

# Impacts of Protestantism on Mong Migrants in Dak Lak Province

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**Abstract:** Protestants account for the majority of the Mong (or H'mong) people migrating from Northern Vietnamese provinces to Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands. Attention has been paid by the State management agencies and researchers to the studies on the religion of Protestantism in general and its practice among the Mong people in particular. Many Mong people have followed the religion because they consider it to be more positive than the ethnic group's traditional one, which includes many costly rituals and backward customs that are not appropriate to the modern life. Yet, the abandonment of the traditional religion and beliefs to follow a new one, besides positive impacts, entails also negative ones.

**Keywords:** Mong people, migration, Protestantism, Dak Lak.

## 1. Introduction

Due to various reasons, after 1975, a number of Mong people migrated from Vietnam's northern provinces to the Central Highlands. In the 1990s, they migrated in greater numbers and more massively, with the destination being mostly Dak Lak province. Since the year 2000 up to now, the migration has still been taking place in a quieter manner, with the quantity being on the decline.

By early 2015, the total number of Mong people migrating to Dak Lak had reached 22,760 [1]. Among them, 1,242 households (6,433 people) arrived from 2005 to March 2015. In 2008, when the number of Mong

migrants reached the highest point, it included 468 households (2,869 people). The figure went lowest in 2013, when only 8 households (39 people) arrived.

In terms of spiritual activities, the community is divided into two groups: one keeping the traditional religion and belief of the Mong people (from the North), and the other practicing Protestantism.

Of the 2,270 Mong households migrating to the places under our survey, 95 still keep their traditional religion and belief, 2,175 have adopted Protestantism (2,174 households) and Catholicism (1 household). In terms of quantity, the number of migrating Mong people converted to Protestantism is 22 times

higher than those who still keep their traditional religion. However, on the national scale, the number of converted Mong people accounts for a small proportion of the total number of the Mong population. At present, only about 120,000 to 150,000 Mong people follow Protestantism, which is an equivalent of one sixth to one fifth of the total number of Mong people in Vietnam – 787,604.

Consequently, while the group of Mong people following Protestantism in the North is only a minority among the Vietnamese Mong, the community of Mong people migrating to Dak Lak that have converted to the religion accounts for the majority of the local Mong. The ratio also indicates that the Mong people who follow the traditional religion are less likely to migrate than those adopting Protestantism or converting into the religion after migration.

For the group of Mong people following Protestantism, under the strong impacts of doctrines and laws, there have taken place fundamental changes, in both positive and negative manners, in their traditional elements of spiritual culture. This article analyses the impacts of Protestantism on Mong migrants in Dak Lak.

## **2. Positive impacts**

*First*, overcoming the limitations and drawbacks of the traditional religion and beliefs.

The traditional culture of the Mong people expresses the cultural values of the ethnic group. The traditional cultural features, such as family cohesion, the worshipping of

ancestors, worshipping/respecting gods/ghosts from nature, have imbued within themselves different cultural layers, which are connected to the history of the ethnic people and at the same time reflect the adaptation of Mong people to their living conditions. The aspects of the traditional culture have become of great use during certain periods and supported the Mong people mentally so that they could survive and adapt to the hardest living conditions. However, with the advances in science and technology and the development of the modern society, many aspects of the traditional culture or rituals with strict rules have become complicated, lengthy and costly. Although many ethnic cultural values are hidden behind the customs and rituals, various elements of the culture have become burdens while the economic conditions of Mong people have not yet been considerably improved. Ma Vang Pao (group leader of hamlet 7, Krong A commune, M'Drak district) analysed: "When I was yet to believe in God, I wasted many things on the offering. I had to offer not only one pig of 50-60kg for a ritual, but, a bigger sacrifice, that is, a buffalo, would be required the next time. When you follow God, nothing is required of you. He would only ask his followers to live a good life. It does not matter that the Bible does not allow us to eat raw blood soup. A family, before following God, was very poor, as once the children get sick, all of their money was spent on offering and rituals. If one follows God, one can make [proper] use of what one owns" [2].

This is one among many stories with common points shared by Mong

respondents who practice Protestantism. In the eyes of many Mong people, especially young ones, the strict rituals have become burdens, and a waste of time and money. For young families or families without men, the strict adherence to the rituals causes them to depend on others, such as those who possess good understanding, those having high reputation within the family, and shamans.

