

## THE CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE MIGRANT HMONG BY PROTESTANTISM IN ĐẮK LĂK, VIETNAM

***Abstract:** On the basis of analyzing the changes in religious beliefs of the Hmong toward “Vàng Trú Protestantism” (Tin Lành Vàng Trú) before migrating to the Central Highlands (the case of Đắk Lắk province), the transformation in religious ceremonies and the shift within the religious community when they live in the new socio - economic conditions that are different from their homeland, this article aims to clarify the changes in the religious life of the Protestant Hmong in Đắk Lắk. Among the factor which affected to the changes in the religious life of the Protestant Hmong in Đắk Lắk, this article focuses on the strong and continuous impact of Protestantism that existed previously in the Central Highlands. Besides, it also clarifies that the Hmong mainly converted to Protestantism before migrating to the Central Highlands in general and to Đắk Lắk in particular, however, their faith was not very deep and vulnerable.*

***Keywords:** Đắk Lắk, Hmong, life, Protestantism, religion.*

### **Introduction**

Mentioning the religious factor of the Hmong who converted to Protestantism in general, especially in the Northwest provinces of Vietnam, it was tended to see it as “Vàng Trú Protestantism”. When the Protestant Hmong migrating freely to the Central Highlands in general and to Đắk Lắk in particular was affected by many factors, including the Protestant element in the Central Highlands, the religious life of the Hmong Protestants in this region have had many changes. On the basis of analyzing the specific expressions of the shift

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religious beliefs of the Protestant Hmong in Đắk Lắk as a case study for this region, this article aims to clarify the changes in the religion pictures of the freely migrants Hmong in the Central Highlands.

### **1. The changes in religious beliefs of the Protestant Hmong in Đắk Lắk**

The religious conversion of the Hmong into Protestantism has impacted strongly on the Hmong community itself and the security situation in general. On the one hand, the religious changes have made loss of the function of traditional religions such as rites of worship, manner of rituals, the way of behavior of the living with the dead and between the alive together, and changing instruments in rites, etc.. On the other hand, these transformations have caused divisions and conflicts in the Hmong community itself; for example, the conversion to Protestantism has caused divisions, opposition, contradictions, even conflicts among Hmong people who follow different religions in the same village; even conflicts of gender, generations, and marriage also occur within the Hmong Protestantism but different sects, etc.. At the same time, religious factors made the Hmong who converted or wishes to convert Protestantism to migrate from some the Northern provinces to the South, especially to the Central Highlands.

Most of the Hmong living in the Central Highlands identify themselves as Protestants. Currently, there are six denominations operating relatively clear in Hmong community in the Central Highlands, including: Vietnamese Evangelical Church (Southern Region), Christian Fellowship Church, Baptist Church, Seven-day Adventist Church, Presbyterian Church, and Federation Gospel Missionary. Therefore, the Hmong migrated into Central Highland in general and into Đắk Lắk in particular, under the impact of new circumstances, their religious beliefs also have changed. In Đắk Lắk, the population of the Hmong is 21,293 people that belong to Protestantism and Catholicism (81 households/ 476 believers). The Hmong Protestants is 20,817 people, operate in 80 Protestant groups in which 14 groups recognized and 66 groups have not recognized religious activities. Those 66 groups belong to 8 denominations, including Vietnamese Evangelical Church (South) and Christian Fellowship Church with 12,000 believers and with 56 groups<sup>1</sup>. The

rest follows other denominations such as Presbyterian Church, Baptist Church, Memonite Church, Gospel Christ, etc. The majorities of the Protestant Hmong have true faith and consider Protestantism as spirit supports in order to leave some conservative customs and old conventionality. The Protestant groups, which registered religious activities, elected the Committee and gradually operates stability. The Protestant groups which have not registered operation mainly makes their worship activities in some small households around 10 to 20 people. Unlike the preachers in the Hmong Protestant groups and other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, the Protestant Hmong preacher in spontaneous groups have narrow theology knowledge. They mainly have got theology knowledge through practices for many years, and then formed the Protestant groups by themselves. The majority of religious activities of those Protestant groups are carried out at believers' own house. By the end of May, 2013, just 14 groups among 80 religious activity groups have been registered the activity<sup>2</sup>.

Most of Hmong people who followed Protestantism in the Northern provinces are called as Vàng Trú Protestantism<sup>3</sup>. After migrating freely to the Central Highlands, they were approached and influenced by pastors and missionaries of Vietnamese Evangelical Church and Christian Fellowship Church, so they started to transform into these denominations easily, and did not need procedure to switch, and considered as newly baptized believers.

