

**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION:
THE RATIONAL CHOICE OF MNÔNG PEOPLE
(The Case of Đắk Liờn Hamlet, Đắk Nhau Commune,
Bù Đắng District, Bờnh Phước Province)****

Abstract: *Religious conversion refers to the change of an individual and a community in their belief in spiritual entities, supernatural forces as well as in their religious rites and behavior. The Mng community in Đắk Liờn hamlet, Đắk Nhau commune, Bù Đắng district, Bờnh Phước province has converted from traditional religion to Catholicism. What were the causes of the conversion? Using methods of participant-observation, in-depth interview, and applying rational choice theory, the author indicated adequate answers to the question.*

Keywords: *Rational choice, conversion, Mng people, traditional religion, Catholicism.*

1. Introduction

Religion is “belief in spiritual entities”¹ or “belief in the supernatural, invisible, sacred forces that are intuitively accepted and they interact surreal or illusory way with people in order to explain the problem of the earthly life and the afterlife. This belief is expressed in diverse ways, depending on each historical period, geographical circumstances, different cultures, and the content of each religion, operation of rituals, various religious activities of each society / religion”². Thus, the religious conversion is the change of belief in the spiritual entities, supernatural forces, as well as the change of religious rituals and religious activities of individuals or communities. There are many causes that lead to the

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religious conversion, such as the other religious teachings are easy to understand, to learn and more rational or their religion does not solve the difficulties in life; marriage with wife/husband who does not have the same religion... The Mnông community in Đắc Liên hamlet, Đắc Nheu commune, Bù Đẳng district, Bình Phước province has had the dramatic transformation of religion.

According to the statistics in 2012, there were 271 households, in which Việt (135 households), Mnông (98 households), Nùng (22 households), Tày (15 households) and Pà Thẻn (1 households) in Đắc Liên hamlet. Đắc Liên hamlet is divided into five groups. Mnông people live mainly in group 1, 2 and 3. The other groups are inhabited by Việt, Nùng and Tày people³.

The population of Mnông in Đắc Liên hamlet was 478 people in 2012. They are farmers; they emigrated from Đắc Nông province in 1960. They are considered as an entire Catholic community because more than 90% of people are Catholics. The priest of the Đắc Nheu parish commented that this hamlet was one of the most successes in the process of propagating during more than 30 years in this area.

The traditional religion of Mnông in Đắc Liên is polytheism. They believe and worship a variety of Gods such as the God of Rice (Brah Ba), the God of Field (Brah Mir), the God of Forest (Brah Bri), the God of Stream, Water (Brah Dak), the God of Rain (Brah Mih), the God of Thunder (Brah N'glaih)⁴. In addition, they also believe in the ancestral Gods like Bông and N'đu. These are the Gods that provide seeds and care for their crops. However, when Mnông people in Đắc Liên have become an entire Catholic community, their belief in the Gods has not been no longer available. The rituals related to agriculture have also not existed. The role of mystery-men (Bu N'hum) has lost. Instead, their faith has dedicated to the God. The role of the parish priest has been enhanced in religious life as well as in their social organization.

So what were the causes that led to this religious conversion? If the old religion were backward that did not meet their spiritual needs, or the new religion has been attractive? To answer this question, we conducted field trips in the Mnông community in 2012. We used two main methods of the anthropology such as observation (in the rites of the Đắc Nheu Church) and interviews (the Mnông Catholics about the issues related to their religious life).

Through the observation, the direct discussion with the Mnông Catholics community, we noticed that their conversion seemed to have clear intent. They calculated the pros and cons in transforming. Especially, the young and middle-aged people, they often considered when choosing a new religion. Therefore, we can say that the religious conversion in the Mnông community in Đắk Liên was a rational calculation of each individual.

In this article, the rationality was the rational choice theory that was mentioned in anthropology, sociology, and economics in the first half of the 20th century. This theory was originated from psychology because some psychologists believed that human behavior was always calculated⁵. The main content of the rational choice theory indicated the strategic choice of individual actors to achieve maximal benefit for themselves in social relations⁶ and to appreciate the achievable purpose of the actors⁷. It was clearly expressed in the choice of religious conversion of the Mnông community in Đắk Liên.

