

“EATING BUFFALO” FESTIVAL AND ITS RELIGIOUS MEANING WITHIN THE M’NONG COMMUNITY

***Abstract:** Mnong people have many rituals. In my opinion, the “stabbing buffalo” and “planting a bombax ceiba tree” festivals are remarkable. However, these two festivals have the same nature, it is the sacrifice to pray for a peaceful and happy life. In this article, the author indicates the “eating buffalo” festival in Mnong Nong and Mnong Preh groups, the meaning of this belief. Besides, the author also introduces the other forms of magic and beliefs in the contemporary life of the Mnong community such as amulets, stone worship, reincarnation.*

***Keywords:** “Eating buffalo”; festival; Mnong; meaning.*

1. “Eating buffalo” festival

The Mnong calls the “stabbing buffalo” festival “eating buffalo” (sa rpu). This festival is small or large scale depending on the family’s ability. Generally, rich families are able to hold a “stabbing buffalo” ceremony as well as a ceremony to plant planting Bombax ceiba tree in a village.

One month before the buffalo-stabbing festival, the householder asked someone to mill rice, get firewood, clean the house, the barn of cows, pigs, chickens, buffalo. If there is no jar (rlung), they will borrow it.

Housecleaning: sleeping places, places for cookers, pots, bowls, gongs, etc. are cleaned. Especially, tubes to drink wine are carefully cleaned, tested.

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Building a hut and a stake to tie the buffalo: a hut about 5-6 m² was built. A bombax ceiba tree (*blang*) is planted on the right side of the hut, a bamboo tree is planted on the left, a wooden phoenix is hung on top of the bamboo. Each bamboo knuckle is punched with a hole and a young palm leaf is put on it. A large pile is buried near the hut to tie the buffalo. There is a fence between the hut and the place where the buffalo is tied, preventing the buffalo from breaking the rope, causing danger to humans.

Before the buffalo-stabbing ceremony, the homeowner performs a ritual for musical instruments (*rlet*)¹. When worshipping, people smear chicken blood mix alcohol on the musical instruments, they hope that this musical instrument's god will dispel ghosts, demons, and protect family and community. The *rlet* ritual only sacrifices a small pig, a jar of wine. The householder and the attendees discuss and arrange the works of the buffalo-stabbing ceremony when they are eating and drinking.

Eight days before the "eating buffalo" festival, the host lets people in charge of inviting relatives to attend. The host has a feast for them with pork and a jar of wine. This ceremony is called the acceptance ceremony. Then, the invited families will decide to invite more guests. Before participating in the ceremony, the elderly tells the children to keep out of mischief, and young people do not do nefarious activities to bother the elderly.

All preparations have been completed, the host who is invited leads everyone to come to the village of the homeowner who holds a buffalo-stabbing ceremony. The person who took the lead walking and praying to the God of the Forest, the God of the Mountain, and the God of the River and invite them to join the "eating buffalo" ritual. In general, if they see signs such as crows flying from right to left, gibbons singing, deer, etc., on the way, they will return home (because signs show gods telling them not to go). However, they must go to the buffalo-stabbing festival despite having a bad omen because this festival is not always organized. If there is a bad omen,

the leader reports it to the host to worship for the whole group, to erase all bad omen that they have met along the road.

When nearly arriving at the village of the buffalo-stabbing ceremony, the group of people who attend the "eating buffalo" festival come to a stream, have a rest, and eat rice. Then, everyone takes a bath in the stream. They get the dress in new clothes, brass bracelets, and silver necklaces. Men also put feathers of birds and chicken into their bun. The elderly tells the children to keep out of mischief, young people do not have an illicit relationship between men and women. All members have to promise to fulfill this advice.

When entering the village, the attenders blow the blowing horn to inform the owner that they are arriving. They go a line to enter the village. Young people with *đồng la* take the lead, followed by healthy young men holding *yeh* (a kind of weapon), old men holding javelins, and those who carry food to help the owner's buffalo-stabbing ceremony, and finally elderly and children.

