

Communal Houses in the Central Highlands at Present: Actual Changes and Influential Factors

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Abstract: In the contemporary social context with a lot of changes in the Central Highlands, however, cultural heritage generally and communal houses particularly in the Central Highlands have been changing variously and causing multi-interactions with social life and development. The article based on the current situation and fieldwork data in 5 provinces of the Central Highlands in 2013 and 2014, we are describing the actual changes as a follow-up and essential supplementation to the source of literature on communal houses in the Central Highlands.

Key words: Communal house; Central Highland communal house; Highland cultural heritage; Cultural change on Central Highland.

1. Introductory

At present, the Central Highland Region is composed of 5 provinces, including Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak - Lak, Dak - Nong, and Lam Dong, covering a total area of 54,641.1 km², making up 16.8% of our country. In 2012, the population of the Central Highlands was 5,379,600 persons. It is an area of ecological diversity with a lot of landscapes and natural resources involved with soil, forest, rivers/streams, falls, mountains/hills, plateaus, and climate ,etc.. Besides, it is also a multi-ethnic region with habitations of almost all 54 ethnic groups, which are divided into 3 main categories, including: the category of local ethnic minorities (accounting for about 25% of the total population in the Central Highlands); the category of ethnic minority migrants (accounting for about 8%); and, the category of Kinh people (accounting for about 67%). This has created a particularly ethnical diversity of the Central Highlands. In addition to the

ecological and ethnical diversity, it is also much diversified in terms of regional characteristics, livelihoods, means of production, history, choices and methods of exchange, and acculturation, resulting in a diversity of cultural expression or, more generally, *a diversity of culture*.

Contributing a considerable part towards the culturally diversified picture of the Central Highlands, there are communal houses. They not only constitute a symbol of the stability, power, and deftness of local people, but they are also the very places for preservation and inheritance of community original cultural values.

As a type of outstanding and special cultural heritage, the communal houses in the Central Highlands have been mentioned in early research works and notes of French and Vietnamese scholars, such as: *Les Populations Montagnardes du Sud-Indochinois*

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(*Miền đất huyền ảo*) by Jacques Dournes (published for the first time in 1950 in France; the translated version in Vietnamese by Nguyen Ngoc (Nguyễn Ngọc) was published by the Writer Association Publishing House in 2003), *Ethnic Minorities in Kon Tum* (*Mọi Kon Tum* – by Nguyen Kinh Chi (Nguyễn Kinh Chi) and Nguyen Dong Chi (Nguyễn Đồng Chi), published for the first time by Mong Thuong Thu Trai (Mộng Thương Thu Trai) Publishing House, Hue, in 1937; and, published by the Knowledge Publishing House in 2011 with the title *Bahnar People in Kon Tum* (*Người Ba Na ở Kon Tum*); *Upper Plateaus* (*Cao nguyên miền Thượng* by Cuu Long Giang (Cửu Long Giang) and Toan Anh (Toán Ánh), Saigon, 1974; *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam* (*Các sắc tộc thiểu số tại Việt Nam* - Saigon, 1974), etc.. Since the country unification (1975), the communal houses have been mentioned and studied more in introductions, collections, and research works on culture of the Central Highlands, such as: *Lifestyles and Customs in the Central Highlands* (*Nếp sống – phong tục Tây Nguyên* - the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Cultural and Information Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995); *Traditional Cultures in the Central Highlands* (*Văn hóa cổ truyền Tây Nguyên* - Luu Hung, the Ethnic Cultural Publishing House, 1996); *Contribution to the Study of Ethnic Cultures* (*Góp phần nghiên cứu văn hoá tộc người* - Nguyen Tu Chi, the Cultural and Information Publishing House and the Review of Culture and Arts, 1996); and, *Cultural Colors in the Central Highlands* (*Những mảng màu văn hóa Tây Nguyên* - Ngo Duc Thinh (Ngô Đức Thịnh), the Youth Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2007), etc.. Particularly, there have been in - depth research projects on the

communal houses in the Central Highlands, showing relatively great attention from researchers on this type of cultural heritage.

