

PRESERVING AND BRINGING INTO PLAY THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: SOME ISSUES

NGÔ ĐỨC THỊNH^()*

I. Tây Nguyên (Central Highlands) is the most diverse and unique folklore region in Vietnam

There have been scientific works that confirm Tây Nguyên as one of the seven large cultural regions of Vietnam (1). There are also many works from inside and outside the country sketching pictures of Tây Nguyên's diverse cultures (2- 9). Therefore, in this article, I cannot and also do not need to go deep into specific aspects of Tây Nguyên culture, I would just like to mention a number of basic characteristics of traditional culture of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên.

Firstly, Tây Nguyên of the distant past and of today is the meeting place of groups of inhabitants and the cultural exchange place of various ethnic groups. Thus, the groups of Tây Nguyên and the various aspects of Tây Nguyên culture make a colorful carpet.

The first known meeting of different groups took place in the early Metal Age and was between a group speaking the Mon-Khmer language and a group from the coastal regions and islands speaking

the Austronesian language. The meeting created a class of indigenous inhabitants whose children have formed about 20 groups, including Bana, Xedang, Mjong, Ma, Stieng, Hre, Bo Rau, Gie Trieng, (Mon-Khmer) and Ede, Giarai, Raglai, Churu (Austronesian language).

Afterward, in different periods of history, Tây Nguyên received groups of people from other regions of the country, including Viet people, the ethnic people in the Center (Bru-Van Kieu) and Tay, Thai, Nung, Muong, Hmong and Dao from the northern mountainous region in recent decades. The arrival of these groups made Tây Nguyên the region with the most complicated and largest component of ethnic people in Vietnam today with more than 40 ethnic groups, of which about 20 groups are indigenous inhabitants. Significantly, these groups live together in every village, and even within individual families, so the cultural exchange and

^{*} Pro., Dr., Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.

influence among the groups is continually strengthened.

Secondly, Tây Nguyên is a region of ancient cultures. The traces of human beings' presence date back to the Neolithic Age. Recent archeological discoveries in Lung Leng (Kon Tum) and Cát Tiên (Lâm Đồng) confirm Tây Nguyên as a region with a sophisticated ancient culture, equivalent in standard to those of the Đông Sơn culture in the North, Sa Huỳnh culture in the Center and Đồng Nai culture in the South during the same period. With this evidence, we must discard the old view of Tây Nguyên as a "primitive" or "backward" region.

In ancient times, Tây Nguyên was the buffer zone between the Angkor Kingdom in the west and the Champa Kingdom in the east and so could not avoid being affected by events in these countries. Interestingly, Tây Nguyên seems to be the only area in the Southeast Asia, which is not influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures. Thus, the traditional culture of Tây Nguyên is considered an original cultural treasure of Southeast Asia, a relic of the time before the process of "Indianization" and "Chinaization".

Thirdly, Tây Nguyên culture, in terms of essence, is a "culture of forest" and "culture of vegetation". In terms of development standard, it retains a pre-state, pre-class culture of orally transmitted folklore. In terms of scale, it is a traditional village culture, thus, the culture is rarely represented in forms of objects with large scale and durability, but

mainly from small scale wood and bamboo objects. It does have some very large cultural products but these are intangible creations, such as epics and gong music. For example, the epics of M'Nong and Xedang are voluminous works with tens of thousands of pages; local artists memorize the works and sing them continuously over hundreds of hours.

Fourthly, Tây Nguyên people have philosophies of reality and mystery. The ideas about reality show in the way people explain everything according to natural phenomena and the world of animals and vegetations around them. In other words, they tend to take natural phenomena as frame of reference for human beings. Their ideas about mystery are evident in the way people think that all natural phenomena have spirit, and the world around them is a material one with spirit, not an inanimate object. Human beings are components of nature, equal and closely connected to all aspects of the natural world. These beliefs are an important element in the deep humanity of Tây Nguyên culture.

The language of Tây Nguyên people, rich in images and rhyme, is an intermediary form between daily language and literary language. The characteristics of thinking and the form of language of Tây Nguyên people create unique cultural forms.

