

**MANIFESTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN THE
FUNERAL RITES OF VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS EMIGRATING
IN 1954 IN LOC HOA PARISH, DONG NAI PROVINCE, VIETNAM**

***Abstract:** After the Second Vatican Council, the funeral rites of the Vietnamese Catholic has traditional rites apart from Catholicism one. Catholicism rituals take place mainly in church and cemetery spaces. Rituals in Vietnamese tradition mainly take place in the family space. Funeral rites show that rituals in the church and cemetery spaces in accordance with the rules of Rome Church but still contain the imprint of the local culture of Vietnamese's conceptions and lifestyle. The rituals that take place at the home are boldly influenced by folk beliefs as well as filial piety in the mindset and actions of believers. Those show that the funeral is a place to express the images of indigenous culture in the ritual of Vietnamese Catholics.*

***Keywords:** Local culture, funeral rites, Vietnamese, Loc Hoa parish, Dong Nai.*

1. Introduction

The historical particularism of Franz Boas recognized cultural particularity, culture is tied with the environment and history in which it exists. The process of formation and transformation of a culture is extremely complex, it has different paths that do not follow a common theoretical pattern¹. The author examined the cultural formation of the Northern Catholics migrated to the South in the complexity of history and the living environment of the community. The culture of Vietnamese Catholics is a mixture of Western Catholic culture and traditional Vietnamese culture, but it does not mean that the

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materialized culture becomes superorganic entities as the concept of Alfred Kroeber- a student of Franz Boas². These two cultures coexist in interrelated and interdependent interactions, thereby creating the foundation for a particular cultural value in the social life of Vietnamese Catholics. This feature can be seen through the life cycle rituals of the believer such as wedding, funeral, and death anniversary.

In this article, the indigenous culture is the traditional culture existed before Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam. This culture does not only include the inherent cultural elements created by the Vietnamese themselves, but it also has the external cultural elements introduced during their historical process including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism. However, this combination is not a mechanical integration of the four aforementioned elements but it is based on inheritance, creativity, and adaptation to the Vietnamese traditional culture.

This paper indicates research on the funeral of Vietnamese Catholics migrated in 1954 conducted in Loc Hoa parish, Tay Hoa commune, Trang Bom district, Dong Nai province by qualitative methodology combined with attendance observation and in-depth interviews.

2. The funeral rites of the believer

The funeral rites are placed in the interaction between the indigenous cultural values and the Catholic values. These rituals are presented in family spaces: *praying for the dying person (phó linh hồn), turban of mourning (làm phép khăn tang), mourning the dead and crying for the dead, the taboo related to the dead, prayers and rituals taking place in the church, Catholic cemetery: ring the melancholy bell, regulations of funerals in the church and at the cemetery, building a tomb, rite in church for the soul of the dead.*

2.1. The rituals take place in the family space

Praying for the dying man (Nghỉ thức phó linh hồn): When there is a dying person, the family informs the “helping the dying” Boards (ban giúp kẻ liệt)³, they will carry out the ritual of praying for the

dying man. This ritual can be interpreted as dedicating the soul to God. This rite consists of the readings of God's word in the Bible to pray for the dying man, then a person will come next to the dying's ear saying a sentence "Jesus Mary Joseph, I dedicate my soul in the hands of God". According to the believers' view, this action helps the dying remember God, repent and be calm before passing away. Because believers believe that if the dying person still entangle in problems, especially the sin, he/she will not be able to close his eyes to pass away. We had an interview with a Vietnamese priest working in the United State of America about this rite. He showed that the ceremony was not performed by the Catholics in the world, but it is only executed by the Vietnamese Catholic community. The priest also said that in addition to the above purpose, it perhaps express the Vietnamese thinking "we must persist as long as there are chances" (còn nước, còn tát), with the hope that the dying person can be regained consciousness when hearing the name Jesus, the blessing of the God.

The action of speaking in the ears of the dying person in the ritual of praying for the dying person makes us associate the ritual of raising the soul of the dead (hú hồn) in the past funeral of the Vietnamese. This ritual shows the last effort of the descendants with the hope that the new dead will be resurrected, the soul of the dead can turn back, re-enter the body. The eldest son holds shirt of the dead, climbs up the front roof of the house, waves shirt and calling the sentence: "three souls (superior vital principles- hồn), seven lesser vital principles (vía) of father, come back quickly to me" or "three souls, nine lesser vital principles of mother, come quickly to me" for three times with three different directions. After calling, he climbs down the roof, covers the shirt over the body or hanging in front of the door⁴. Currently, the convention of raising the soul of the dead hasn't been existed in the Vietnamese funeral ceremony, most Vietnamese people do not know or understand this custom. Thus, if you ask Catholics about the connection between the action of talking to the ears of the dying person and this custom, you definitely do not get the answer. We temporarily made the comment that the form of speaking in the ears of the dying of Catholics may be influenced by the custom of raising the

soul of the dead in the traditional Vietnamese funeral. However, this custom was fully Catholicized by calling the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, to hope that the dying person would be free to pass away or be awakened. The Catholicized process of indigenous ceremonies is a creation of the Vietnamese believers who formed their own Catholic rite to fill their traditional practices and to express the Catholic faith, as well as, the meaning of their cultural customs.