## **2. The Changes in the religious ritual of the Protestant Hmong in Đắk Lắk**

Through actuality survey in some important locations where lots of the Hmong Protestants reside in Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông provinces, most of religious activities of the Protestant Hmong are quite simple, even religious activity contents does not reflect clearly the religious features of any denominations. However, where the Protestant Hmong resides permanently is that their religious activities are relatively steady and they belong to Vietnamese Evangelical Church (South) and reside in some locations for the Hmong in Krông Á (M'Đrăk district), Hòa Phong, and Cư Pui communes (Krông Bông district) in Đắk Lắk.

The survey results of these Protestant Hmong groups showed that their religious activities were organized methodically. The Protestant Hmong often gathers to pray from 7 am to 8 am on every Sunday at a fix point that mainly is a house of the volunteer preacher and it is him to preach. The places of worship are decorated quite simple with the Cross and slogan “*Qmuas vai TswNtui*”, meaning “Honoring God” in the Hmong language. Besides, there is an orchestra, mainly Organ, in order to serve religious rites or sing hymn.

In the religious services, preachers have Hmong Bible versions that was printed in foreign country and was introduced to Viet Nam by Pastors and dignitaries, even some cases for lack of printed Bible, preachers copied a set of Old Testament and New Testament by hand. Though some preachers have less knowledge of doctrine, theology, and religion, they are authorized to do baptism for believers. The baptism ritual is mostly implemented in stream. In some Protestants groups such as hamlets No. 7, No. 8, No. 9, and No. 10 in Krông Á commune (M’Đrăk district), Nor Pông hamlet in Hòa Phong commune, and Ea Lang and Ea Rok hamlets in Cù Pui commune (Krông Bông district), Đăk Lăk organized religious activities in accordance with cluster groups. Every Wednesday evening, some Protestant Hmong, mainly youths and juveniles, learn to how to sing hymn, how to pray, and how to perform arts after a busy and tired day. Some groups have implemented Holy Communion in accordance with Protestant ritual on Sunday early monthly.

On the level of faith, there is a large of Hmong people identifying themselves as Protestants, but they do not understand dogma, Bible, even do not know denominations that they believe in. Simply, they often listen to the Bible evangelism program by the Hmong language through Manila radio station, and they attend Sunday services weekly. In some places, the Hmong converts to Protestantism as a movement, and the main reason is to imitate each other naturally. Some preachers themselves just do simple tasks as go door to door to talk about God; that is if anyone believes in God, he/she will not have to worship ghosts and deities any longer, and will be received God’s grace. Thereafter, they made a list of followers, opened classes teaching

Bible, and learned to sing to praise God. However, many people converted to Protestantism but they still drunk, smoked and healed by hiring shaman. This shows that the level of faith of some Hmong Protestants is fragile and not deep. Most of Hmong Protestants responded that they did not know anything about Protestantism. They became Protestants because they reduced conservative customs, no beating, no drinking, and no smoking.

### **3. The changes of religious community of the Protestant Hmong in Đăk Lăk**

Freely migrant factors of the Protestant Hmong in Đăk Lăk particularly (in the Central Highlands generally) not only make changes in belief and religious rituals but also make many changes in a religious community. Đăk Lăk is one of the locations that the migrant Hmong from the Northwest provinces reside there. According to census and housing in 2009, the population of the Hmong in Đăk Lăk is 29,375 people with 5,226 households, live in 45 hamlets in 19 communes of 8 districts<sup>4</sup>, and the ages of fifteen and older account for 53% of whole population. All of them have been migrated from Northern mountainous provinces, especially from Hà Giang, Lao Cai, Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang, and Sơn La, etc.

The Hmong from Northern mountainous provinces migrated to Đăk Lăk in many periods. In 1986, implementing the strategy of labor allocation and resident allocation across the country, apart of unnoticeable Hmong people (around 200 people) living in formerly Hoàng Liên Sơn province migrated to Đăk Lăk to reside for the first time. From 1986 to 1990, many groups through their relatives emigrated in small groups. The total of the Hmong moved to the Central Highlands in this period was about 2,000 people, and Đăk Lăk (including Đăk Nông today) was a single province that have had resident Hmong. However, just after 10 years, the phenomenon of the Hmong emigrating freely into the Central Highlands reached a climax; its peak is from 1994 to 1998 with 619 households that equivalent 3,321 Hmong people emigrated into the Central Highlands per year that make the Hmong population rank the third percentage of population, just after Tày and Nùng populations. Besides, the Hmong

began to appear in Gia Lai and Lâm Đồng provinces. The phenomenon of freely migrant Hmong into the Central Highlands declined in 2002 because of the limited policy of authorities of the Central Highlands provinces, but the Hmong migrating into Đắk Lắk seems to be not declined<sup>5</sup>.