Fifthly, Tây Nguyên contains rich and massive treasures of folklore, that is, orally transmitted literature of many genres. The most typical genre is epics with hundreds of works performed in the

activities of the community. The frequent, widespread performances create a kind of living epic, making Tây Nguyên unique in Vietnam and precious and rare in the world.

There is also the music of the gongs, which were preceded by ancient stone musical instruments and remain one of the only permanent possessions of the Tây Nguyên people.

The communities also have an unwritten code of law which contains knowledge of community management and the cultural characteristics of every ethnic group. It includes knowledge of the architecture of private homes and public houses (Rong houses, Gol houses, long houses, etc.), the sculpture of statues at charnel-houses and the design of original decorations which show erstwhile cultural relationships with the islands in Southeast Asia and Pacific.

There is also a sophisticated system of beliefs, customs, and festivals with characters from nature and the human world, which help bind people close to others in their community and ensure a harmonious relationship with nature. (1)

II. The trends of cultural changes in Tây Nguyên of today

As above-mentioned, historically Tây Nguyên was not influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures. However, this does not mean that Tây Nguyên was a completely isolated area. Apart from the relations with the Cambodian and Champa Kingdoms in the period before and after the first millennium AD, the leaders of Tây Nguyên also had relations with feudal

Đại Việt (Great Việt) country during the Lý and Trần dynasties (12th -13th centuries) according to historical documents. This relationship became more regular from the time of the Nguyen dynasty (19th century).

French colonials who invaded and dominated the Indochinese countries, drew Tây Nguyên into the orbit of Western colonialism. The century of resistance wars and attempts to liberate the country from French colonials and American imperialists really cemented Tây Nguyên within the country of Vietnam. After the unification of the country in 1975, Tây Nguyên contributed to building and developing the country during the decades of industrialization and modernization.

In this political and social context, especially in recent decades, the culture of ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên has changed rapidly according to various trends. In our opinion, there are four main trends in cultural change of the ethnic people in Tây Nguyên.

1. Cultural exchanges and influences

This is one of the important agents of the cultural changes of ethnic groups in Vietnam in general and in Tây Nguyên in particular today. However, unlike all the former historical periods, the scale and intensity of cultural exchanges and influences have been larger and stronger. These exchanges and influences occur among ethnic groups in a region, between Kinh people and ethnic people in Tây Nguyên and between Tây Nguyên, urban

areas and the rest of the world. The exchanges are often fast and intense, which sometimes creates a sense of pressure on the local peoples, making them feel that changes are being imposed on them and making the changes difficult to “digest”. The natural mechanism of the process of introducing new cultural elements to ethnic groups is: introduction, mixture, selection, re-creation and association; but the rapid pace of change today has upset and shortened this process.

The rate of change is due to the development of transport and information networks which shorten physical distances and remove communication barriers among and between groups. The process of redistributing and resettling the population in Tây Nguyên in the last 50 years, especially from 1975 until now, broke up the traditional territories of ethnic groups and created a new residential form with a combination of groups. As Kinh people continue to make up a higher and higher proportion of the total population, the process of cultural exchanges and influences with the rest of Vietnam is intensified.

The cultural exchanges and influences among the ethnic groups within Tây Nguyên and with outside groups have had multi-faceted impacts, both positive and negative. First, these exchanges and influences have contributed to speeding up the process of rapprochement among ethnic groups, thereby encouraging traditional cultural changes amongst groups. This has allowed aspects of

culture including spoken language, text, education, science, clothing, housing, cultural activities and entertainment to be adopted and enjoyed by other groups.

However, the strength and enormity of exchanges and influences - the clash between the new things and the old ones, between modernity and tradition - have created cultural dizziness. High development levels and intense external pressures deny the subjects receiving new cultural influences the conditions and time to select, acquire, recreate and associate. Consequently, the old and traditional things and inner life of some local peoples have been overwhelmed. Some people have forgotten, refused or turned their back on the traditional ways. Meanwhile, the new things, which have not been carefully selected, massively dominate the cultural life of the ethnic groups.