The turban of mourning (Làm phép khăn tang): After the death of a person, the body is taken a bath in wine or fragrant water, dressed in beautiful clothes, wrapped in a shroud with a cross, placed on the bed. The shrouding ceremony will take place at 9 AM or 3 PM, a priest comes to perform the sacrament of body, coffin. When making the turban of mourning ritual, the priest recites a prayer: “God teaches us to be filial to our parents and grateful to our ancestors when they live, as well as, when they pass away. God also teaches us to remember and pray for those who have died. At the moment, we ask God to bless and sanctify these mourning cloths that the descendants and family of the soul ... will carry on their heads, as a sign of filial piety and remembrance...”⁵.

The turban of mourning ritual is just practiced by the Vietnamese Catholics, expressing respect for the meaning of filial piety through the mourning cloths of believers. This ritual shows that the Vietnamese Church has proactively created its own rituals to fuse indigenous cultural values into the Catholic rituals.

After performing the sacrament, the body is placed in the coffin head facing outward, according to the Vietnamese Catholics, the dead can face the altar of God. In front of the coffin, there are usually two candles, a flower vase, a fruit plate and a bowl of incense in the middle. After this ceremony, the family members begin to wear funeral garments.

Mourning the dead is a mandatory practice for the Vietnamese in funerals. The funeral garments represent the filial piety of the descendants with the dead. The funeral garments of the Vietnamese Catholics are similar to the traditional one. Children have to wear

funeral clothes made of fabric or gauze, son-in-laws also wear the funeral dress according to each family. The eldest grandson, foster children⁶, adopted children may not wear funeral clothes but they are also required to wear turban of mourning made of gauze. The other children or neighbors will wear white turban of mourning, the great-grandchildren wear yellow turban of mourning. Nowadays, there are some families who do not wear gauzy funeral clothes because they think that these clothes are not suitable anymore and wear black clothes but still keep turban of mourning made of gauze. Most of the followers kept gauzy funeral clothes because they think that wearing white mourning clothes was the most suitable, children wear black clothes look them like visitors. Some believers don't like changing the mourning clothes.

“In a funeral, people must be dressed funeral clothes made of gauze according to the Vietnamese custom since a long time ago, I don't like to change to a black shirt. I will practice our ancestral custom, some people have changed because they think it is cumbersome but I don't think so. If my father pass away I will dress the funeral clothe made of gauze, I will not change to the black shirt.” (Male, 39 years old).

The mourning clothes do not only mean the filial piety but they also express many meanings of the community. A funeral with many funeral clothes made of gauze shows that it is a family with many children. For the Vietnamese in general and Catholics in particular, having many children is a good thing, the thought of having many children and grandchildren still exist in the minds of many believers, especially the elderly. It is also an honor if the dead has many foster children because it shows that this parent is loved, honored by the community, chosen as the sponsor for their children. Today, many families have few children because of the pressure of life. Parents and grandparents do not force their children to have many children, but they often advise that if you don't have many children, won't have many children to wear mourning clothes.

In a Catholic's funeral, it is not only the grandchildren wear white turban of mourning, but the visitors also do like that. For the

Catholics, if they have good feelings for the family of the dead, especially the family or the deceased help them in their lives, even if they are not relatives, they will wear white turban of mourning to show their love for the family and the deceased. Thus, during the funeral, a large number of mourners does not only indicates that they are a large family, but it also expresses the status of family members and the deceased in the community. Especially in the funeral, some people wear yellow turban of mourning show the longevity of the dead. Long life and having many children is an admiration of many people for the deceased.

Many northern migrated Catholics families in Loc Hoa still maintain their custom. If the deceased still has parents, the coffin will be tied by one or two turbans of mourning, it shows that the dead still has to keep filial piety, even though his/her parents are still alive. During procession to the cemetery, many parents do not accompany the coffin because the Vietnamese customary regulates that parents do not have to make farewell their children. Vietnamese people believe that the death of elderly is consistent with the natural law, but the death of young is a pain, the great misfortune of the family. Placing turbans of mourning on a coffin represents the responsibility of the deceased as well as remind the livings do not to leave before their parents and grandparents. The death of descendants before parents and grandparents is considered as ungrateful children because they can not take care their parents and grandparents.