According to the traditional way of thinking, the peace in the daily life of a person and his/her family depends on whether or not the rituals are practiced correctly. This is one of the obstacles for people who possess independent thinking and want to make changes and escape from the constraints of the traditional customs. Once they change to a new religion, it is Jesus Christ who can free them from fears that arise due to their perception of the causes of diseases as brought about by traditional beliefs. To believe in God is to believe in only one supreme spiritual entity, rather than in many gods. Following Protestantism, especially with the new living conditions in Dak Lak, the migrating Mong people become more motivated, and they feel at ease accessing health services for treatment instead of “curing” the diseases by means of worshipping rituals. In funerals, they now put the deceased into coffins, shortening the duration of the event, and no longer killing many a pig, chick, buffalo or ox...

*Second*, adjustments made in the behaviours of the Mong people, helping them form a new and better lifestyle.

For many Mong people, the most important reason for them to make the

decision to follow Protestantism is the fact that they can see positive points of the religion. While conducting the survey, we interviewed many group leaders, several pastors and believers, who first learned about Protestantism when they were very young. Realising the many good things in the doctrines of Protestantism, they believed in them, later on studied and researched deeper into the religion to become active members in the community, acting as group leaders and pastors, providing guidance to others joining the religion. For example, for group leader Ma Vang Pao, the process of receiving the religion was told by him as follows: “When I was in Ban Lien commune (Bac Ha district, Lao Cai province), nobody talked about God. Our family moved to Van Ban district simply because life was hard. At that time, I was in grade 8 at a boarding school. By the time I finished school and came back home, my family had already followed the religion. I decided to follow God also because the Bible told me to be good to my parents while they were still alive, and not to make them sad. [If,] the children do not treat their parents well and do not show the love for them, while they are still alive, but only show the gratefulness to the parents when the latter are dead, by offering rituals, that would only be a show to put on for outsiders to watch. That is not the love for the parents” [4].

A community of Mong people that is free from drinks or fights is what can be easily seen by both those who follow Protestantism and those keeping their traditional religion. Previously, heavy drinking that leads to fighting represents a pair of behaviours that is commonly seen

and inseparable with the image of the Mong men. Following Protestantism, alcohol is replaced by soft drinks in most eating and drinking activities where many people gather, such as weddings, funerals, meetings. Soft drinks also replace alcohol among the compulsory offerings that the groom's family shall bring to the bride's... The habit of drinking alcohol, though not yet completely eliminated, has now been lessened among a number of Protestants. Not only do the Mong people abstain from drinking, they also have given up smoking cigarettes and opium. They are no longer engaged in offences like burglary or theft...

The custom of *cướp vợ* ("robbing a wife") has existed within the Mong community for many generations. Though it somehow demonstrates the value of the woman, the custom hinders the love affairs of many couples and causes various cases which should have not happened. Following Protestantism, Mong people no longer "rob" the wives. The man and the woman get to understand each other and come to an agreement. They then would talk to their parents to arrange an engagement ceremony and a wedding.

The issue of child marriage in the Mong society is prevalent. To minimise the number of such cases, the local Protestants are encouraged to marry at the ages stipulated by the State thanks to the fact that pastors will only perform matrimonial ceremonies for couples who are old enough to be eligible for marriage and have obtained the certificates of marriage. In addition, one of the ten commandments of Protestantism states that adultery and divorce are not allowed. Therefore, occurrences of adultery and divorce are declining in their community.

*Third*, the economic conditions of migrating Mong families are improved.

To draw a comparison, the economic conditions of Mong people following Protestantism in Dak Lak are still lower than those of the native people. However, the economy of each family has improved as compared with before migration. Therefore, the Mong Protestant interviewees all asserted that their living standards have become more stable since they left their home villages. That is partly attributed to the more favourable production conditions in Dak Lak, and partly to the fact that they focus more on production, not having to waste time and wealth on worshipping rituals under traditional customs. Products of agricultural activities, including husbandry, not only serve their demand for food but also become goods that generate income. For the reason, Mong migrants all state that they have no intention to come back to their home villages.