In 1991, Nguyen Khac Tung's (Nguyễn Khắc Tụng) research work titled *Communal Houses of Ethnic Minorities in the North of the Central Highlands* (*Nhà Rông các dân tộc bắc Tây Nguyên*) was published, providing comprehensive information about the communal houses from the material and spiritual perspectives. In the publication, both living and ritual activities are described in detail and the communal houses are viewed in relation to other architectural works such as the communal temples of Viet people in the North and the pagodas of Khmer people in the South. Later on, there were a number of research works on the communal houses, such as: *Designs on the Communal House of Bahnar People* (*Họa văn trên Nhà Rông Bar Nar*) by Nguyen Duy Thieu (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu); *Communal Houses - Village Houses* (*Nhà Rông - Nhà Làng*) by Chu Thai Son (Chu Thái Sơn); *Communal Houses in the North of the Central Highlands* (*Nhà rông bắc Tây Nguyên*) by Kon Tum Provincial Department of Culture and Information (1999); *To Build Communal Houses and Cultural Communal Houses: Preservation, Innovation, and Development of Cultural Values of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands* (*Xây dựng nhà rông - nhà rông văn hóa, những vấn đề cần bảo tồn, cải tiến và phát huy giá trị văn hóa của các dân tộc Tây Nguyên*) by Nguyen Ngoc Quang (Nguyễn Ngọc Quang) (The Publishing House of Literature, the National Cultural Center, 2001); *Communal Houses – Cultural Communal Houses* (*Nhà Rông - Nhà Rông văn hóa*) published by the Institute of Culture and Information, the Review “Culture and Arts”, and Kon Tum Provincial

Department of Culture and Information in 2004; *Communal Houses - Cultural Communal Houses: Actual State and Solutions* (Nhà Rông - Nhà rông văn hóa, thực trạng và giải pháp) published by Kon Tum Provincial Department of Culture and Information in 2008); the photobook *Central Highlands Communal House* (Nhà Rông Tây Nguyên) by Nguyen Van Ku (Nguyễn Văn Kự) and Luu Hung (Luu Hùng) (The World Publishing House, 2007); *Communal Houses of Xo Dang people in Mo Panh Village, Dak - ro Ong Commune, Tu Mo Rong District, Kon Tum Province* (Nhà rông của người Xơ Đăng ở làng Mô Pành, xã Đắk Rơ Ông, huyện Tu Mơ Rông, tỉnh Kon Tum) by Ro Dam Thi Bich Ngoc (Rơ Đăm Thị Bích Ngọc) (Master's Thesis in Cultural Studies, the Institute of Cultural Studies, 2009). In all those works, authors paid much attention to communal houses in the Central Highlands, mentioning the functions and the necessity of the communal house preservation before rapid social changes at present; many authors presented issues involved with cultural communal house building and its impacts on community socio - cultural life.

2. Actual changes in communal houses in the Central Highlands at present

If we have ever been to the Central Highlands, especially the North of the Central Highlands, we certainly have got used to the image of an imposing and high communal house standing in the center of each village of Bahnar, J'rai, Xo Dang, Gie Trien, B'rau, and Ro Mam people. etc.. Yet, there is no longer such an image at present; there have been fewer and fewer traditional communal houses; whereas cultural communal houses or cultural houses have been getting more common. During our fieldwork in Kon Tum Province, we heard