Crying for the dead is indispensable in a funeral of Vietnamese people. A funeral without crying will make the visitors feel strange. Previously, there was a practice of “do mourning profession” (khóc mướn) by making the crying. This practice is no longer exist in the Catholic community but many middle-aged followers often joke that “when you die, I’ll weep for you” (ông bà mất, con sẽ khóc mướn cho ông bà) when they visit the older people. Thus, the cry is indispensable in a funeral. In the current funeral, many relatives still weep bitterly over the dead, especially the burial service. Relatives kneel down around the grave, cry, blame the deceased of leaving

family, hinder the burial. At a funeral, the women of the family cried, a female cried to faint (Field diary, in February 2015).

According to the Catholic faith, the death brings sadness to those who are still alive, but it is also considered as the happiness of the dead because life in the world is temporary, dying to enter into the eternal life with God. Therefore, the living do not need to cry wistfully. As the author Phan Ke Binh commented on the European funeral customs: “Everyone is silent, the relatives recite a funeral oration when procession to the cemetery, then they come back home... bring a bouquet of flower to visit on holidays. In spite of being elegant and simple it shows the filial piety”⁷.

The author also commented on the crying custom in the funeral of the Vietnamese: “The children weep so mournful, many people cry despite of hoarseness. Love in the heart, two tears are just enough, but the real love does not need to cry, crying makes the ears ache, people feel uncomfortable”⁸.

Thus, it can be said that the mournful crying of Vietnamese Catholics is completely influenced by indigenous mind. Crying does not only express affection for the dead but it also shows visitors that they love the dead; this is a family in which the members live in harmony with one another; the dead is very affectionate, so many people weep over his/her death. Excessive weeping is gradually reduced, only middle-aged women may be somewhat influenced by the tradition. Young people almost cry silently.

Reciting prayers for the souls of the deceased to be forgiven by God is the Catholic faith, zealously practiced by Catholics. Every believer recites several prayers for the dead when visiting. After the funeral, the family will invite parishioners and their relatives to come and pray for the dead. If the deceased is a member or contributes or helps the association, the members will come to the deceased home to pray for the dead. It is considered as “gratitude” for the dead. Each association often recites prayers for three consecutive nights, and the evening prayers last for one month. If there is any association, the neighbors will come to pray together with their

families, and some families pray for their dead relatives for three months and ten days. For Catholics, praying for the dead expresses the responsibility of the co-religionist as well as feelings of friendship and filial piety for the deceased. Therefore, this is a believer's daily practice in life.

In the funeral, beside the religious significance, meaning of filial piety is always valued by believers. The notion of filial piety does not only govern personal behavior, but it also measures family value in the community. Beside mourning, weeping, praying for the dead, believers are always deliberate fullness of the funeral procession for the deceased. They feel proud if they can buy good, beautiful coffins; many people, many associations visit to pray; many wreaths; a brass band playing funeral music with many songs to commemorate the dead; after the burial, a feast for those who attended the funeral. This way of thinking will lead to competition among families in the funeral procession for the dead. Thus, in many Masses, priests often advise the believers do not pay attention to the panache, but care for the soul of the dead by praying. If every family wants to have funerals bigger than others, it will cause social and family harm. In term of society, it will cause friction sometimes as a hater because of competition among families. In each family, it sometimes leads to an argument because the family members have to share a large amount of money for the funeral. Catholics do not flaunt in funerals, but they still have the desire to organize funeral more prodigious than the others because it is not just a way to express the feelings of the living with the deceased but it is also the honorific of family in the village community.

During the funeral of a 90 year-old man in March 2015, after the burial, I had an interview with a group of believers, they talked about the dead. A man said that he has had longevity but few people participated in the funeral. Others felt compassion for the dead because the funeral did not have any trumpet, there was just a wreath. One person explained that his children were so poor they couldn't organize thoroughly the funeral, his family members also had little

interaction with other people, did not join any association, so few people visited the funeral (Field diary, on March 2015). These remarks show there was comparison of the funeral scale. Believers expressed compassion for the dead because they do not have the full funeral as the others. In the cohesion of the community, it shows mutual assistance as well as supervision of members to follow the regulations and concepts of the community. The “word of mouth” as mentioned above make children of the dead feel ashamed, as it is the blame of the neighbors for do not complete their parents funeral. Therefore, most of believer’s families try to organize a enormous funeral unless their families are really poor. A funeral also expresses the influence of folk beliefs in the believer’s thoughts through the taboo related to the dead such as *wearing funeral clothes, crying, taking diseases, wearing funeral clothes for animals, plants, believing in omens, do not use the deceased’s belongings*.