2. The rationality of religious transformation of individuals and Mnông community in Đắk Liên

The rational choice theory emphasizes the needs to consider and to calculate in order to achieve maximal benefit. The optimization is not just the material factors, but it is also the mental factors and social benefit.

When the Mnông community Đắk Liên abandoned the polytheism to convert the monotheism (Catholicism), individuals and community calculated to achieve the optimal choice. The considerations and calculations which are concretely expressed through the following factors:

2.1. Selection of modernity in religious beliefs

Modernity is used in this article in opposition to tradition. The modernity in religion includes elements such as the institutionalization of organization, secularization of behaviour and rationalization of choosing faith.

- The institutionalization of organization: before arriving of Catholicism, the management of religious beliefs was not clearly assigned in the Mnông community in Đắk Liên. Their divine system had the same status. The God of Field (Brah Mir), the God of Forest (Brah Bri), the God of Water (Brah Dak), the God of Rain (Brah Mih), the God

of Thunder (Brah N'glaih) had no distinction of caste, nor had no clear institution of worship. The worshipping the Gods were based on customary laws and regulations by village elders and mystery-men (Bu N'hum) according to their dreams. Depending on these dreams, they brought out the offerings and the mode of worship Gods. But there were almost no differences in the offerings to the Gods. The offerings were always stem wine (rượu cần), buffalo meat or pork (depending on the level of ritual) and bamboo cooked rice (cơm lam). All people of the community attended the ritual, then eating the offerings. Only one family was in charge of preparing the offerings. It became a heavy burden for the family that should perform the ritual.

The institutional management of the community had a separation between village elders and mystery-men; however, their roles were often overlapped in terms of spirituality. Village elders hold the governance, maintaining customary laws of the community, who also laid the rules of divine worship. The mystery-men had responsibility for implementing the divine rituals, but they also interfered in the regulations of the village, as proposal offerings and the mode of the rites. In comparing their role, people were fearful of mystery-men, because he was not only represented the community on the front of the divine, but he also represented the deities in punishing the community. It was not good to upset the mystery-men. Thus, when we asked Mnông people about the existence of the mystery-men (N'hum) at present, they cheerfully answered “no more”. The mystery-men and their family did not live in the village because they were not trusted.

The exhilaration of Mnông people in Đắk Liên has been led by the presence of Catholicism and they have become believers of this religion. According to these people, Catholicism appeared here in the late of 1980s. The priests who were propagating in Đắk Nông, they followed the farmers, they moved to evangelize in Đắk Liên hamlet. At first, Mnông people did not believe in this religion, because the mystery-men (N'hum) endeavoured to prevent people from converting. However, with the perseverance of the missionaries such as using of Mnông language to persuade, medicine to treat malaria for them, people gradually trusted and become Catholics. When comparing the role of the mystery-men (N'hum) and the parish priest, people always said that N'hum was not

good, could not afford medical treatment, moreover, they required many offerings for the rituals while the parish priest only prayed and used drugs, but diseases were cured⁸. It made people believe in the mystery then they converted.

In addition, it is clear that the role of the God was an important factor to attract the attention of Mnông people. The inhabitants stated that according to their traditional religion, the Gods have the equal role and duty so they should have to organize many rituals to pray, thanksgiving that is costly. However, the new religion (Catholicism), God is unique that stands out from the other Gods and has the Omnipotence. People just ask God, they do not offer the offerings, they just have sincerity they will be blessed. In my opinion, it is the intentional choice of Mnông when they convert to Catholicism.

Furthermore, the other important thing was the role of the parish priest in this community. He was very crucial in the spiritual life of believers. According to Mnông people, the parish priest was completely different from N'hum. The parish priest always encouraged people to reduce expenses in the ritual and the share of the possessions of dead people, do not worship the Gods; weddings did not hold for long time and reduced gifts to avoid debt for grooms' families. In contrast, N'hum set up offerings of rituals who forced people follow such as in the father's/mother's funeral they must share a half of their property for the dead; in the wedding, wedding presents are beef, pork, chicken, tở⁹, salung¹⁰, sarong¹¹, the total worth between four and five ounces of gold (not including a pair of buffalo). Therefore, the parish priest has gradually been respected by Mnông people than the N'hum because he took care of people's lives.