from an official of the Provincial Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism that in 1999, the total number of traditional communal houses in all 625 villages of the province was 265; the corresponding figure has been considerably lower by now, as those traditional communal houses have been seriously downgraded. When we were carrying out our survey in Dak - Ha District (Kon Tum Province), officials of the District Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism revealed the statistic data of remaining communal houses in the district as below: Of all 62 villages in the district, 56 villages have a communal house, of which 30 ones still remain in use; 21 ones have been downgraded due to rains, storms, and fire; the rest 5 ones have been completely broken down. With our own eyes, we witnessed this situation, when we were doing fieldwork in Dak - Ui Commune. There is a communal house in each of 9 villages, but 1 has collapsed completely due to storms and the rest 8 have been seriously downgraded due to climate and non-maintenance. According to the master's thesis of Ro Dam Thi Bich Ngoc [9], in the whole Ngoc Hoi District (Kon Tum), there are 63 villages, but just 6 ones have a communal house. The fact that the number of traditional communal houses has been increasingly fewer due to downgrading conditions is popular not only for Kon Tum Province, but also for other provinces in the Central Highlands. According to an assessment made by the Division of Heritage belonging to Gia Lai Provincial Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, there are about 400 communal houses in the whole province at present, but many of them are left unused or seriously downgraded; some of them have been repaired or rebuilt in another way (to be

roofed with iron - sheets, for example); as a result, the number of traditional communal houses that are still in use is not considerable and it is even getting fewer and fewer.

Communal houses are not only decreasing in the number, but their functions and significance in the community life are also negatively changing. In the past, the communal house played a role as the seat of the village, where management activities were run; the village patriarch and other members of the village council usually held meetings in it; village people were also gathered in the communal house for punishments or important community activities. By now, this role has faded out, as the village management no longer relies much on the village patriarch and the village council. Furthermore, people are rarely gathered there to make customs - based punishments or preparations for important activities of the village involved with production, natural calamities, or enemy - inflicted devastation.

In the past, the communal house was used as a guest - house of the village. When someone was going through the village and needed a place to stay overnight, he/she could stay in the communal house. At present, however, there are very few people staying in the communal house, when visiting the village, because village people are now responsible for arranging a place for guests to stay; in addition, the guests no longer want to stay in the communal house, due to unfavorable facilities. The communal house used to be a place, where cultural values were preserved and inherited; where memories and achievements of the village people's creativeness were kept; where sacred objects and fruit of the village people's labor and fighting were displayed;

where artisans sang epics and handed down knowledge of the customary laws and traditional behavior to next generations. After making direct observations in a lot of communal houses in the Central Highlands, however, we have realized there are very few communal houses, where sacred objects, buffalo horns, precious gongs, and ancient wine - jars are displayed. In fact, people do not have those objects to be displayed; if someone has, moreover, he/she does not want to display them in the communal house, as revealed by a local person in Kon Ron village (Ngok Reo, Dak Ha, Kon Tum): "We can't display them there, because we don't want to lose them. They are sometimes stolen, even if we place them at home. It did happen to a family in this village, indeed". The epic singing as well as the customs - based punishment is now rarely held in the communal house, lessening more and more the function of cultural value preservation and inheritance.

Ritual organization inherently was a significant function of communal houses; they were closely attached with every ritual activity of the village people, such as: agricultural production rites (worships to deities, including the water deity, the fire deity, the mountainous deity, and the rice deity, as well as ceremonies for new crops, etc.); health - related rites (the conciliatory worship, the good crop worship, the bad luck removal worship, and the disease discharging worship, etc.); lifetime-related rites (the ear - blowing ceremony, the adulthood ceremony, and sometimes, marriage ceremony); and, the Yang thanksgiving (the village moving ceremony, the new communal house ceremony, the victory ceremony, etc.). The communal house, therefore, could be seen as the spirit of the village; it was a space for ritual activities. Yet, such ritual activities are not held

frequently in the communal house nowadays, since the very rites have been faded out; village people no longer practice a lot of the above - mentioned rites; in many villages, there is no river wharf for the water deity worship; people no longer go hunting, so they do not make worships to the mountainous or forest deities. In many villages, people no longer grow rice or corn; they therefore do not make worships to the rice deity for a good crop. Compared with other functions of the communal house, however, the function of ritual organization is still maintained better. Community ritual activities, such as the conciliatory worship, the bad luck removal worship, and the Yang thanksgiving worships, etc. are sometimes held in the communal house. A lot of our survey respondents in Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces reveal that ones surely talk about religious activities, when mentioning the communal house; all remaining activities of the community faith are certainly held in the communal house.