Although funeral clothes are formalized in the funeral rite of the Vietnamese Catholics, they still reflect the beliefs and folklore of Vietnamese people through taboos. The funeral clothes do not only express etiquette (customary code), but they also express the grief of the living. Therefore, the customary of wearing funeral clothes has been stemmed from taboos. People fear mourning may cause the other sorrow. In an in-depth interview, a 73 year-old woman told the story of her nephew (a priest) during his father funeral. He dressed the funeral clothe made of gauze then he wanted to change the other because he felt ashamed with sloppy clothes. Therefore, the priest asked her advice to sew another mourning suit. She advised do not sew twice because no one dare to do like that, but the priest insisted to have another mourning suit, and he also demanded: “you give me a turban of mourning made of fabric, I don’t wear a turban of mourning made of gauze, it’s too dirty”, I said that “you can change your clothes but you have to wear a turban of mourning made of gauze”. Then, he agreed do not to change the turban of mourning (headband). She emphasized that she was scared because the priest’s mother was sick but the priest was too young so he did not believe in this taboo.

Nobody dared to sew a mourning suit twice because it meant that there would be another funeral in the family. In addition, if the children do not wear a turban of mourning made of gauze, instead of turban of mourning made of fabric will be mocked at eventhough he is a priest. (An extract from the interview, in August 2015).

After the burial, children who are forced to keep the turban of mourning for 100 days or depending on the perception of each family, the majority of the wearers leave the turban of mourning at the cemetery, they do not bring it at home. These white mournings will be collected and burned. Most of the followers believe that it does not need to bring the turban of mourning home, burning them in the cemetery is convenient, but perhaps one reason is that the fear of bringing bad luck to their home.

“During a funeral procession, people throw flag of mourning away because the flag will bring another person to follow the dead, so when the coffin arrives the church, there is no funeral flag, even people burned their mourning clothes, they just wear a symbol on the chest, do not wearing the funeral, they think it will bad luck, pull an another family member follow the dead”. (An interview with a 25 year-old female, in October 2015).

Crying for the dead also has taboos such as avoiding tears fall on body of the dead because of fear the dead will pull the living to accompany. Although most Catholics do not believe in this taboo, they always explain that crying makes the soul of the deceased feel a strong attachment to the living, will not be calm to pass away. Catholics do not believe that the dead can harm their living relatives but they have a fear of their health damage.

“Since ancient times, our ancestors said that “if you let tears fall on body of the dead, your eyes will be weakened”. For example, when my uncle on Truong Minh Giang Street (Ho Chi Minh City) died, I came to visit him. My nephew (a priest) and a photograpther said that “Do not let your tears fall on his body, your eyes will be blurred”. I agreed with them and did not let my tears drop on his body” (An interview with a 73 year-old female, in August 2015).

Taking diseases, catholics do not only believe that the dead can cause human illness, but many of them also think that the dead can take the disease of the living. When they are sick, whatever the diseases such as moles or warts, arthritis, even fatal illness, they also demand the dead take these diseases. Believers stand next to the coffin whisper or touch the dead then rub on their body with hope to be cured.

“The family members of the dead demanded the dead take their diseases, I did so but my disease was not cured because I demanded after the others. I believe in that thing so when my relatives have just passed away, I always ask them take my disease, our grandparents told us this thing” (An interview a 65 year-old male, in October 2012).

“In the past, when my uncle died, I had some warts, I took a betel leaves to rub on them then gave these betel leaves to my uncle take them away. Then, these warts were gradually disappeared. I also saw many people did so but I did not know if their diseases were taken away or not” (An interview with a 43 year-old woman, in January 2016).

Wearing band of mourning for plants, animals planted or nursed by the dead have existed in some families. This custom may originated from the agricultural inhabitants in order to protect plants and animals from being affected by the death of human. According to the followers, their grandparents practiced these practices because fear of the trees or animals would die follow the owner. Believers explained that no one believes that trees or animals like dogs and cats will die follow their owners if they do not wear band of mourning, but this action shows sorrow for the deceased who planted the tree and raised the animal. However, we often hear believers tell stories about cat or dog die a few days after the death of its owner, also died according to his master. Thus, there are certain influences of indigenous beliefs that govern the actions of believers in dealing with the dead.

“During a funeral, my niece realized that her grandfather cared for a tree and a dog so she tied a band of mourning for the tree, the dog. In general, I do not think about his issue but I saw people tied a band

of mourning for each tree, animals also wore a band of mourning in many funerals. They need to wear a band of mourning because of the care for them as a child, a grandchild” (An interview with a 51 year-old female, in January 2016).

Do not use the deceased's belongings: The small items were buried with the dead as clothes, jewelry. After the burial, the remaining belongings will be burned even valuable items such as bed. I asked why they buried or burnt the belongings of the dead, no believer would say that they were afraid of bad luck because it was against the Catholic faith, it meant superstitious. Believers also did not think that the dead will harm their relatives. Thus, the given reasons were the hygiene issue. People feel painful if they see the belongings of the dead. However, we often hear believers joking with each other: “if you use the belongings of the dead he/she will claim back”, it is a joke but it perhaps the true thoughts of believers. For believers, though a relative died but he/she remains a member of the family, there is still a connection with the earthly world, all the belongings of the dead in the world will belong them forever so without the consent of the dead, no one dares to use such items.