Thus, a clear institution (in the spiritual system and organization) helped Mnông people have a sympathetic view to Catholicism. It was one of the most important factors that led Mnông people to the choice of faith and became followers of this religion.

- The secularization of religious practice: the preaching of the parish priest did not overemphasis on the commandments, the salvation, the existence of the afterlife, the God and the Jesus Christ's action, etc... Because, according to Mnông, even young people did not profoundly understand about these themes. The elders did not understand; they did

not have any knowledge to comprehend all the sublime preaching. Thus, the priest preached about the ethical community, specific issues related to the social life of the people through the teachings of the Bible in the ceremonies of the Đắc Nhau Church. He gave the example to illustrate as “People should not worship the Gods, it will not be useful, pray to God, because the Almighty God has the power to bestow good things to people”¹². He banned believers sell premature cotton and cashew nuts, he called people work hard, reduce expenses, organize simple ceremonies¹³.

The parish priest also associated with the village elders, the village leader to discuss on the principles of the community, in which they focused on advocacy of reducing demands gifts for wedding, division of assets for the dead, etc... According to the deputy parish priest, the demands gifts in marriage have been always difficult for the bridegroom’s families, because they could not afford the property. To marry a wife for their son, the bridegroom’s family sometimes had to sell land or to pledge assets. The division of wealth for the dead has been a waste, because “the dead comes back the Lord, they will not use these objects on the earth”¹⁴. However, some things could not be overlooked, such as “the rite of cutting buffalo” in the wedding. According to the village elders’ view, it has been a compulsory rite and important in the wedding of Mnông. This ritual has been performed to free the bridegroom out of his wife’s house. Without performing this rite, the bridegroom has had to stay forever at the wife’s house. It has not been good for the bridegroom’s family¹⁵. The other issues have been adopted and implemented gradually in the community. It has been a success of the secular operation that the parish priest has directed.

According to Mnông people, this success has made their lives more pleasant. Currently, in wedding, Mnông people have not been worried about the demand gifts. The presents have been given in marriage as a symbol and an agreement between two families. The wedding has also been organized simpler, taken place one day. During the funeral, the property division of the dead has just been considered as a rite. The Mnông people have recognized that, beside the implementation of the State policy, it was also the contribution of the parish priest to change their lives less difficult.

Previously, Mnông knew that the ritual performance was a waste; however, they had to comply with the customary law. Many families encountered difficulties after hosting the ritual, because they must sell or share many properties in the ritual. Therefore, they chose to convert to Catholicism.

According to the parish priest of Đắk Nheu, the Mnông people in Đắk Liên have had high cohesive community. Through the religious power that had convinced a family and helped them have a better life, then, the other families converted to Catholicism. Therefore, the strategy of the Catholic missionaries in the Mnông area has brought benefits the community in many ways, in particular, reducing waste of the spiritual life. According to the village leader of Đắk Liên, the Party and the State concerned it for a long time, but the efficiency was not high because of some officials related to benefits such as land, land compensation, approving poor households who were not trusted by the people of the community. Thus, the words of these people would be less valuable than the words of religious representatives in some cases. It was the reason which led to the success of Catholicism in the Mnông community.

- Rationality of the choice of faith: as the analysis mentioned, along with the observations and interviews during the study in the community, we realized that the conversion to Catholicism of Mnông people was a rational choice of each individual. They had careful consideration of the risks and benefits in converting to Catholicism.

According to statistics of the Đắk Nheu parish, over 90% of people in Đắk Liên were Catholics, nearly 10% were not Catholics. The non-Catholics in this village were governmental officials, military officers, and people aged 70 and older.