“The communal house is no longer sacred” - said regretfully a 78 - year - old man in Lan (Lân) Village (Ia Kly Commune, Chu Prong District, Gia Lai Province). According to his explanation, women were not allowed to come in the main communal house of the village in the past; whereas, women can come in it freely now. In the past, village people conformed to punishments made by the village patriarch in the communal house; whereas, young people no longer obey this today. In many villages, the communal house has been repaired or rebuilt and people no longer follow previous taboos, etc.. According to a lot of local people, the communal house is currently used as a meeting hall of the village, where village people are gathered for dissemination of the state law and

policy as well as other entertainment activities such as cultural exchange, sports, and meetings. As a result, the ritual function of the communal house has decreased, but it is inclined to be used for daily entertainment activities of the village people.

A big change involved with the communal house in the Central Highlands resulted from the program of cultural communal house building (or the community cultural house. That means if there is a communal house in a village of ethnic minorities, the communal house will play a role of the community cultural house. If a village has no communal house, the community cultural house will be used for community meetings and other community activities), which has been carried out in all provinces of the Central Highlands. In reality, the program aims at very good goals, which is to encourage and help local people to restore traditional communal houses or build new cultural communal houses/ community cultural houses in order to have a space for community cultural activities. In Kon Tum Province, for example, the Provincial People’s Committee issued the Direction No.21/1999/CT-UB dated November 25th 1999 on maintenance and restoration of the traditional communal houses in the area of ethnic minorities. The Direction described clearly the goals and the way of implementation, as below: “In all towns and districts, it is necessary to add the restoration of communal houses into the content and the program on implementation of the 5th Plenum Resolution of the 8th Session Central Committee. Local people should be mobilized and encouraged to repair or rebuild new communal houses of the traditional architecture with the funding contributed voluntarily by people; yet, it must be effective and thrifty”. Owing to the program, 575 communal houses (making up 97.8%) have

been built by now in all 588 villages of ethnic minorities in the whole province.

With great efforts made by the local government, local people, various organizations, and businesses, the communal house has been brought back to life of local people. In the villages, where people had no communal house or their communal house was completely broken down, a new one has been built. In the villages, where the communal house was downgraded, it has been repaired. Looking at the new cultural communal houses and the repaired ones, however, we can realize that they are not effective to meet the requirements of a common space for local community. The new communal houses are much different from the traditional ones, in terms of form, function, and sanctity. In terms of form, the cultural communal house are built from brick, concrete and iron - sheet roofs, emulating the shape of a traditional communal house; i.e. they are not built from wood, bamboo, and thatch like the traditional ones. The new communal houses are not decorated with designs that show the skills as well as religious and artistic life of local people. Unlike the traditional communal houses, the new ones are not seen as a work of outstanding and original architecture, they no longer look harmonious with the overall architecture of the whole village, in some villages, the new communal houses look really strange and inapposite.

In terms of function, the new communal houses are no longer attached closely with religious activities of village people, they no longer play the role of a place for preserving and handing down traditional cultural values. They are now merely used as a place to organize community cultural activities, of which most are meetings for political and social dissemination.

In terms of sanctity, the cultural communal houses are not built according to the faith requirements. In the past, the selection of location, direction, and construction materials as well as worships to be held during the construction had to follow strict regulations. Furthermore, village people took part in all stages of the communal house building. All of these made the traditional communal houses have the sanctity and bear clearly the cultural stamps of community. At present, the cultural communal houses are not made by village people, they are sometimes very different from the selection of village people, they do not bear any memorial, historical or cultural stamps. Consequently, the cultural communal houses are not considered sacred at all. They are viewed merely the same as other houses. And, "if we are not called to gather there, we will not come in it at all" - said a 67 - year - old woman in Ia Kly Commune (Chu Prong District). In the past, the village patriarch and members of the village council as well as young people regularly came to the traditional communal house to take care of it; other people of the village also came there very often, since it was the very sacred place attached closely with their production and ritual activities. At present, the connection between village people and the new communal house gradually fades away. People do not come to it regularly. As a result, a lot of cultural communal houses are left unused and broken down, since village people do not see them as their common houses and they have no responsibility to take care of them.