The festival owner also blows the blowing horn to respond to the attenders. At this time, the sound of the blowing horn, *đồng la* along with the happy howl of both sides. When the guests are coming in, the host team goes out. The two sides go around, then they merge into a circle. The girls are in the inner circle to play *đồng la*, and the boys on the outside circle holding weapons. And the others sit down to drink and smoke. The festival owner asks the guests about the bad omen in order to worship before entering the house. There are people standing at the door, splashing water over each guest. Each guest drink "stem liquor" (*rượu cần*). When the guests are in the house, everyone cheer, stomp their feet for a while. The jars of wine have been filled with water and plugged tubes. While the guests having a rest and drinking wine, the host serves the meal.

Many leaves of banana spread out along the length of the house. Homeowners put rice on banana leaves, sticky rice is above,

normal rice is under sticky rice. The sticky rice is also molded into turtles and lizards. This meal does not need dishes, everyone eats by hands, and soup is stored in bamboo tubes.

In turn, the guests take out the tubes of sticky rice, bird meat, venison, white fish, grilled catfish, etc. to invite the host. After eating, they drink wine and pray to God of Forest, God of Mountain, God of Stream, God of River, God of Rice, God of Corn, invite these gods come to drink wine and bless people to joy the feast.

At night, the atmosphere is bustling and exciting: many fires are burned on the yard, on the buffalo-stabbing area. The sound of the blowing horn, *đông la*, and *rlet* ring out. A group of people plays *đông la* going around the house, around the place where the buffalo is tied. Some other people go to the hut to singing or take turns playing gong and *đông la* until morning.

In the early morning, the host comes to the stake to tie the buffalo, bring a small jar of wine to the hut, and invite guests to drink. After drinking, the leader of the guests prepares to stab the buffalo. At this moment, the atmosphere is so exciting: people carry water from the stream; take the leaves into jars, stab the buffalo, and scream in the sound of gongs. First, the person who stabs the buffalo cuts off the hind legs, then use a spear to stab the armpits. For a good stabber, a stab can kill the buffalo.

A mystery-man takes the buffalo blood mixed with the wine, spreads it the stake to tie the buffalo, and prays to the gods. After worshipping, people cut buffalo, cook, eat until early the next day.

At noon on the third day, the owner of the ceremony cooks rice to feast guests. This meal is also prepared as the first meal: rice on banana leaves, food in bamboo tubes, water pots available for guests to wash their hands, etc. That night, most adults are tired, they go to sleep after eating and drinking. Young people confide, date, some of them become husband and wife.

On the morning of the fourth day, the host invites guests to farewell drinks. This is a chance for the host and the guest to say all the questions over the past few days. If the question is not mentioned at the moment, everything is fine, they don't mention any more. When the guests leaving, both sides blew the horns and play the gongs to say goodbye to each other.

The buffalo-stabbing festival is the custom of the M'ngong people. After months of hard work, the buffalo stabbing festival is an opportunity for people living far apart to have a chance to meet each other. It is a great festival for the community. However, organizing this festival is very expensive. Currently, people rarely organize buffalo- stabbing festivals.

2. Festival of planting a bombax ceiba tree

According to custom, M'ngong people plant a bombax ceiba tree for each "eating buffalo" festival. This kind of tree is not only a symbol of vitality, luck, happiness, it also a sign to recognize their old village.

Planting a bombax ceiba tree festival (*Tăm blang mprang bon*) is held in a plot of land in front of the village.

The first morning of the festival, villagers focus on perfecting the bamboo tree (*cây nêu*) such as cutting, coloring to the head of the wooden (or cotton) phoenix, digging holes to plant the bombax ceiba, burying buffalo stakes, prepare offerings, meals, welcome guests, set musical instruments.

