and challenges. They are war heroes and cultural heroes in the process of building and developing ethnic groups. The classification of characters comes from constructing characters with different purposes, which is one of the features of folklore. Besides the main character being a hero, there is also a system of assistant and rival characters to describe how people in the epic era held opinions on the opposition between benevolent and malevolent, and good and evil. From this perspective, the epics sometimes absolutize the quality of each type of character and often the hero. The assistant characters represent benevolence, the good. The right side always wins in the battle, meaning the wrong, bad, and evil always lose.

In short, in constructing heroic characters and supporting characters, the epics of the two ethnic groups, Xo Dang and Bahnar, have clear intersections that create similarities. Both epics focus on constructing central characters who are talented heroes with integrity, strength, brave spirit, and invincibility. The hero is a vivid symbol of the community, representing the people's ideals, solidarity, and attachment. In addition, the epics also build a system of assistants and rivals, whether favorable or unfavorable, to the main character's mission, all of which enhance the hero's character and glorious feats.

4. CAUSES AND MEANING OF SIMILARITIES

Researchers have identified the Mon-Khmer as the earliest residents among the extant inhabitants in the North Central Highlands. Since ancient times, the contact between the ancestors of the two ethnic groups during the migration of the Bahnar people from the plain (nowadays Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh) to the plateau has been recorded (Đặng et al., 1981, p. 107). It indicates that the Bahnar and Xo Dang inhabitants have a long history of residence in the Central Highlands. People from the two ethnic groups even had conflicts, not simply about occupying land, but due to the daily clashes between one village and another or between individuals.

The clearest reasons for the similarity are language, the area of residence, and the interspersed settlement of the two ethnic groups in the area. The people who spoke Mon-Khmer are the direct ancestors of most of the inhabitants of the North Central Highlands, such as the Bahnar, Xo Dang, Gie Trieng, Ro Mam, and Brau. All ethnic groups that belong to the Austroasiatic language lineage and the northern Bahnar branch reside interwoven. The difference between villages and localities is sometimes more significant within each group than between groups, resulting in "middleman groups." Therefore, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between the Xo Dang and the Bahnar. For example, members of the Ta Tre group sometimes identify themselves as Gie Trieng and sometimes as Xo Dang. The Ro Ngao group identifies with the Bahnar ethnic group. But because they live in the Xo Dang area, people in the Po Co commune (Dac To) act as a "middleman group." These are the results of historical influences (Đặng et al., 1981, pp. 28-29).

The similarities in the economy, society, and culture between the two ethnic groups have influenced the content of the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics. The economic activities of the Bahnar, Xo Dang, and some other ethnic groups in the North Central Highlands are typical of traditional agriculture. This means that they rely on natural factors, shifting cultivation, and self-sufficiency for the central core of their society. The forms of the appropriation economy still hold an important position. Livestock production is directly associated with agriculture. Trade has developed, but professional traders have not yet appeared. They mainly exchange goods with neighboring regions by barter. The division of labor by gender is still rigid. The Xo Dang and Bahnar have developed several traditional crafts based on local advantages, such as forging, weaving, knitting, gold panning, carpentry, and pottery making. The primary conventional social organization of the two ethnic groups is the village (*pley* and *ploi*), which is based on a sense of history about cultural similarities, without relying on any governmental organization. There is no class division in society. The representatives of each village are the village elders who

control the affairs of the whole town by customary law. There is a water source, a cemetery, a sacred forest, a hunting ground, a grazing area, and for every villager a roof. The family home is the residence of one or more generations. Family organization differs by ethnicity, being either patriarchal (Bahnar), bi-generational (Xo Dang and Gie Trieng), or matriarchal (Jarai). But all have mutual support in many respects. There is no such thing as human exploitation: “no one goes hungry when other people’s granaries are full” (Đặng et al., 1981, p. 43). The Bahnar and Xo Dang inhabitants maintain the typical unified cultural elements of the ancient indigenous culture of mainland Southeast Asia.

The resemblance in terms of material and spiritual beliefs of the two ethnic groups is reflected in production methods, cuisine, costumes, architecture, means of transportation, customs, literature, art, etc. For example, both ethnic groups have houses on stilts with curved roofs or communal dwellings. They have traditions of brushing teeth, stretching ears, and eating betel nuts. They perform a rice-eating ceremony to worship the god of rice – Yang Sri. They also perform the ritual of grave abandonment, the custom of sacrificing buffaloes, and celebrate the first day of the harvest. They practice the worship of many gods: the god of lightning, the god of banyan trees, and the god of rice. These customs are passed on orally by storytelling and are partly reflected in the epics. The similarities mentioned above do not limit the diverse nuances and characteristics of each ethnic group’s culture since each group has developed cultural nuances in the process of survival and development that differ from the others. In addition to the reasons mentioned above, the epic structure originating from the mode of epic creation and transmission of the poets from the two ethnic groups (*Ho m’uan* of Xo Dang and *Hri h’mon* of Bahnar) is another crucial reason for the artistic similarities between the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics.

The most important meaning of the similarities between the epics of the two ethnic groups, Bahnar and Xo Dang, is the contribution to unity in the diverse epic region and culture of the Central Highlands. Along with the epics of many ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, the epics of these two ethnic groups show the nature of deep community cohesion and an optimistic spirit to overcome all challenges for a good and happy life. These factors contribute to building a perfect human model in body and soul. This feature is quite common in epics of many ethnic groups in Vietnam and worldwide. In today’s life, the above similarity is also a driving force in promoting cohesion in the two ethnic communities, the spirit of solidarity between ethnic groups to build a grand national unity bloc, and the development of Vietnamese culture imbued with that identity. In preserving and promoting traditional cultural elements, including epics, this similarity helps managers, researchers, artisans, and residents of these two ethnic groups join forces and find solutions. Hopefully, these solutions will improve the efficiency of collecting, researching, and promoting the value of “the epic” – a unique genre inherent in the two ethnic groups and the Central Highlands epic region in general.

5. CONCLUSION

The epics of the Xo Dang, Bahnar, and other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands have similarities in all three main themes: war, labor, and marriage. In these

performance works, folk artists have built a plot system with many challenging events to highlight the quality of the hero's intelligence and talent and to add drama to the plot.

The Xo Dang and Bahnar epics are narrative works that objectively express the lives of ethnic groups in the past and define the people's souls, thoughts, and aspirations. The epics all build central characters. Throughout the epics, heroes represent the community's ideals, morals, and aesthetic conceptions. In addition, the epics follow the character system of other folk narrative genres, which are classified into two lines. The assistant character line includes brave individuals who always stand with the hero in the story, pretty girls, divinities, and groups of helpful characters. The other line consists of rival characters.

There are many reasons for the similarities between the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics. These include the residential process, exchange and acculturation in all aspects of life of the two ethnic groups, the mode of composition and transmission, etc. It can be seen that the similarities have created unity in the diverse Central Highlands epic region, making an essential contribution to the continued preservation and promotion of the value of the epics of the ethnic people in the area.

This article points out for the first time similarities in theme, plot, and character systems between the Xo Dang and Bahnar epics. However, there are still many unique features of literary and symbolic values between the two groups of epics in terms of culture and society. In addition, the similarities of the epics of the two peoples to other Central Highlands epics, Vietnamese epics, and epics worldwide are significant issues beyond the scope of this research paper that hopefully will be addressed in other studies.

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