Thus, it is obviously seen in all over the Central Highlands that traditional communal houses are now step - by - step replaced by cultural communal houses in villages of Bahnar, J'rai, Xo Dang, Gie Trieng, B'rau, and Ro Mam people, particularly in the

North of the Central Highlands (Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces).

3. Influential factors for changes in the communal house in the Central Highlands at present

- Change in the natural environment

Talking about the Central Highlands, we surely mention forest and connections between local people and the forest as well as their cultural practices relating to it. According to the report “*Economic Structure in the Central Highlands and Problems*”, from 1976 to 2010, the area of natural forest in the Central Highlands reduced by 30% (over 1 million hectares) [12, p.22]. Based on our observation, the area of forest in the Central Highlands is reducing more and more now, as deforestation is taking place every hour now for wood, farmland, and valuable forest products, etc.. A common scene in the Central Highlands is that forests have been devastated and villages are built by the asphalted roads; the living environment and cultivation fields are no longer covered with forests; the sacred sites and cemeteries no longer lie unobtrusively inside the forest, but they are now exposed in densely - populated areas. For local people in the Central Highlands, to have forest means to have everything; and conversely, to lose forest means to lose the long - lasting living environment. There are not enough wood, thatch, and bamboo left to be used to build communal houses, so people have no choice but to use concrete, bricks, iron sheets, and other industrial materials instead. This makes the culturally and artistically creative products of village people, which are shown via the communal houses, poorer and poorer and the traditional values that have been preserved in the communal houses for a long time also fade away rapidly.

- Change in livelihood

If we ever came to the Central Highlands in the past, we surely would get a deep impression of the livelihood of ethnic minority people, which was closely attached with the forest and poly - cultivation in mountainous fields. If we come there today, however, we will no longer get the same impression. Instead, we can see urbanization and transformation of livelihood structure taking place rapidly in the Central Highlands at present.

As local people rely less on cultivation of agricultural plants, such as rice, corn or cassava, to earn a living, they grow more industrial plants such as rubber, coffee, pepper, cashew, tea, cacao, etc.. According to the statistic data of provinces in the Central Highlands in 2012, the area of those industrial plants makes up over 60%. This has resulted in a lot of problems; for example, the larger the area of industrial plants is, the smaller the area of forest will be. We witnessed activities of deforestation for industrial farmland in many places; thick and green forests were deliberately considered poor and were therefore devastated quickly, in order to get land for rubber plantations (in Chu - Prong District, Gia Lai Province, for example). Local people grow industrial plants, but they do not conform to planning, soil characteristics, and market demands. They are, therefore, stuck within the “growing and devastating” situation; the price gets low, when they have a good crop; and vice versa, the crop gets bad, when the price is high. In addition, they encounter other problems, such as: shortage of water for irrigation, shortage of funding, difficulty in preliminary treatment, loss of products during the harvesting time, etc.. The livelihood of local people, consequently, still remains

unstable, although cultivation of industrial plants seems to provide a high economy.

Local people in the Central Highlands used to do rotational nomadic farming, but they have switched to settled farming now, resulting in a lot of changes in production techniques, production means, and production targets, etc.. The experience learned from history of mountainous cultivation is no longer useful for them; they have to depend on techniques for agricultural intensification; they have to learn experience from other ethnic groups; they have to show more concern about exchange and consumption of products that they have made; they have to make accumulation; but they cannot rely on self - sufficiency as before. As the livelihood has changed, the traditional agricultural schedule has also changed completely. The schedules for rites, ceremonies, and community activities have to change appropriately to the new crops of industrial plants. In fact, people have to spend more time and energy taking care of industrial plants and they need to be quick - witted in approaching the market, which makes them have less time and sacred space for artistic activities; as a result, people lack the environment for practices, preservation, and improvement of cultural heritage.