Apart from positive points in the doctrine, Protestantism also provides its followers with material assistance when they are in need. Among the social activities of the religion, charity and mutual assistance are the highlights since they originate from God's teaching in the Bible. Within the community of Mong migrants who follow Protestantism, the subjects to be assisted are families with especially difficult situations such as households with members being ill for many days, those unable to work, and poor households lacking food...

The assistance comes first from within the group and includes mutual support in terms of labour, providing help with food or from the funds of the group. For families

unable to work or having limited capabilities for work, the executive board of the group shall ask other believers in the spirit of volunteerism to offer support in terms of labour. For families with economic difficulties, the board would consider using the group's funds (using cash or farm products) to provide support.

Additionally, with respect to disadvantaged areas, Mong people following Protestantism are also paid attention to by the local Vietnam General Confederation of Evangelical Churches in the form of monetary and material aids, including essentials such as salt, rice, instant noodles, via charitable activities on grand festive days of the religion or "*Tết*" (Lunar New Year) holidays.

Therefore, activities of assistance by the group and the general confederation, one way or another, provide a helping hand for the Mong people migrating to the new land.

*Fourth*, promoting equality among the community of the Mong people.

The family plays an important role in the traditional society of the Mong people. According to their traditional religion and beliefs, young men, especially those who are not yet married or yet to have the first child, are not considered mature adults. They must obey and learn about the lifestyles as well as the customs and rituals from older people. Following Protestantism, the Mong people, especially the young, receive the religion directly from the Bible. They are provided with guidance by pastors, group leaders, and members of the executive board. All Protestant believers are brethren. The hierarchy is based on age. The Mong Protestants are no longer bound by complicated rituals transferred to them

by older generations. Young people believe that they have been liberated and given the right to more freedom, democracy and independence in every aspect of life.

Among the Mong Protestants, the role and position of women have changed towards more equality. The custom of "robbing a wife" has been discarded. The fact that men and women marry on the basis of understanding and voluntarism shows the equality in the decision to get married. Thus, women now play a more active role in deciding their fates.

In order to get married, in line with the Protestant regulations, the couple must have a certificate of marriage and need to spend time studying the doctrines. The certificate of marriage shall legally protect the woman once problems occur in the marriage. It also asserts the position of Mong women in the society.

*Fifth*, social relations of the Mong people are more widely expanded.

Relations and the cohesion in the traditional society of the Mong people are vertical ones, i.e. blood relations, from top to bottom. Once they are converted to Protestantism, the kinship relations are lessened and social relations are promoted horizontally, that is, among believers of the same religion.

In the traditional way of thinking, only the people who share the same "ghost" will wholeheartedly help one another and may die in the others' houses. Upon becoming believers of Protestantism, all Mong people of any family are brethren, and they shall provide one another with both material and mental support as much as they can. Furthermore, the Mong Protestants can form relationships with people of the same ethnicity in other countries.

Although family cohesion has declined, for the groups of Mong migrants in Dak Lak who follow Protestantism, just like those not converted, they do not abandon their brethren or relatives. An example is in Vu Bon commune, Krong Pak district, where three groups of Mong people live - two in hamlet 12 and one in Son Dien hamlet. Among them, one group follow Protestantism and the other two keep their traditional belief. Though the three groups live in three separate areas, whenever one of them hold a big ritual, the group always invite the others. Meeting people of the same kinship, they acknowledge their relations. When there are big events in a family, such as weddings and funerals, they invite or assist one another with cash and rice. And Mong migrants following Protestantism in Dak Lak still keep in touch with their relatives in the home villages so that the bonds are not lost.

*Sixth*, more Mong people have become literate.

Protestantism penetrated into the Mong community via various channels such as the radio, the internet, cassette tapes, videos, CDs, VCDs, pictures, photos, books and newspapers... Specifically, the Bible has been translated into the Mong Romanised characters, which are widely known among the Mong community, especially young people, being easy to learn and to memorise even for those who are not yet literate. Pastor Hang Seo Din (hamlet 7, Krong A commune, M'Drak district) said: "In the past, I did not go to school but I understood the Mong Romanised characters. Having studied the characters, I compared them with the hymns sung in Vietnamese or correlated the Bible in Vietnamese with the

characters. Now I know both Vietnamese and the Romanised Mong characters as, during the process of studying the religion, I always drew comparisons between the two" [5].