Late in the afternoon, the work of building the bamboo tree and burying buffalo stakes is started. Another group slaughter pigs, then burn them on fire. The important place of the festival is the place of the bamboo tree. When the tree is planted, the mystery-man respectfully pray the gods to permit the villagers perform a "buffalo-eating" ceremony, bless people to avoid risks, accidents, diseases and have good things in the life.

Six people play the gongs going around the bamboo tree in a direction from left to right. A person stands in front of the tree to blow the blowing horn. At this time, the sound of gongs and the blowing horn makes the festival atmosphere jubilant and solemn. At sunset, four healthy people holding ropes tie the sacrificial buffalo to the stake. Then, many fires are lit up. people drink, talk and confide in all night.

The next morning, the buffalo-stabbing ceremony officially begins. Almost people gather at the time. The mystery-man comes to the jar of wine and takes wine to pour the bamboo tree. Then, he takes a little wine and sprays it on the offerings in order to invite the god to eat and drink along with the villagers. Next, the mystery-man takes a tube of wine (wine contained in a bamboo tube) and a handful of grass and give it to a woman who is responsible for “crying buffalo” (*Nhim rpu*). This woman comes to the buffalo to feed it, then holds a tube of wine and pours it lightly on the animal’s head, singing and crying:

My buffalo, I love you so much

The stake was built

You eat grass leaves for the last time

... I mourn you, buffalo!

Although the folk song of M’nung people is not as passionate as the Rade’s folk song, the song “crying buffalo” is mournful. However, it is painful without tragic because buffalo death helps human peace and happiness.

The beginning of the buffalo-stabbing ceremony, the loud sound of gongs and the blowing horn hustles and urges people. Two people who stab buffalo holds a knife and sharp spear. A person comes to behind the buffalo, cuts hind legs of the animal. The buffalo falls down, the other person stabs the spear through the animal’s heart². The mystery-man hurriedly comes to the buffalo, one hand holds the grass to the buffalo’s mouth, the other hand

pours wine into its head and pray to the god forgive the mistakes of the villagers during the festival. The first action of the mystery-man is to thank for its sacrifice. This sacrifice is for the peace and longevity of the villagers.

After the action of this mystery-man, the buffalo meat is split to all villagers, the rest is served the festival participants.

It can be said that the buffalo-stabbing festival of Mnong people and some other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands is a barbaric act from viewpoint of human beings in contemporary society. For the Mnong, it is not right. The Mnong Nong group call "eating buffalo" is *sa rpu*, the Mnong Preh call "planting the bombax ceiba tree" is *tăm blang* to refer to the above festival, they do not call it a buffalo-stabbing festival. Moreover, the "buffalo-eating" festival is a religious belief in animal sacrifice to pray for a peaceful and happy human life.

3. Magic forms and beliefs

The magic forms of the Mnong are numerous. Their meanings are large, very difficult to penetrate and understand for people outside the ethnic group. In general, the M'ngong people often use mystic experiences. They mainly believe in feelings of spirituality. Thus, they have cautious, careful behaviours toward the world around them. I will present some of the magic forms of this ethnic group, analyze and decode them.

3.1. Charms

The Mnong believe that besides the gods, there is an invisible force with tremendous power called *hồn ngải* (*huyền gũn*). *Hồn ngải* exists in a kind of plant similar to turmeric, it is called *củ ngải*. It has the ability to control others, to spread diseases, and death to others according to its owner's discretion. Thus, when encountering a disaster, Mnong people often think that someone had used charms to harm him. Their anxiety, fear, scare are caused by charms.

Resentment, killing each other is caused by charms. In the past, Mnong people planted a god tree called *ngái thân (tấm gun doih)* to protect the village, residents, and animals when establishing a village on new land. According to the Mnong, when planting this tree, the bad guy and the evil god looked into the village only to see darkness. In the epic of Mnong people, *hòn ngái* (soul of this tree) incarnated into two girls named *Vah* and *Vãnh*. *Ngái* was used by human beings and divine to fulfill their will. For example, the goddess *Lêt* used *Ngái* to make *Tiêng* village had deep sleep so the man named *Lieng* entered the village owner's house to get the harp of god³.