The change in livelihood has led to changes in cultural practices as well. Traditionally, local people in the Central Highlands attached much importance to agricultural rites involved with rice; they often held worships in the rice sowing time, the rice blossoming time, the rice harvesting time, and when they put rice in storage. The worship for a good crop and the worship to the rice deity in the harvesting time were often held in the communal house. At that time, people gathered there to have a feast, singing and playing music with gongs. As they no

longer grow rice now, but they grow coffee tree and other industrial plants, they don't need to make worships to the rice deity. "We grow coffee tree now, we don't need to make those worships. When we harvest coffee, we just invite friends and relatives to our home to have a drink; it is not necessary to go to the communal house" - said Mr. Jolang Rít, a 62 - year - old man in Lan Village, Ia Kly Commune, Chu - Prong District, Gia Lai Province. The transformation of cultivating plants has reduced agricultural ritual activities and deprived of community activities in the communal house, which were inherently attached closely with production and religious life of local people. In addition, it resulted in the loss of the environment for practicing and handing down traditional cultural forms.

Due to the change in livelihood, living and production activities have also changed correspondingly. Local people no longer have convenient time for community activities in the communal house as before. The objects used for ritual practices, such as gongs, jars, and copper pans, etc. are no longer significant for them, so they can sell out of them without any considerations. The change in livelihood has made local people take part in seeking markets for product consumption. Many of them have to move heaven and earth to look for a job. Some have to work as hired laborers and some have to run everywhere to sell products. They, consequently, neither have time to take part in community activities nor have opportunities to learn or pay attention to abundant folk knowledge that has been handed down orally from generation to generation; for example, the knowledge of gong performance, the way to build and decorate a communal house, and the essays in relevant worships, etc.. Practically, the communal house is no longer attached

closely with life of local people. It is, therefore, easily understood that functions of the communal house have changed and faded away.

- Change in population composition and social structure

According to the preliminary results of the research project “*Population and Migration in Sustainable Development in the Central Highlands*”, the rate of population growth and the extent of population fluctuation of the Central Highlands have been the highest in the whole country, since the national unification. In 1976, the total population of the Central Highlands was just 1.23 millions people coming from 18 ethnic groups, of which local people of ethnic minorities made up 69.7%. In 1993, the total population amounted to 2.37 millions people with 35 ethnic groups, of which local people of ethnic minorities accounted for 44.2%. 10 years later, in 2003, the total population of the Central Highlands increased to 4.67 millions people with 46 ethnic groups, of which local people of ethnic minorities made up just 25.3%. In 2013, the population of the Central Highlands ranged from 5.5 to 6 millions people with all 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam, of which local people of ethnic minorities just accounted for approximately 20% [1, pp.91 - 101].

The number of migrants to the Central Highlands has increased rapidly, making local people become minority people in the very homeland. They have to gather together in some places or they have to move the living place further due to extreme pressure of population growth in the region and drastic reduction in farmland. In such a context, the communal house is no longer a place for regular community meetings, as the village has lost

its role as the highest social self - governing unit; customs have been replaced by law; the village patriarch council no longer exists; and, the communal house institutions are no longer attached closely with life of local people.

At present, the Central Highlands have become “a miniature version of Vietnam” with habitation of people from almost all 54 ethnic groups. The proportion of local people of ethnic minorities is getting increasingly smaller; the role as a cultural subject has faded out in the very place, where they have lived for generations. The village administrative structure has also changed and the role of the village patriarch and customary laws just remain as symbolic. All of these have resulted in more or less changes in cultural heritage, including the communal house. The functions of the communal house have been increasingly insignificant. It is no longer attached with daily life of local people. There are just symbolic and memorial values left; the practical value and sanctity have faded out much.