For the elderly people, the conversion to the new religion was not very important, because it did not impact on their lives. Currently, the older people have been living with their children and grandchildren; they have not owned the family's economy and they have not had any duty to support their children so they haven't had any concerns about the interests of religion. We interviewed some officials' parents in the village; they said that they had heard about God. Their grandchildren have believed in God and have gone to the church every Sunday morning; however, they did not follow this religion because their health

did not afford to go to the church. Their descendants also did not advise them convert to this religion. They did not pay much attention to communal activities. In our opinion, this is the choice of the individual in the community. Because of the conversion of Mnông people to Catholicism did not aim the deliverance, return to God after death, but they achieved benefits for their personal life and family. When they did not concern about the interests of themselves and their family, the conversion was no longer important. Therefore, the interviewed people were not interested in what religion that they believed.

The people who did not convert to the new religion had the choice of interest. For example, the case of a military officer did not convert to Catholicism, but his wife and children followed this religion. To explain this problem, he said that it was the right of his wife and children. He had a different belief that was the confidence in the Party and the Uncle Hồ. He added that in his current work, it should not follow any religion. The other officials did not convert to Catholicism, so they considered themselves as atheists.

In terms of rational perspective, the choice of religion is the purpose. This goal oriented to achieve the interests of the individual and the family. As we mentioned, over 90% of Mnông people in Đắk Liên were Catholics, nearly 10% were non-Catholics, all Catholics or non-Catholics had their own benefits. Therefore, the choice of religion completely was a rational choice of individuals and families of the Mnông community in Đắk Liên.

2.2. Increase communal activities and rest to regenerate labour

One of the reasons that led the majority of Mnông people in Đắk Liên converted to Catholicism which was the communal activities. In the parish priest's opinion, Mnông people had a high community spirit and they needed to have communal activities. It was clearly manifested through the traditional rituals. The community was always shown in these rituals. When a ritual took place, everyone of the community involved. However, it was a big expense and it was often responsibility of one family. Therefore, the communal ritual was not often organized. When Catholicism appeared, the communal ritual through the organization of the weekly Masses was not expensive, so it attracted the attention of the community. Observing the ceremonies, we found that a large number of

Mnông people had participated in the Masses. The Masses were held two sessions: at 5 AM and 7 AM every Sunday at the Đắk Nheu church. The ceremony at 5 AM was usually in charge of the parish priest with the main attention of people over 40 years old. The ceremony at 7 AM was responsible of the deputy parish priests with the attention of people under 40 years old, especially, the young and teenagers. The attended people were well dressed, went to the church in a group. When arriving to church, they put neatly their motorcycles, came into the church to wait for the Mass. During the ceremony, they solemnly heard words preached by the priests. When the ceremony finished, they left the church in the mind of the pious believers. On Sunday, they relaxed and jointly drank coffee or alcohol.

Most of Mnông cultivated in remote places. They worked in the fields from Monday to Saturday. On Saturday evening, they returned to their village to prepare to go to the church on Sunday. Therefore, the desire to meet people in the community just took place on Sunday, as this is a mandatory day off of Catholics. Thus, people had the opportunity to stay together after a week of working in the fields. On Sunday, the cafes in Đắk Liên became more crowded. People gathered in their family houses to eat. The Karaoke opened all day for singing.

Mnông people said that thanks to Catholicism, they have a Sunday for a rest. They also said that they could have a rest on the ordinary days, but they did not feel happily because everyone went to work. For young people, they liked Sundays because they could meet friends to drink coffee or wine without titbits from the community. In their opinion, it was a legal opportunity to rest and to recharge, so they did not receive any complaints from older people in the community.

Thus, the desire of communal activities and having a rest to regenerate labour was reasonable desire of every person and Mnông community. The communal activities were inexpensive, the rest was legitimized and encouraged which was one of the most important factors to attract the attention of the community to the Catholicism. According to the middle-aged people, before arriving of Catholicism, they were not interested in the calendar nor Sundays, they just worked until they were tired, then they had a rest. After converting to Catholicism, people knew the calendar, worked and rested according to the timetable, especially,

Sunday for God and rest. The Mnông people in Đắc Liên believed and obeyed the parish priest. In the Our Lady Flower offering occasion on 27th May 2012 at Đắc Nhau church, the parish priest declared that it was the solemnity so believers should not work on this day, including tradesmen. Believers complied with the teachings of the parish priest. All stores closed. It can be affirmed that the religious activities, the Masses in particular and the rest on Sunday were the causes that led to the conversion of Mnông community from the traditional religion to Catholicism. That was the rational choice; they needed a legitimate rest and regular communal activities.