So the case of pastor Hang Seo Din is that of a person who was once illiterate of the [national] Vietnamese language, and, via studying the religion and theology, has acquired the knowledge of the Romanised Mong characters, and made comparisons so as to study Vietnamese via the Bible and the hymns. His motive for learning the Romanised Mong characters is also that of many other Mong youngsters, and that is why the characters have now become relatively popular among the community of Mong Protestants, especially the young.

Additionally, Protestantism always requests its followers to live and work in line with the regulations of, and attached great importance to the compliance with, the law. Therefore, in places where we conducted our research, according to reports of the local authorities, most Mong followers of Protestantism show their willingness to abide by the policies of the Party and the State.

### **3. Negative impacts**

*First*, leading to the "erosion" and gradual loss of the cultural identity of the Mong people.

Primarily, as a one-god religion, Protestantism has changed the Mong people's worldview completely, including their conception of the soul and human being. They no longer believe in any other god. Their every thought, perception and behaviour are now in relation to the God of

Protestantism. Accordingly, the Mong people dropped all traditional cultural activities as well as worshipping rituals in weddings and funerals. It can be said that the birth and development of the new religious phenomenon has been leading to the erosion of the cultural identity of the Mong people.

Protestantism has changed the core values in the traditional culture of the Mong ethnic people, i.e. the kinship culture. Once converted into Protestantism, Mong people change from the traditional blood relations that lead to the way the hierarchy in the clan is calculated and arranged, and the regulations of each clan..., into a relationship among religious believers. This has moved the Mong community from the kinship to the group cohesion.

Following Protestantism, the Mong people abandon their belief in ancestors. If the religion is practiced by all Mong people, gone are the ceremonies to worship ancestors and the rituals to show the way for the dead to return to their roots, there will be nothing left in the ethnic people's culture, in both the spiritual and material aspects. With the disappearance of songs that "guide the way" for the souls of the dead to the world of their ancestors, people would only live with the current life and no longer be aware of the roots of the ethnic group. This would cause a loss of identity and values of the ethnic culture formed by generations after generations in the history of the ethnic group.

*Second*, causing internal contradictions and divisions within the communities of Mong people.

First of all, they include the clashes and contradictions against familial and social customs and traditional beliefs. For the

Mong people, the worship of ancestors is sacred. It has even become a criterion of ethics for each member in the family, clan and hamlet. These customs originate from rituals expressing the piety and gratitude of the offspring towards grandparents and parents for giving birth to them and bringing them up. Customs such as death anniversaries, funerals and weddings are cultural values with a profound human meaning. Following Protestantism means a change in lifestyle, mentality, emotions, culture, and beliefs. This creates an internal conflict within the ethnic group, i.e. between followers and non-followers, within each family, clan or village. Many social orders have been reversed. Brothers even refuse to see one another if one of them does not show up and help at the funeral or help prepare for it when the father is dead. Especially, heads of clans, village chiefs, village patriarchs, who used to be respected and highly regarded, have had to hand over their governing role to a new pool of people consisting of active missionaries, most of whom are young and middle-aged people.

Historical circumstances have resulted in Mong people on many occasions migrating to survive and make their living. However, previously, they often migrated with their families, clans or those of the same bloodlines. Several blood-related families migrated together, or one family moved first and set up a base for the others to follow suit. The groups of families were still closely connected to the other blood-related families due to the bonds of the customs and strict regulations on rituals. Migrating to a new locality, Mong people felt at ease only when there were there a group of the shaman, the fortune-teller, the master in blowing "*khèn*",

which is the traditional Mong musical instrument, and the master who is knowledgeable of regulations and customs, and prestigious enough to settle disputes arising in the community. During the early stage of penetration of Vang Tru (Vietnamese: *Vàng Trú*) religion and Protestantism, among the Mong community, the several families, who were determined to escape from the constraints of the traditional beliefs, were often not accepted by other members of the community, who were the majority. “Old people”, “old-fashioned people”, or “vampires” (lit. ghosts sucking human blood, implying the Mong custom of eating raw blood soup) are terms showing the prejudice of Mong Protestants against Mong people who maintain the traditional beliefs. “New people”, “new path”, “civilised people” are terms used to denote Protestants. In the opposite direction, “abandoning the ancestors”, and “abandoning the roots” are what the Mong people who kept the traditional beliefs thought of those following Protestantism.