2. Discontinuation between tradition and modernity in the process of cultural renewal of ethnic groups.

This occurs when the traditional cultural renewal does not take place naturally. There is no inheritance and development, no acceptance and rejection. It is a chaotic combination of the new things and the old ones, which does not create organic association between them. The old things are lost while the new ones have not yet formed, creating a gap in cultural life. Consequently, the cultural life of some people has weakened and become poor. Traditions, cultural values and heritages have been lost rapidly, as people denied and turned their back on the old ways. In

terms of social relations, a number of moral standards and behaviors of the traditional society were gradually lost and are now obsolete. However, the moral standards and behaviors of the new society have not yet taken root, making moral values in social relations shaky and easily disrupted.

This is a widespread trend of cultural change in most of ethnic groups in Vietnam, however the situation is more serious in Tây Nguyên. The reasons for that are: a) The groups of indigenous people in Tây Nguyên are more vulnerable because they've been living in traditional farm-based society and do not know how to defend themselves against the rapidly developing market economy; and, b) The massive migration and cohabitation of ethnic groups has promoted cultural exchanges and assimilation among groups, especially between the Kinh and ethnic people, which has led to some disturbance due to rapid cultural change (5, 6).

3. The trend of natural assimilation of culture

Natural assimilation is a process of naturally occurring cultural contact, exchange and influence among ethnic groups. It normally occurs between a group with a large population and high economic, social and cultural development level and neighboring small groups. The result is the small groups either accept the culture of the groups with higher development level, or they are assimilated partly or entirely into the

bigger groups and consider themselves members of that group. This is a common phenomenon around the world, especially in societies with several classes. According to V. I. Lenin, natural assimilation is progressive while forced assimilation is counter-progressive (11).

In our opinion, there are two processes of natural assimilation taking place in Tây Nguyên, they are:

- The assimilation of small indigenous groups of people living in the borders, with larger but developmentally similar groups. Examples are the assimilation between the Ba Na people and Gia Rai people, Gia Rai and the Ede in Phu Yen and Ea Hleo in Đắk Lắk and between Ede and Mnong in Đắk Lắk, Stieng and Mnong and Ko Ho in Lâm Đồng. The process of natural assimilation is taking place among indigenous groups with equal developmental levels, therefore, it does not create any significant upset for Tây Nguyên culture (5, 6).

- The process of natural assimilation between the culture of Việt (or Kinh) people and the culture of the indigenous ethnic groups is more intense and cause greater changes in Tây Nguyên culture. The process is part of the larger trend of modernization in Vietnam. The ethnic people who want to modernize have to go through the door of "Vietnamization" just as Vietnamese people who want to modernize have to go through of the door of "Westernization". This process of natural assimilation strongly affects many aspects of both material and moral life.

How should we evaluate this process of natural assimilation? Cultural assimilation

differs from cultural exchange. Assimilation is a process of accepting the cultural elements of other groups and adopting them as your own. It is not a process of innovation whereby aspects of one culture are altered to fit the traditions of another. Therefore, the unique characteristics of a group will die out in the process of assimilation. Even when it is natural assimilation without any intentional imposition, this loss of cultural traditions is a negative consequence which needs to be overcome.

4.The trend of recovering traditional culture

This trend has stemmed mainly from outside pressures and the State and Party's policies rather than from the desires of ethnic people in Tây Nguyên. Since Central Resolution 5 of 8th term on "building the Vietnamese culture of advancement and national character" was promulgated in 1998, a series of campaigns and projects have been carried out to preserve and promote traditional cultures. This policy is consistent with the trends of the era (the cultural decade of UNESCO) and with the aspirations of the Vietnamese people in general. However, there is a certain gap between self-consciousness, the urgent need for the preservation of the traditional culture of Tây Nguyên people and the State and Party's general policies. As a result, the process of implementing this policy in Tây Nguyên has been problematic.

5.Analyzing causes

- If culture is regarded as the result of people's accommodation with the natural environment as they seek to ensure their survival and develop their community, the degradation or development of nature will adversely affect the culture. In Tây Nguyên during recent decades, forests have been destroyed and water sources and land have been reduced and polluted. As writer Nguyen Ngoc has pointed out, when forests are lost, the culture of ethnic groups in mountainous areas will decline because their culture *is* "forest culture".

- For the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên, the frame of village society plays an important role in generating and nurturing the culture and traditional character. However, in recent decades, the framework of village society of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên has undergone drastic changes, which have undermined or even destroyed its driving force, and directly affected the economic, social and cultural life of the indigenous ethnic groups.