3. Conclusion

As the analysis mentioned, we think that the conversion from the traditional religion to Catholicism of Mnông was an intentional choice. They did not care about the philosophy of deliverance, salvation after death, but they were just interested in the achieved benefits in the current life. These were the advantages of material life, better maintenance of communal values, more comfortable rest. Catholicism met these demands; it also created the trust for Mnông, so they voluntarily changed religion.

Thus, the religious transformation of the Mnông community in Đắc Liên hamlet, Đắc Nhau commune, Bù Đăng district, Bình Phước province was the rational choice of individuals and community. They had the forethought and intent to be Catholics./.

Notes:

- 1 E. B. Tylor (Huyền Giang translated from Russian version, 2001), “Văn hóa nguyên thủy”, *Văn hóa Nghệ thuật*: 22. [“Primitive Culture”, *Review of Culture and Art*]
- 2 Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (2005), *Lý luận về tôn giáo và tình hình tôn giáo ở Việt Nam*, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội: 167. [*Theories on Religion and Religious Situation in Vietnam*, National Political Publishing House]
- 3 Báo cáo số liệu của thôn Đắc Liên năm 2012.
- 4 Trương Bi (Chủ biên, 2004), *Nghi lễ cổ truyền của đồng bào Mnông*, Sở Văn hóa Thông tin Đắc Lắc: 95. [*The Traditional Rites of Mnông People*, Department of Culture and Information of Đắc Lắc]
- 5 John Scott (2000), “Rational Choice Theory” in Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli, Frank Webster, *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*, Cromwell Press, Trowbridge: 265.
- 6 Fredrik Barth (1966), *Models of Social Organization*, Royal Anthropological Institute, London: 275.

- 7 Vũ Quang Hà (2001), *Các lý thuyết xã hội học*, tập 1, Nxb. Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội: 447. [*The Sociological Theories*, Tome 1, Hanoi: National University]
- 8 An example that Mnông people in Đắk Liên often mentioned is the treatment of malaria, N'hum required sacrifice, worshiped continuously for three days, but the disease was still not relieved with higher fever. However, the parish priest just gave medicines and asked everyone to pray, the fever went away and patients cured.
- 9 Tổ (also called jars) there are many kinds, ranging from one to six eyes. The value of each kind of Tổ is different, the more eyes, the higher value. In 2012, price of the one eye was 400 thousand Vietnam Dong; the six eyes about 1.2 million Vietnam Dong.
- 10 Salung is shaped like tổ, but it is dark brown, higher value than tổ and sarong. In 2012, the three eyes salung cost about 10 million Vietnam Dong.
- 11 Sarong is shaped like tổ, but it is larger, brown black, patterned, lower value. In 2012, the three eye sarong cost about 5 million Vietnam Dong.
- 12 The interview of a Mnông Catholic in Đắk Liên.
- 13 The interview of the deputy parish priest of Đắk Nhau.
- 14 The interview of the deputy parish priest of Đắk Nhau.
- 15 Views of a village elder when he recounted a meeting with the parish priest.

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3. Vũ Quang Hà (2001), *Các lý thuyết xã hội học*, tập 1, Nxb. Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. [*The Sociological Theories*, Tome 1, Hanoi: National University]
4. John Scott (2000), "Rational Choice Theory" in Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli, Frank Webster, *Understading Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*, Cromwell Press, Trowbridge.
5. Document of Field research of students and lecturers of the Anthropology faculty conducted in Đắk Liên hamlet, Đắk Nhau commune, Bù Đăng district, Bình Phước province. The project of National University, *Indigenous Knowledge of Ethnic Minorities in the South East in the Process of Social Development* by Prof. Dr. Ngô Văn Lê, 2012.
6. E. B. Tylor (Huyền Giang translated from Russian version, 2001), "Văn hóa nguyên thủy", *Văn hóa Nghệ thuật*. ["Primitive Culture", *Review of Culture and Art*].
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