Charms are a belief embedded in the minds of the Mnong through generations. Charms still lead to their scare.

3.2. *Ma lai*

Beside charms (*bùa ngái*), they think that there are *ma lai (chiak)*. According to the Mnông, *ma lai* is a kind of demon with human form. *Ma Lai* eats corpses. A person is suspected of being a *ma lai* may be killed by the community or has to flee. When coming to a new place, this person absolutely keeps secrets the reason why he/she has to come there. If the secrets are revealed, it is very difficult for the person to live with the new community. It may lead to misunderstanding⁴.

3.3. *Worship of the gods of white rock, blue rock, and rock shaped the bird vik*

According to the Mnong, gods of rock have many different types, colors, and shapes. There are three main gods of rock:

Mlar is a piece of white rock, as big as the tip of the big toe, with the following shapes: round, flat, pointed, cylindrical.

Mlũm is a piece of green rock, as big as a wrist. This type is mainly round, flat, rarely pointed, cylindrical.

Sung vik a piece of rock shaped like an ax blade or a hammered blade. Mnong people call that piece of rock is *sung vik*. The *vik* birds only look for food at night, they sleep during the day. On the

night of March, the *vik* birds sing on the treetops. The Mnong think that that the *vik* birds cut trees for cultivation. Therefore, anyone who meets *Sung vik* is lucky, he works in the fields and he will harvest a lot of rice, the god of Rice is always in his house.

When seeing the three types of stones, Mnong people take them home for seven days. If the person who finds the piece of rock sees a girl or boy coming from somewhere asking to live with him/her in dreams, it is a good god. If he/she has no such dream, it is not a magic stone, he/she must take the stone out of the house. Otherwise, there will be risks. If the person who finds the piece of rock sees a man or a woman cursing him/her, it is an evil god. In this a case, they have to put the "evil god" into the pot, pour the water, cover the top of the pot, and then boil it. The "evil god" will die and be unable to harm humans.

3.4. Spirits and reincarnation

The groups of M'ngong people in the southwest of Dak Nong province believe that each person has two souls: a soul of buffalo (*huêng rbǔ*) and a soul of spider (*huêng vil*). In which, the buffalo soul is the main soul, the spider soul is the secondary soul. If the secondary soul dies, humans get sick. If the buffalo soul dies, humans will die⁵. The souls go away from the body when the owner sleeps, so people have a dream. According to this concept, the souls do not depend on the human body, they can exist independently for a certain period of time. The soul lasts forever through reincarnation. It is also a common concept, they think that the soul can temporarily or permanently leave the human body.

When people die, their souls will leave the body to go to the *bon Phan*⁶ (village of the dead). The buffalo soul or spider soul is possible to return to the earth to reincarnate (*bun*), the soul of god (*huêng brah*) is impossible to return to the earth to reincarnate⁷. Reincarnation is a phenomenon that still causes the Mnong fear⁸.

4. Symbols

For Mnong people, the symbol is mainly concentrated on the bamboo tree (*cây nêu*) erected during the “buffalo-eating” festival (*sa rpu*). In general, the tree has 3 floors:

1) The top floor is called *ntâng Nar* (the residence of the Sun). The white, red, and black threads are lined there. They represent the sun’s rays of light shining down on the Earth. There is also a picture of a *kring* bird⁹ (a phoenix made of cotton or the wood of a bombax ceiba tree). The phoenix is a symbol of power to keep sparrows, wild beasts, and other insects from destroying crops.

2) The middle floor is called *gre rwah* made of bamboo. This is the place where the gods live.

3) The bottom floor called *mpop* is where placed a jar of water, tubes of wine. This floor is made to resemble a cage called *nong*. There is has a small pot of rice, a beeswax lamp, and chicken eggs. These offerings will be offered to the gods by the mystery-man on behalf of the community.