- Pressures from the exchange process and influences from inside and outside the region, sometimes called "Vietnamization", or "Westernization", considerably affect the lifestyle and cultural status of ethnic groups. This is an unavoidable aspect of cultural exchange and one that often results in positive contributions to the receiving group. However, the intensity of the process of exchange and influence have become stronger and stronger while the ability and opportunity of the ethnic groups to resist or select are weak. Therefore, the pressure

overwhelms and causes disturbance in accepting cultural influences from outside.

- We have showed here some shortcomings and mistakes in orienting and managing the processes of cultural development of the ethnic groups. For a long time, we have not paid due attention to this matter and have not seen how important the role of culture is to social wellbeing and development. Our sense of traditional culture was incorrect and heavily influenced by class status. We sometimes negated values of the past. The guidance of cultural tasks was formalized and imposed externally. It did not reflect the fact that culture is “of the people, by the people and for the people”. As a result, we did not complete the task well, despite having spent considerable money and effort.

III. A number of problems raised in preserving and bringing into play traditional culture of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên

- The first and most important thing is awareness of the role of culture in development. Culture is, after all, the result of adjustment to nature to allow for the social development of all ethnic groups and nations. So, what is “cultural adjustment”? Perhaps, it is harmonious combination of the elements, such as way of life, aspiration for happiness, national character, knowledge and more, which form, in each ethnic group, conceptions of development, goodness, comfort, as well as methods to achieve those targets.

We have long since mentioned cultural characteristics and cultural tradition. But

what are the cultural characteristics and traditions of each ethnic group in Tây Nguyên? In the past, we have acted without first studying carefully and gaining a thorough grasp of our subject. Consequently, we have not achieved the results we expected. For example, we are carrying out a project of building a "cultural Rong house" in Tây Nguyên. However, we have imposed the model of Rong house of Bana on nearly 20 other ethnic groups while each of them has its own form of house. Therefore, we should study carefully what we intend to do if we do not want to end in failure.

We also need to change the awareness of indigenous people in Tây Nguyên about their traditional culture, to overcome their inferiority complex and their tendency to look outwards (“huong ngoai”). Many ethnic people do not appreciate the cultural values of their groups and some - especially young people - even turn their back on the traditional culture. Only when they have full awareness of, and pride in, the traditions of their ancestors, can they defend themselves from external cultural pressures and bring their traditional culture into play in modern society. Such self-acceptance also provides a foundation to accept the cultural values of other groups.

We have long since given up the right to decide that this cultural phenomenon is “progressive” or that phenomenon is “backward”, and then decide people are allowed to do this and not to do that. From the position of cultural subject, we can only provide orientation and leave people

to evaluate, select and decide what they think appropriate for themselves.

1. The job of preserving and bringing into modern life the cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên should be performed by the people of the groups in Tây Nguyên. It is a cause of Tây Nguyên people, and for Tây Nguyên people. That is the democratic essence of the cause of preserving and developing culture. Without these, we will never achieve the results we expect despite good intentions and all of the human and material resources we have invested.

In recent years, as a result of the experiences of Kinh people in the deltas and instructions of the State, the provinces in Tây Nguyên have drafted village conventions. In reality, these conventions should be inserted into the policies for building families and villages because culture is a fundamental content of village conventions. However, local governments carry it out separately and do not coordinate with mass organizations in the Father Front. The drafting of these village conventions should be studied carefully. The conventions should include the inheritance of traditional customs of every ethnic group in each locality. Remember, the responsibility of cultural managers is only to orient, and each village has to list the necessary contents of the convention based on its local reality. Meanwhile, we ourselves draft village conventions, which are then approved in the meetings of local authorities despite local people's real ideas. That is, the village convention imposed by the law, does not stem from

the aspirations of the people. People have not played an important role in drafting and implementing their self-governing regulations.

Since Central Resolution 5 of 8th term on "building the Vietnamese culture by advancement and national character" was promulgated, we have developed traditional cultural activities, such as festivals of culture and art and performance programs in Tây Nguyên and many other areas to introduce the special cultural characteristics of every ethnic group. These activities are necessary to support and enhance people's pride in their culture and strengthen mutual understanding. However, the form of organization is not persuasive; it is sometimes affected or distorted by the dominant culture and does not soundly reflect the reality. These activities are often performed by professional artists, while the cultural daily life of local people have not been paid due attention. It seems that cultural managers attach importance to cultural performance and dissemination more than they do to the real cultural life of the masses.