A male believer strongly opposes the beliefs that practice in the Catholic community, such as avoiding the use of the dead's belongings, a fear of the dead will bring the living with them. It shows that the indigenous beliefs still affect Catholics:

“About ten years ago, my uncle who lived in Bà Rịa died. His clothes were red with dust. I took my new clothes to change for him before the shroud rite. When this rite finished, his body was taken to my house. My relatives there said that “it needs to buy another clothes to change for him, it is impossible to wear your clothes for the dead”. I told them: “He was in a coffin, it is impossible to take him out to change clothes. I will be responsible for my action”. I did not agree with them because I thought that “my uncle never hurts me, grandparents do not harm me”. My wife was also scared, she said that “you have to change clothes for him”. But I still let him wear my clothes, I have kept his clothes until now, I don't have any problem. I

think the relatives are too superstitious, I do not understand why they still practice this taboo”. (An interview with a 39 year-old man, in January 2016).

For male Catholics, their thinking and action is more rational than women. Thus, they do not practice unreasonable activities related to beliefs that have been existed for a long time in the community while women practice all taboo though they are unreasonable, unreliable in order to avoid the bad things to their family. Therefore, they often buried or burned all things related to the dead to avoid the bad things.

The belief in omens related to the dead of the traditional faith also affect the believer. Followers often talk about bad omens or saying of the deceased before death. Dao Duy Anh stated that Confucianism believes in “predictable abnormal phenomena occur in the human life” (thiên nhân cảm ứng), everything that happens in the universe, in a nation, in a clan and for each individual has its own natural causes⁹. Toan Ánh explained that everything has direct or indirect link, so things occur in the heaven and on the earth affect people so they lead to contemplate the phenomenon could predict a good, bad omen. The author also stated that “predictable abnormal phenomena occur in the human life” was the influence of Confucianism but the practice was done by Taoism¹⁰. Therefore, in relation to human destiny, the Vietnamese people think that when human beings are dying, they have signs of nature, abnormal speech and actions. The Vietnamese Catholics always believe that their destiny is decided by God, they follow call of God. Nevertheless, believers always concern about the omens and try to avoid bad luck. There are families of believers when they hear sounding of an owl near their house they feel extremely anxious because it is an omen about the death. Or when the family’s children say something related to the bad luck or the death when a family member is sick or going to go far, it will be dismissed by adults because they think it is a bad omen. It is unpredictable when a person will die, however, they believe in omens so when a family member died, believers always recall the strange words, abnormal actions of this person before the death. From that point of view,

perhaps people want to discover a bad omen to avoid even though they believe that human life is held by God.

“I had heard a bad omen the day when my son went to Saigon. I wondered if it was a bad omen, then I decided to keep him stay at home with me until the next day. I know the death is arranged by God, it can't avoid, it is really inevitable, I am just careful” (An interview with a 51 year-old woman, in January 2016).

In addition, the believers also have some taboos like the other Vietnamese people in funerals such as avoiding a cat to jump over a corpse that make the corpse sit up. After a funeral, elderly people often remind their family's members to set up the fire and to step over the fire in order to banish the cold, the risk of the funeral before entering the house to meet the child or to go to the pigsty because a fear of the cold air, the risk at funeral will make children cry, pigs being ill.

“After visiting a funeral, burning incense for the dead, people have to step over the fire before going to the pigsty because fear of cold air will harm sows and piglets. I am also afraid so I must step over fire before visiting my baby”. (An interview with a 43 year-old women, in January 2016).

The taboo during the funeral showed that although the Vietnamese Catholic believe in the absolute power of God, who controls the universe, the birth and mortal of human beings, they are still influenced by the folk beliefs. To justify the existence of these practices, believers use traditional morality or science to explain, to eliminate absurdity. Although believers consider these taboo as superstitious they practice them because the idea of “having abstinence, having goodness” (có kiêng, có lành) that have existed deeply in the minds of the majority of believers.

2.2 The rituals take place in the the church and cemetery

The tolling of a bell to mark someone's death: When the parish has a death, a person of the church will pull the bell, if the dead is a male, the bell will be toll 7 times, if the dead is a female, the bell will be toll

9 times to inform everyone. If Catholics hear the sound of the bell they know someone died. They will pray for the dead. Some elderly believers explained the difference between the tolling of a bell for men and for women that their ancestors believed a man has three souls (superior vital principles) and seven lesser vital principles; a woman has three souls and nine lesser vital principles. Thus, they practice this custom by tolling a bell for the dead.