Many objects, images, taboos in the ritual, the Mnong festival is related to the sacred symbol in their spiritual life. During the time of praying for rain, Mnong people are not allowed to cook the meat of *put* birds with *biăp* vegetables because it is related to the banyan tree¹⁰, the magic tree.

The symbols in the rituals and festivals of Mnong people show their conception of the universe, beliefs, and desires. the bamboo tree (*cây nêu*) reflects the concept of a three-layer world; *kring* (phoenix) in the upper part of the tree is considered as a symbol of a “soldier” who protects crops from birds, insects. The *blang* tree (banyan tree) symbolizes luck, peace, happiness. According to the Mnong, the god of *Blang* always protects and helps people. Where there is *blang*, devils do not dare to come. This is a divine tree that protects the community’s life.

The symbol in the rituals, festivals of the Mnong is often associated with dreams. Dreams in Mnong's mind are true. Therefore, people act according to their dreams to achieve their goals.

5. Characteristics of the Mnong's beliefs, religious symbols and conclusion

1. Firstly, beliefs, religious symbols in the Mnong's mind is not "mythical illusion", it is a true belief. This belief has both positive and negative aspects (it sometimes lacks humanity).

2. Many practical actions of humans are associated with beliefs and sacred symbols, followed by taboos. For example, if there is a pregnant woman giving birth within 4 days, a dog gives birth 3 puppies, a pig lays without a nest, chickens lay eggs at night or someone goes through the "village of god" (the forest where people, cattle and other animals are not allowed to come in), people will be bitten by a snake, a tiger. When selecting land for cultivation, it is forbidden to destroy watershed forests, old-growth forests, to cut old big trees, especially divine trees such as *Jri* (the banyan tree). If people violate these regulations, they offense to a god, they will be punished by the gods, they will be sick or even die.

3. The symbol of the Mnong is often associated with a dream. The dream in Mnong's mind is considered as true images of life. Therefore, people act to achieve the goodness that dreams bring.

The meaning of belief, symbols is always the "iceberg" of ethnic cultural life, decoding beliefs, religious symbols in Mnong's culture help us to understand the essence of this culture However, this is still a challenging gap for researchers. /.

Notes:

- 1 *Rlet*, a musical instrument consisting of a tube of bamboo with three holes put into the peel of a dried gourd. This is a sacred musical instrument, only used in a great ceremony.
- 2 The above festival is recorded in the M'ông Preh community. I have used Le Khắc Ghi's material in his Ph.D. thesis on Culture: "Traditional festivals of the M'ông Preh, Krông Nô District, Đắk Lắk province in contemporary society in 2018".
- 3 *Sử thi thần thoại M'ông/ Epic mythology of the Mnong* (Đỗ Hồng Kỳ, Điều Kâu Collected and translated (2nd edition), Nxb. Văn hóa dân tộc, Hà Nội, p. 731, 732.
- 4 It is not long ago, two orphan sisters have been suspected to be *ma lai* by the village owner of Bu Nur (in Mondulkiri province, Kingdom of Cambodia), so they planned to exchange them for cattle. The orphan sisters escaped when they heard the news. They were adopted by the village owner Bu Nung (Quang Truc commune, Tuy Duc district, Dak Nong province). At the same time, he took young men to start a fight with the Bu Nur villagers for suspecting the two orphaned sisters. Then, there were many sick people in Bu Nung village, the village owner thought the two sisters were real *ma lai*, so they killed them. (According to Mr. Piong Mplan in Village 10, Dak Rung Commune, Dak Nong District, Dak Nong Province. This man is a great-grandson of Bu Nung village owner.)
- 5 According to them, the buffalo soul is managed by Mrs. Ur Yông Nđăk (where the god Ndrĩ, Ndrě lies). *Chiak (ma lai)* want to eat the dead body, they have to inform this woman. When Mrs. Ur Yông Nđăk agreed that she takes the buffalo soul away, *Chiak* would have the opportunity to eat the cadaver. At night, people in the village dream that a buffalo dies and someone will die in the morning or a few days later.
- 6 The Mnong Preh in Krong Kno District said that in order to arrive Phan, a soul will pass through six "doors" of the gods: Ting - Drô - Kra - Kră (the other god's name have not been yet recorded) and finally Brôi and Brai gods. If a soul dies six times without turning into fog, it is possible to return to earth to reincarnate. If a soul comes to the sixth "door" and turns into mist perched on the grass, at dawn the wind blows to the ground, then the soul returns to Brôi, Brai gods. When the soul has come to Brôi, Brai, it is not allowed to return to earth.
- 7 When people die (normal death such as elderly, sickness), the buffalo soul goes to Phan. Then, it returns to earth to reincarnate into the body of a child in the family. For the sudden death, the soul is eaten by the monster Briăng and exiled to Phăt forest in Heaven. Sometimes the souls of the dead are not allowed to go to Vê, Vom, Dê, Dơm to live in Phan