2. In our opinion, in Tây Nguyên, the natural and social frame that ensures preservation and promotion of cultural values and social development is *buon lang* (the village). In the last decades, due to the population redistribution and the development of the market economy, the structure of village society has been upset, the structure of community has been weakened, farming households that were protected by the village are now "laid

bare” and left vulnerable to the collision of social changes. National culture, which is basically village culture, suffers the same fate. Therefore, it is necessary to attach much importance to village culture, and through it to preserve and bring into play traditional cultural values, as well as to bring new cultural elements into life. In the near future, the development of the economy, society and culture of Tây Nguyên have to stem from the villages and be in the interests of the villages. Hence, the restoration of village culture and promotion of the villages’ activities have to be regarded as important solutions to speed up the stability and development of society, culture and national defense (12).

3. There are two forms of preserving and bringing into play the values of traditional culture: stationary preservation and moving preservation. Stationary preservation is the preservation of forms of cultural phenomena outside the environment from which they arose, for example, the preservation in museums of papers, exhibitions and archives. Stationary preservation mainly serves the need for scientific research, dissemination, studies, and the keeping of cultural phenomena to restore and bring to life when necessary.

Moving preservation is the preservation of cultural phenomena in the social environment in which they arose and exist so that they continue to change and play their roles under the influence of specific social conditions. For example, unwritten epics are a unique cultural phenomenon of

the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên. At present, we are carrying out surveys and compiling, translating and publishing hundreds of epics. That is stationary preservation. Though it is necessary, it is a passive form. We need a more active form to preserve the epics in the environment of the Tây Nguyên community so that they continue to play an important role in cultural life of the ethnic people. Currently, we have had experimental projects of preserving epics in the social environment of the groups so that they continue to be “live epics” passed on by performance as they have been for the last thousands of years.

Cultural preservation in a moving state and in social environment shows the viewpoints of cultural subjects in the cause of preserving and bringing into play their national cultural characteristics. It means the people are the creators and preservers of cultural values. The State can only play the role of assistant.

4. In Tây Nguyên and many other areas, cultural institutions face quite a few problems which need to be taken into consideration. In the implementation of cultural development programs, all the factors involved, from budget to staff, are the responsibility of the State. As such, the culture we are striving to build often bears the imprint of “State culture”. How about thinking about it in another way, and approaching it from another direction? We should consider culture as activities of the people, as they are the ones who maintain and enjoy cultural values under the direction of the State.

Once such a viewpoint is accepted, how can the staff and institutions involved in cultural activities manage their work? Should we follow the old model of instructions from above downwards, or apply the new model of proposals from grassroots level upwards, or combine both of them? No matter what way is selected, we must remember that culture is of the people and for the people.

REFERENCES

1. Ngô Đức Thịnh. Regional culture and cultural region in Vietnam. H.: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1993.
2. G. Condominas. Nous avons mangé la forêt. H.: "Thế giới Publishing House", 2003.
3. J. Dournes. Forest, Women and crazy. Hồ Chí Minh: Youth Publishing House, 2002.
4. Mysterious land. Hồ Chí Minh City: Hồ Chí Minh city Publishing House, 2002
5. Bế Viết Đăng et al. Outlines of the Êđê and Mnông in Đắc Lắc H.: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1987.
6. Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al. Ethnic groups in Gia Lai – Kontum. H.: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1988.
7. Mạc Đường (chief editor). The ethnic issue in Lam Dong. Lâm Đồng Culture and Information Department, 1983.
8. Ngô Đức Thịnh (chief editor). Folk culture of the Êđê. H.: Cultural – Ethic Publishing House, 1993.
9. Folk culture of the Mnông. H.: Cultural – Ethic Publishing House, 1993.
10. Many authors. Tây Nguyên epics H.: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1998.
11. V. I. Lenin, Complete works. Volume 13. H.: National Political Publishing House, 2005.
12. Many authors. Some issues related to the socio-economic development of the villages in Tây Nguyên. H.: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2002.