According to Dao Duy Anh, the soul (hồn) is the spirit that depends on the human temperament, when a person die, the temperament will fly up; the lesser vital principle (phách, vía) is the spirit which depends on the body a person die, it will dissipate under the ground. A man has three souls and seven lesser vital principles, a woman has three souls and nine lesser vital principles. Distinction between the soul and the lesser vital principle is only found in Taoist books, people just believe that each body has a soul¹¹. The Vietnamese do not distinguish three souls and seven lesser vital principles from three souls and nine lesser vital principles, it perhaps it was standardized through the belief system of Taoism. For the Vietnamese Catholics, the sound of the bell does not show that they believe in the conception of “three souls and seven lesser vital principles from three souls or nine lesser vital principles” but they are influenced by Taoist thought in traditional culture. At present, ringing the bell has become an unwritten regulation, the Catholic Church of Vietnam does not have any idea, Vietnamese Catholics practice the habits according to their ancestors.

Ritual regulations in the church: The funeral rites that take place in churches and cemeteries follow the rules of the Roman Catholic rite. However, some rituals still hold the mark of indigenous culture. In Loc Hoa, beside the funeral of clergy, there are special solemn funerals for the clergy’s parents. The clergy’s parents are called “great grandparents” (ông bà cố), it expresses respect, admiration of the community. Their funerals were attended by many priests, cloisterers, parishioners. The priest who celebrate the ceremony praise them for their work of education good children to serve God. During the procession to the cemetery, the funeral atmosphere is also different

from the other funeral. In particular, the funeral procession includes a large number of priests and religious members that lead to admiration of the community. They are also buried in a special place than others according to parish regulations.

We had an interview with a Vietnamese priest who was doing pastoral work in the United States about the attitude of Western believers to the families of priests. He told us that there is not the term “great grandparents” (ông bà cố) in English, Westerners consider priesthood as other occupations in society and the family of clergy like other families. In term of theology, being a priest is a special vocation of God to him. He also said that many Vietnamese priests are doing pastoral work in the United States, while the number of Westerner cloisterers has gradually decreased for many reasons, for example, they do not have family support as the Vietnamese. Vietnamese followers always urge their children become cloisterers because they do not only carry out their responsibilities to God, but they also honor their parents and grandparents. For believers, becoming a clergy is not only a personal vocation, but it is also the ancestors’ good deeds; if grandparents, parents have a life of virtue their descendants will be chosen by God. Therefore, being parents or relatives of a priest is an honor, it represents the status of the family in the community.

Regulations on burial at the cemetery: Loc Hoa parish regulates that the clergy’s parents, the parish council’s members will be buried in honorable places in the cemetery. The large tombs covered with a roof are the clergy’s parents, the parish council’s members. At present, the parish regulates that all tombs are not different. However, they are still buried in honorable location, they are not buried in rows like other people.

“When coming a cemetery, people will see the graves that are built on either side of the path, they are tombs of people who were considered as having a virtue life or specific contributions. For people who do not contribute to society, to the parish when they die they will be buried in near the fence or at the corner”. (An interview with a 63 year-old man, in August 2015).

In contrast, funerals of the followers who violated the canon law, the law will be not solemn. Those who have committed crimes such as murder, drug addiction or violated the monogamous marriage law will not be allowed to put their coffin in the church during their funeral ceremonies. They also will be buried in separate burial sites, it is not only to show punishment for the dead but it is also deterrent to others.

“Those who have wives but have other wives, when they die they will be buried in separate burial sites. If someone committed crime, his/her coffin won’t allowed put in the church. People think that it helps to decrease crimes, it is also a deterrent to others” (An interview with a 65 year-old man, in October, 2015).

According to the Catholic faith, every death is due to the power of God, when mankind die, they will be returned to God, equality in front of God, regardless of the status or reputation to decide if death is glorious or shame. Meanwhile, the regulation of funeral ritual in the church, the burial place of the Loc Hoa parish has showed that there is a stratification of the status of the dead in the thought of believers. This status is based on the lifestyle and role of the deceased in the community. Believers consider these rituals as an educational measure because they believe that whether they are alive or died, they need reputation. Reputation does not only belong to an individual, but it is also related to descendants. I refer to the folk saying of the Vietnamese: “A Buffalo leaves its skin when it dies, a person leaves his/her reputation when he/she dies”, so the Vietnamese always try to reach “birth in safe, death in peace” (sinh thuận, tử an), to be beloved, to have good evaluation by neighbors. They do not want to die with a bad reputation. The above measures are very effective in restricting the believer’s violation of the canonical and legal regulations. It is sadness, shame of the family that have family’s member died and the coffin must be placed outside the church. When there are ceremonies at the cemetery, families often gather around the graves of relatives to attend the Mass, to pray for the deceased. The graves are buried in the corner, near the fence which are usually intended for offenders, often alone because relatives do not dare to stand there, they are afraid of some one look at them with an unfavorable look.