Residences of Hmong people in Đắk Lắk are very far from the center of city. The reason is that their ethnically features; they often live in remote and high mountainous areas. In addition, when migrating freely to the Central Highlands, they were not welcomed warmly by indigenous communities, so they have resided in remote areas in order to avoid detecting and interfering by local governments and conflicting with indigenous residents. An actuality survey in Đắk Lắk shows that nearly 100% Hmong people migrated primarily by households' size; each of household has two generations, and even particularly, some households have four generations. Freely migrant households often have relationships with their relatives and friends, and through these relationships they knew that Đắk Lắk has more advantages than Northwest provinces and in addition they were encouraged and agreed by their relatives and family, so they decided to move to Đắk Lắk and have relied on each other. As a result, the kinship and ethnic community of Hmong people in Đắk Lắk were connected very well<sup>6</sup>.

After migrating freely into the Central Highlands in general and Đắk Lắk in particular, cohesion communities based on kinship lines of Hmong people have had some certain changes. Before migrating, Hmong people reside in areas with concentrated living conditions, although they were depended on local administrations or state administration, they tend to consolidate together by self-management system such as Hà Giang province, especially the former Đồng Văn Highlands. However, resident consolidations just are connected in concentrated areas, and it is easy to break in dispersal areas because of nomadic features and not the same kinship lines. Normally, in the same village, when a separation occurs, the people with the same kinship lines tend to sunder together.

Consequently, main basis cohesions in the traditional Hmong society - over the dispersion of living areas was divided by administrative boundary - are kinship and family relationships. According to Hmong people's idea, their community consists of people who has the same ancestor. Each of family lines have own features that express their rituals, religious beliefs, mostly expressed in funeral<sup>7</sup>. The family line possesses strict customary laws in order to control their members and regulate their responsibilities and duties in helping each other, and they have self-management organization under the control of leaders. The leaders are trusted and enshrined in "ruling people", "ruling ghost", and "ruling guest" by relatives<sup>8</sup>. They decide family lines' inner issues as organizing, protecting the community and helping their members, and they also are representative of family lines in relation with other ones, with authorities and with Spirits.

In the past, the family line played the organization and leadership roles in struggling and dealing with reality causes like the invasion of external forces, poverty, and diseases and fiction causes like religion and superstition. These causes make them need to connect together. Consequently, the Hmong kinship is not only a blood relationship but also emerges as a traditional social institution that participates in social management, maintaining social orders, and protecting the community. The kinship is very important to members' life. The custom of accepting another family line or joining some other family lines for the support and help is a way out for the homeless and inferior. The Hmong family line community also is a traditional religious community and their family line relationships have impacted directly on their religious beliefs.

On the one hand, the consolidation of the Hmong family line have some positive aspects in creating the clannish solidarity and ethnic spirit. Therefore, Hmong people have existed and overcame the long history of struggle of thousand-year. Nowadays, these community relationships are still significant factors in order to ensure solidarity, orders, and community protections in the new context, especially in the context that Hmong people's life has many difficulties. On the other hand, the feature of the Hmong family line is also negatively

affected by the tendency to remain local, closed and narrow-minded, and conservative ideology. It is a major obstacle in building the solidarity within ethnic and with other ethnics, and it prevents Hmong people developing themselves.

Moving to the Central Highlands, the Hmong Protestants community have changed the structure of the family line community because they reside in new lands that socio-economic conditions differ from their old hometown and because of organizing traditional rituals, especially funeral rites that is impossible absence of the relatives' assistances in terms of spirit, materials, time, and forces. The freely migrant Hmong in the Central Highlands is short of these assistances. Thus, for those households, the kinship is not enough to help them overcome the difficulties in the new residences, including organizing the traditional rituals.

It is that the kinship is limited, so the freely migrant households converted to Protestantism in order to have relationships and the wider help from other family lines who are Protestants in the same village or different villages. Due to the fact that the freely migrant Hmong Protestants know that the assistances from Hmong Protestants are wider and more important than the assistances from the family lines. According to them, Protestantism is more important than the family line.

### **Conclusion**

It can be said that the majority of Hmong people in Đăk Lăk converting to Protestantism is an objective reality; it is not true that most of them are cheated as awareness for a long time. In fact, apart of them have really religious needs, in the one hand, the needs would replace their conservative traditional religion, and they consider Protestantism as a social fulcrum in the other hand. In the locations that Hmong people reside steadily, religious activities tend to have public and eventful signals. In many Protestant groups (even the groups have registered in Krông Á, M'Đăk district or the group have not registered in other locations as well) have elected the Committee, and formed organization itself. Many groups are guided by pastors and preachers to apply for activity registration and license to build

chapels in order help religious activities operate steadily that compatible with this religion disciplines. Obviously, after moving to the Central Highlands in general and Đăk Lăk in particular, “Vàng Trú” Protestantism in Northern provinces is impacted by other Protestant denominations existing in the Central Highlands, and Hmong people gradually transfer to more “orthodox” Protestantism./.