- The Kinh-like tendency and stereotypes

By now, Kinh people have made up about 70% of the total population in the Central Highlands. They live alternately with all other ethnic groups. Kinh people are now playing the major role in socio - economic development in the Central Highlands. The survey conducted by Tran Thi My Hang reveals that Kinh people live in all 14 communes and towns in Chu Se District (Gia Lai Province); they live and do business in almost all villages of J'rai people in this district [6, p.82]. It is very common in all villages in the Central Highlands that Kinh people come to everywhere to do business. Some of them set up shops and stores and some others come to sell and buy things as vendors.

Almost all of those trading activities are undertaken by Kinh people. We tried to find out whether there were any ethnic minority people doing the same job, but we could not find anyone. Local people explained to us that they were not used to doing such trading activities. As Kinh people have appeared everywhere in the Central Highlands, people of ethnic minorities step - by - step get used to the lifestyle of Kinh people; they get used to new material values, money, modern houses, and facilities that Kinh people have brought to the local areas. They are now building the same houses as those of Kinh people; the communal houses are also built in the same way, because “it is more convenient” as revealed by a lot of local officials and people in the Central Highlands.

In addition to the above - mentioned tendency, there are stereotypes of ethnic minority people. Due to accidental or purposeful misconceptions, local people of ethnic minorities are considered backward, underdeveloped, less civilized, and uneducated, compared to Kinh people as well as people of other ethnic groups that have a larger population and more developed economy. This is an important factor that makes ethnic minority people have difficulty in integration into general development, although they have a lot of resources and potentials. Because of the stereotypes, the cultures of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands tend to change, imitating the model of development of Kinh people; the inherently particular and outstanding cultural colors of the local ethnic minorities disappear gradually in oblivion. One of the evidences for the loss of cultural heritage is the very communal house, which we are talking about in this paper. We had opportunities to visit a lot of communal houses in the Central Highlands and we

realized that those communal houses were left desolate; there were no sacred objects displayed inside; there were no community activities held in the communal houses; the sound of the gongs were rarely heard in the village. Being viewed as cultural heritage, the communal house used to be a typical cultural symbol of the Central Highlands, but it is now losing functions and position in the community cultural life.

- Tendency of modernization

With simple observation, everyone who comes to the Central Highlands can realize that modernization is taking vigorously in this region, villages are moved to main roads and are rapidly urbanized. Village houses are numbered, like those in the street. Roads are busy with motorbikes and cars. The image of urban life is covering traditional villages. Suddenly, local ethnic minority people have become urban people, the crop - based working schedule is now replaced by the office - hour one. New values are set up appropriately to the model of industrial production and consumption. Traditional agriculture - relating knowledge is lost; and, the customs and habits, which used to be regulated strictly by the customary law, are fading out.

Modernization, industrialization, and urban life are also shown in the fact that local ethnic minority people have accessed diversified services of information and communication. Almost every household has a TV and uses the telephone. The Internet covers all villages, owing to which local ethnic minority people can connect the world outside very easily. Various types of service are provided everywhere. Sitting at home, people can buy food and all other essential commodities, etc.. All of these have resulted in an urban - like and industrial lifestyle. It is a major factor for oblivion of traditional cultural activities,

people no longer gather in the communal house to enjoy entertainment activities or get information. Instead, they can access a lot of entertainment forms, they can watch TV or have a drink with others or play online games or sing Karaoke, etc.. The gong performance is sometimes held, but it has also changed appropriately to new music. Young people of ethnic minorities follow the fashion of the actors/actresses they like. They even name children after movie characters. Obviously, the tendency of modernization has led to changes in the pace of life and the spiritual life. The communal house and activities held inside are left in memory. The communal house just remains symbolic and it has been also administrationalized suitably to industrial and urban society.