The contradictions began to get seemingly less intense, and the people’s attitude started to be seemingly more open, as said by the locals, only from the years of 2004-2005 when the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions was promulgated and implemented in 2004. The legal document affirmed that both the citizens who practice a belief/religion and those who do not, as well as those practicing different beliefs/religions, shall respect one another.

In the context, the relations between the two communities seemed to move towards opposite directions in the two areas - the home villages and the localities they migrated to. In the home villages, where the

Mong people keeping the traditional religion account for the majority, reactions to those following Protestantism were stronger, mainly in relation to the abandonment of ancestor worshipping. Meanwhile, at the destination of migration, where the Mong people following Protestantism are the majority, whenever those keeping the traditional religion hold an event and invite those of the same ethnicity but a different religion, they often prepare separate dishes for the latter, buying other types of food and soft drinks instead of alcohol... Though that make them feel uneasy, in the new context, it shows the compromises and adaptations of both the Mong groups, which is aimed at achieving better social relations.

On the other hand, in spite of the quite open relationship between the two groups of Mong migrants, they still live in separate clusters of families.

So, among the Mong migrants’ community in Dak Lak, apart from a group who have studied carefully and become aware of the positive core elements of the religion, there is still another group who receive Protestantism with vague understanding, especially those who are inadequately educated and do not have opportunities to access books on the religion. Their apprehension of the basics of the Protestant doctrines is therefore very limited. This has been referred to by many researchers as the issue of “*nhạt đạo*” (being less committed to/having less belief in the religion). They only know that to follow the religion means to practice specific things such as not conducting many worshipping rituals, not drinking alcohol, fighting and committing adultery.



That also includes taking good care of parents while they are still alive, and helping others when they are in need... This agrees with the comment of Tran Huu Son: "they consider religion a means to solve the pressing demands of their lives and do not give too much attention to the philosophy and the illusive happiness in the afterworld" [5, p.130].

Though Protestantism helps its believers with their daily life, it poses a great risk in case there is an impact from external ideas with a bad purpose. For example, in 2012, a family of Protestants in hamlet 7, Krong A commune, M'Drak district, incited by a bad person, crossed the border to Laos. They were then captured, applied with pecuniary penalties, and went to jail in Laos. Or, in 2014, in hamlet 12, Vu Bon commune, Krong Pak district, instigated by a number of bad people, a group of 12 Mong Protestants crossed the border to China [8].

*Third*, causing the situation of spontaneous migration and illegal border crossing.

As stated above, one of the reasons for Mong people's spontaneous migration is related to the conversion into Protestantism. In addition, as they no longer believe in the traditional religion and beliefs, the Mong people cease placing too much importance on the relations in the family as well as the rituals and the regulations therein. They are no longer largely bound by traditional social institutions. When migrating, apart from choosing a place suitable for making a living, they also select a community of the same religion, if possible. There, the relationships among fellow believers are more important than family relations.

Mong people's history is closely connected to migration. Cross-border and trans-national migration, under the impacts of external factors, now occur in a scattered manner among the Mong migrants following Protestantism in Dak Lak. This has caused a negative impact on their mentality in particular, and, on the other hand, poses latent risks against the security and safety of the society, and the political situation in the province and the Central Highlands in general.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Mong people are an ethnic group with a unique cultural identity. The new religion and living condition in a new land have led to fundamental changes in their practices of the religion and beliefs. The changes have helped those following Protestantism to be more dynamic, overcoming the limitations and drawbacks of the traditional religion and beliefs, and helped them make adjustments to the behaviours and form a new and more civilised lifestyle. More people have become literate. There is greater equality among different sections of the Mong society. Their economic conditions have improved. However, following Protestantism, the Mong people are at the risk of the erosion of the culture, and the risks of conflicts and division. Party committee and administrative leaders at various levels need to take immediate as well as long-term measures to implement the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions, to stabilise the situation as regards the political security and the safety in the society in the Central Highlands in general and Dak Lak province in particular.

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