Descendants are not only happy for their ancestors' goodness, but they also suffer the scandals of their ancestors.

Construction of the grave: according to Phan Ke Binh: "Because of the belief that ancestors and descendants are connected, if the ancestral remains are safe, their descendants are peaceful, if the remains of the ancestors are not safe, their descendants are not peaceful"¹². Therefore, the selection of land to build a grave for the dead is very important to the Vietnamese. The burial will affect the prosperity, success or failure, peace or dissonance of the children as well as the clan. A. Rhodes commented: "The indigenous people are foolish to believe that the wealth, fame and health depends on the land of a grave. In order to leave the dead in peace (they do not come back home harass descendants), people do not build the grave in the mysterious place or far away from the road for a fear of the enemy invades the grave of the parents, parents will complain, punish the children who did not care for their safety"¹³.

Catholics do not consider the date and time for the burial because that is against the canon law and the dead has a grave placed in place in the cemetery. However, the burial, the grave is important to them. For Loc Hoa parishioners, building a decent tomb for the dead is important work after the funeral because they think that the living as well as the dead needs a roof to cover. The views of a collaborator: "I agree with the view that the dead body is ashes, however, from ancient times to present, each person needs a grave, that is a house". (An interview with a 39 year-old male, in January 2016).

The Vietnamese Catholics as well as the other Vietnamese desire their relatives have "a beautiful, peaceful grave" (mộ yên mà đẹp). Thus, building a decent tomb for a relative is the responsibility of the living, if they can not do this, they will feel worried about the dead.

"Every living person must have a house, a dead must have a tomb. When a person marry, he/she needs a house, can not live on the road, the dead needs a grave to rest. People built a grave for their parents. If you can not build a grave for your parents, your conscience will not be tolerated, you will be mocked, your neighbours will say all children can

not build a grave for parents. Therefore, when the funeral finishes we will prepare to build a grave for parents. One child can not do it, five, seven children do together, children can not do, grandchildren will do. If you do not have enough money they can borrow to do, and they will gradually repay” (An interview a 51 year-old female, in January 2016).

According to believers, the life after death is the same as the living one. Having a house in order to have a stable life is the most important thing for the living. The dead also needs a roof to rest. Even the deceased need to have a neighbor to have fun in the afterlife. Thus, after the burial for relatives, believers also do not forget to plug some incense sticks to the surrounding tombs with the intention of causing love between the deceased and his/her neighbors¹⁴.

Most Catholics in Loc Hoa do not believe in feng shui of Taoism to choose burial land for their relatives because they consider the cemetery as “a holy land”. However, some believers believe that “a tomb is disturbed, or insecure” which will affect the family and children. Therefore, a deep buried grave also means stability. A co-worker recounted her family’s intent to exhume a relative’s corpse and rebury the bones in the Loc Hoa. However, her family did not reach consensus because of a fear that reburial will affect the lives, jobs of the whole family. She commented: “Many people think that touching the grave of the ancestors will be unlucky in work, punished, so they rarely touch. Some people believe that if the reburial isn’t taken play right time, good day and good hour, the family will be unlucky, so it is rare to rebury, it must ask an advice of the priest and pray”. (An interview with 25 year-old female, in November 2015).

Many believers believe that if a dead person has a stable resting place, their children will have a peaceful life, and if the burial has a problem it will affect the livings. A 63 year-old woman, in an in-depth interview in August 2015, told us her family’s story of the re-burial. Many members of her family suddenly suffered from strange diseases, they were taken to hospital but no disease detected. A Catholic clergy accidentally met her house and said that her grandmother was buried above a child’s grave so the child disagreed, harassed her family. “If

you want your family members being healthy, you have to re-bury the child or your grandmother elsewhere”. She came to the person who had the authority to decide the burial in the cemetery, told her family’s story, cried and asked for re-burial, but this person said that it was superstitious, but it is not absolute prohibition. Although many family’s members protested, she hired laborers to to exhume her grandmother’s grave, after burning incense to tell her purpose, the remains of the child only was a little soil taken up to bring to another buried place. She intended to bring the child’s remains to the parish church to pray but a fear of being considered as a superstitious person she decided take it to the Buddhist temple. She said that her family members were no longer sick and she did not think her job was wrong. The re-burial is not done by every believer because the fear of being superstitious. In general, the believer always come the priest to ask for an orphaned soul, pray for this soul being reposed without disturbing the family. When performing the re-burial, believers have explained their actions are not superstitious but they believe that the dead are sacred, they need resting places, if their burial places are violated, they will cause disasters for living people to express dissatisfaction.