village, to return to the village of the living, it becomes a devil wandering the bushes.

8 Điều Kâu, a translator of the Mngong's Epic, before his death, talked with his daughter about his reincarnation. The following is the reincarnation of Điều Kâu through the words of Thi Mai, his daughter:

9 In the early morning before my dad's death for a week, he said "Are you free today, I need to talk to you". I said I was free. Dad told me to enter his room (a brick house in 2004 was built by money for translating the epic) and closed the door. My father said: I can not pass my illness. I handed over *Ot Ndrong* translation documents to you and he also handed me folk songs, proverbs, genealogies, Bu Nong dictionary (Mngong – Vietnamese dictionary).

Finally, my dad said: Do you give birth to another child? I will die so I am looking for a family to reincarnate. I don't want to stay with another family because I can only hold a pen, I can't work in the fields. You try to give birth to a child, I will reincarnate, I can leave without a doubt. I have been looking for a family to reincarnate for over a month but I did not like any. I promise to do what my father said. Seven days later, at night at the Đắk Sông district hospital, I dreamed that my father and son were sitting in my house in Đắk Ndrung. My father told my daughter to get close to him. He whispered something and put his hand on his granddaughter's head. I woke up, ran into my father's bed. He could not say anything. Đắk Sông hospital transfer my father to the provincial hospital. A day later, the provincial hospital sent my father home. He held his children's hand, then stopped breathing.

Seven months later, from the day my father asked for reincarnation, I gave birth to a son. When my son was born, I picked him up to his grandfather's belongings and told him to grow up quickly to use these mementos.

(The aforementioned content is copied from Thi Mai's handwritten version).

Kring is just a legendary bird that exists in spiritual culture, in the legend, the epic of the Mngong. In their imagination, it was the animal that was both a bird and a snake. Its venom is very poisonous. In the epic *Ot Ndrong*, the character Lêng- the hero of the battle – "used the venom of the phoenix snake" to his sword (see:

Con diều lá cướp Bing con gri, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội, 2009, p. 1240).

10 In 1998, during the survey in Quang Truc commune, Tuy Duc district, Đắk Nông province (Đắk Rlấp district, Dak Lak province at that time), I heard a lot about the banyan tree near Đắk Ke stream. This banyan tree is very large, with luxuriant branches and leaves, shading a large area. According

to the statement of Điều Byăt, during the French period, a French owner wanted to expand the area of growing tea, so he hired the Kinh to cut banyan trees. The cutting of the banyan tree failed, as many Kinh people died. This incident may be random. However, it can be said that in Mnong's mind, the banyan tree has its divine function. Returning to the above relation, birds called *put* live in groups on the banyan branches, when the fruit is ripe, they will eat these fruit. Mnong people believe that this bird is favored and sponsored by the god of the banyan tree, so they have the taboo as mentioned above.

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