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**Notes:**

- 1 In the match with the Central Highlands provinces, the rest of the Hmong region as below: Protestants in Đăk Nông province is 13,404 people, that belong to the Vietnamese Evangelical Church (South) and Christian Fellowship Church with 12,313 people and with 57 groups, 17 groups of which have registered the religious activity; Nearly 3,000 the Hmong Protestants in the Regiment 720 with 12 groups; 1,188 believers in Lâm Đồng province, in which the Vietnamese Evangelical Church (South) have 4 groups, one of which registered the religious activity (the village No. 4 and 5, Rômen Commune, Đam Rông District).
- 2 In M’ Đrăk District: Having 7,951 believers, operating in 24 groups in which 11 groups with 4,684 have been registered the religious activity. In Cư Mgar province: 107 households/ 569 believers operating in 02 groups not registered the activity. In Lăk province: 115 households/ 679 believers operating in 03 groups not registered the religious activity. In Ea Kar district: 36 households/ 231 believers operating in 02 groups not registered the religious activity. In Ea Súp district: 1,213 believers operate in 09 groups not registered the religious activity. In Krông Pắc district: 197 households/ 941 believers operate in 06, all of which have been not registered the religious activity. In Krông Năng district: 21 households/ 151 believers operating in 02 groups not registered the religious activity. In Krông Bông district: 1,545 households/ 9,233 believers operating in 32 groups, in which just 02 groups registered the religious activity.
- 3 This term refers to religious phenomenon that emerges in the Hmong region in Northern provinces from 1987 to 1990. The term “Vàng Trú” is because the FEBC radio station used it to propagate Protestantism to the Hmong. According to some researches, the notion of “Vàng Trú” has been formed due to base on the notion of “Vangx” (King, Emperor) of Hmong people. The name “Vangx Tsur” (King Home, Emperor Home) or Vangx Tsur Ntux - “Heavenly King” was invented in order to nationalize between God and Hmong King in history or in the legend of Hmong people, so that calling and scaring this ethnic have to follow “Vàng Trú” as their new King with hope to get happiness later. Actually, Vàng Trú is artificial method that preachers have used to introduce Protestantism into Hmong ethnic easily. The true nature of Vàng Trú is Protestantism.
- 4 In M’ Đrăk district: 1,524 households/ 8,738 people reside in 14 villages/ 5 communes, in which 1,208 households/ 7,222 people have permanent residence and 246 households/ 1,516 people do not have permanent residence; In Krông Bông district: 2,235 households/ 13,105 people reside in 13 villages/ 03 communes, in which 1,992 households/ 11,890 people have permanent residence and 243 households/ 1,215 people do not have permanent residence, that gather

in Ea Uôl village, Cư Pui Commune because this commune has been not planned the residential area; In Ea Kar district: 50 households/ 315 people reside in 01 village/ 01 commune, in which 09 households/ 56 people do not have permanent residence because they reside in the Ea Sô nature conservation area; In Krông Pắc district: 247 households/ 1,412 people reside in 05 village/ 01 commune, all of which do not have permanent residence; In Krông Năng district: 150 households/ 186 people reside in 01 village/ 01 commune, in which 02 households/ 10 people do not have permanent residence; In Lắk district: 157 households/ 762 people reside in 04 villages/ 04 communes, all of which do not have permanent residence; In C Mgar district: 132 households/ 671 people reside in 01 village/ 01 commune, in which 18 households have registered the residence; In Ea Súp district: 731 households/ 3,586 people reside in 06 villages/ 03 communes, in which 255 households/ 1,398 people have permanent residence and 476 households/ 2,188 people do not have permanent residence.

- 5 The survey data showed that , the number of the freely migrant Hmong into Đắk Lắk was highest in the stage of 2002 - 2008 with 1,526 people per year.
- 6 Institute for Religious Studies (2013), *The Religious Transformation in the Central Highlands: Situation, Policies and Solutions*, Buôn Ma Thuột: 200.
- 7 Đặng NghiêM Vạn (1994), “Some of the Religious Situation in Vietnam Today” in *The Religious Issues Today*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Pub.: 34 - 35.
- 8 Vương Duy Quang (1994), “The Issues of the Hmong followed Christianity Today”, *Ethnography*, No. 04: 38.

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