Demand ceremony for the dead soul in the church: After the funeral, parishioners often ask for church services, some families demande a Mass in the monastery to pray for the deceased. Believers do not only demand periodic ceremonies, but they also request ceremonies for a longtime by contributing, helping religious organizations, orders and churches. Believers will receive a certificate of their contributions for Catholicism. These contributions is one of the ways that believers “hoard up treasure” to enter the kingdom of heaven. Believers will be prayed by the community through the Mass even they are living as well as they died. Religious associations, orders always pray for benefactors. Therefore, if the deceased does not have certificate of contributions, families’ members will use the remaining offerings after the funeral or each member donates a sum of money to help Catholicism with the name of the dead in order to be prayed by the community.

3. Conclusion

The funeral ceremonies of Catholics show that the rituals take place in the churches or at the cemeteries followed the Roman Catholic ritual but they still contain the imprint of indigenous culture such as *ringing the melancholy bell, regulations of funeral rites in the church and burial grounds, praying for the soul of the dead*. The rituals take place in the family space strongly influenced by folk beliefs, the concept of filial piety of the Vietnamese tradition. These beliefs are manifested by the taboo practiced by believer in relation to the dead to ensure that the livings being peaceful after the death of their family member. Despite the taboo is contrary to doctrine, believers still practice because of their mentality “having abstinence, having goodness”. The filial piety perceptions of Vietnamese culture are always reflected in the thinking and behavior of believers when performing rituals, it shows responsibility towards the deceased, such as *the funeral rite, mourning, crying, building a tomb, praying*.

The funeral shows the coexistence of two value systems: Catholic culture and traditional Vietnamese culture through the rituals of believers. This feature demonstrates the Church’s activeness in combining Catholic rites with indigenous rituals as well as the impact of indigenous culture on Catholic rituals. As a cultural subject, Vietnamese Catholics actively combine Catholic rituals with traditional rituals, create funeral rituals according to Catholic norm but they still express indigenous consciousness. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Department of Anthropology (2013), *General Anthropology* (Vietnamese), Vietnam National University Pub., Ho Chi Minh City: 41
- 2 Nguyễn Đức Lộc (2015), *Social configuration of Northern Catholic Community Migrated to the South - from the Community to the Individual Dimension* (Vietnamese), Vietnam National University Pub., Ho Chi Minh City: 200.
- 3 The “Helping the Dying” Boards (ban giúp kẻ liệt) consists of members who will carry out the ritual of praying for the dying man.
- 4 Hữu Ngọc (chief author, 1995), *Dictionary of Vietnamese Traditional Culture* (Vietnamese), World Pub., Hanoi: 328.
- 5 Lộc Hòa parish (2015), *The Anointing of the Sick and Burial Rites* (Vietnamese), internal circulation.

- 6 Every child receives a godfather or a godmother according to the sex of the child to support the baby while performing baptism after giving birth for about a month at the church. Godparents do not only play a role in the Catholic ritual but they are responsible for the child throughout his/her life. They have the responsibility to uphold the child's faith, to be present in the ceremony associated with the child's growth in faith, to help the child in his/her life, often to be witnesses in the child's marriage. In contrast, this child behaves towards his/her godparents like his/her parents, must visit them on holidays, has to mourn.
- 7 Phan Kế Bính (2014), *Vietnamese Custom* (Vietnamese), Hồng Đức Pub., Hanoi: 29.
- 8 Phan Kế Bính (2014), *ibid*: 28.
- 9 Đào Duy Anh (2014), *Vietnamese Cultural History* (Vietnamese), World Pub., Hanoi: 201.
- 10 Toan Ánh (1968), *Vietnamese Old Belief* (Nếp cũ tín ngưỡng Việt Nam, quyển hạ), Nam Chi Tùng Thư, Saigon: 163.
- 11 Đào Duy Anh (2014), *ibid*: 189.
- 12 Phan Kế Bính (2014), *ibid*: 31.
- 13 Alexandre de Rhodes (1994b), *A History of Tonkin Kingdom (Lịch sử vương quốc Đàng Ngoài.)*, Trans.: Hồng Nhuệ, Ho Chi Minh City Catholics Solidarity Committee: 52.
- 14 The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (2003), *Cultural integration experience of Christian life in Vietnam* (Vietnamese), internal circulation: 177.

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4. Lộc Hòa parish (2015), *The Anointing of the Sick and Burial Rites*, internal circulation.
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6. Department of Anthropology (2013), *General Anthropology*, Vietnam National University Pub., Ho Chi Minh City.
7. Nguyễn Đức Lộc (2015), *Social Configuration of Northern Vietnam Catholic Community Migrated to Southern Vietnam - from the Community to the Individual Dimension*, Vietnam National University Pub., Ho Chi Minh City.
8. Hữu Ngọc (chief author, 1995), *Dictionary of Vietnamese Traditional Culture*, World Pub., Hanoi.
9. Alexandre de Rhodes (1994), *A History of Tonkin Kingdom*, Translator: Hồng Nhuệ, Ho Chi Minh City Catholics Solidary Committee.