- Change in religious faith

In the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the religious conversion started to take place in the Central Highlands. By now, it has been very popular; the number of local ethnic minority people who have changed religions is getting increasingly higher. Nearly a quarter of all population of 11 local ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands are now Protestant believers. Combined with Christian believers, the corresponding proportion reaches 37.2% [7, pp. 22 - 25].

The religious conversion is taking place mainly in form of converting to Protestantism and Christianity, creating challenges to traditional cultures generally and cultural heritage of ethnic minorities specifically. As they have changed the faith, those, who follow the Christianity, just pray to God (Monotheism), but they no longer worship to Yang (Polytheism). As a result, rites and worships gradually fall in oblivion. Gongs were inherently sacred objects attached closely with the worships to Yang, so

people in many places no longer keep the gongs. In the 1980s especially, people sold out ancient jars, gongs, and offerings to Yang. They stopped making the grave - leaving worship; they stopped gathering together in the communal house to listen to story - telling songs and folk - songs or to make the gong performance. Instead, they spent time reading or saying the Bible and going to the church. The situation was improved afterwards, since the very new religions became more flexible in integration with the local culture; in addition, local people realized that it was not necessary to give up their traditional culture, after following those religions; thus, people stopped eliminating practices of the traditional culture. Yet, the practices of traditional culture are no longer diversified as before; most of ancient jars and gongs have been sold out; rites and ceremonies are not regularly held; the way to do gong performance and the skills to build a communal house have been lost; the communal house is not needed, as people go to the church etc..

- The viewpoint on “preservation with selection” and implementation of the 5th Plenum Resolution of the 8th Session Central Committee of the Communist Party

The viewpoint on “preservation with selection” was emphasized in the Instruction No. 27 - CT/TW dated January 12th 1998 of the Politburo as below: “it is necessary to do preservation with selection, innovation, and improvement of good customs; at the same time, we have to eliminate gradually unsound and backward ones. It is essential to do research and create civilized cultural forms as well as maintain and develop our national cultural identity”. This viewpoint was further strengthened in the 5th Plenum Resolution of the 8th Session Central Committee on “Building and developing

Vietnam culture full of national identity” promulgated in 1998 and implemented widely in all local areas afterwards.

It can’t be denied that with implementation of the 5th Plenum Resolution of the 8th Session Central Committee, the viewpoint on “preservation with selection” has caused a significant impact on restoration of the communal house. In Kon Tum province - a province in the implementation program of the 5th Plenum Resolution of the 8th Session Central Committee - for example, the Provincial People’s Committee issued the Direction No. 21/1999/CT - UB dated November 25th 1999 on maintenance and restoration of traditional communal houses in the areas of ethnic minorities. As a result, 575 communal houses were built in all 588 villages of the province, making up 97.8%. As the features of folklore were disregarded, the new communal houses do not have the same spirit as the traditional ones. In reality, the communal house is significant and sacred for community, only when community people with their hallowed belief take part in building it and they then attach living activities such as rites and ceremonies it with it. Evidently, the communal house is a cultural element to be essentially restored. Yet, if we do not maintain the spirit of the communal house, which is built by sanctity via rites, customs-based punishments, and community activities, the rebuilding of communal houses will not be significant at all.

Having analyzed factors that cause impacts on changes in the communal house heritage in the Central Highlands from different perspectives, we have realized that the communal house has been changing greatly in all aspects; the biggest change, in our opinion, is the gradual loss of “the spiritual” of this cultural symbol. We can rebuild “the temporal”, we can re-make

gongs, jars, and drums, but it is very difficult to restore “the spiritual” once it has left. The new communal house may be more beautiful and larger than the traditional one; it may be built from more expensive materials; the government, social organizations, and sponsors have paid more attention to it. However, it is no longer attached closely with daily life, production and spiritual activities of local people; it is no longer a sacred place, where community cultural values are created and maintained. At that time, the communal house just exists as a mere formality. Since means of production, living space, and the village structure have changed, and even the faith in deities has also changed, the communal house certainly will lose fundamental grounds for its spirit.

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