

## MILPA IN THE LIFE OF TÂY NGUYÊN ETHNIC MINORITIES

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*Located in the geographic coordinate from 11° 45' to 15° 27' (north latitude) and from 107° 12' to 108° 55' (East Longitude), Tây Nguyên has a strategic location in terms of economic, political, social, environmental, national defense and security field. Tây Nguyên with its natural area of 5.612.000 hectares of which 3.140.000 hectares of many types of forest, accounting for 36.3% of the country's forest reserves. Tây Nguyên is also the residence of the 13 ethnic minorities such as Ba Na, Xơ Đăng, M'nong, Ede, etc., and preserves many traditions, tangible and intangible cultural heritage with historical and aesthetic value as communal house, long house, Lithophone, grave statue, cultural festivals, gong and a great treasure of folk literature with epic, tales, fables, folk songs handed down through generations for thousands of years. Studying how to deal with nature in general, cultivation in particular of ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên over time, then finding out the core characteristics changing many aspects of life here and contributing to provide the scientific basis for the Party and State to propose reasonable economic, cultural and social policies promoting the development of Tây Nguyên in general toward future sustainable development.*

### 1. Some basic characteristics of traditional milpa production of Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities

In the life of Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities, forestland and milpa have significant and irreplaceable roles. In the past, forests covered almost all over Tây Nguyên that is from the high mountains down to the lower valleys and flat areas. According to the concept of the Tây Nguyên people, milpa supply them tools to work all year round, so even in any environment ethnic minorities here choose their residence near the forests and till the field in the way of burning off and pricking. Accordingly, on a bunch of new mountain field, farmers

grow rice, corn, cassava, bean, etc. until the soils are exhausted and to be left to find a new one. This cycle is repeated only when the old mountain field restores the necessary fertility. In the condition that markets and commodity exchanges in many areas have not developed, the production of Tây Nguyên people aims at self-sufficiency for daily life, while exploring the produce available in nature environment remains quite evident in the people's lives. Tây Nguyên ethnic groups also distinguish very clearly the type of land for cultivation and non-cultivation; there

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are regulations on the distribution and use of land that is rather tight and specific. This distinction has different somewhat between ethnic groups but generally can be classified into three types:

*Residential land:* this is the land farmer's use for building houses, sheds, barns and public buildings. Residential lands are usually placed under the management of highland villages. Depending on the cycles of cultivation, the major change in the life of the village of the residential areas can be formed.

*Farming land:* including milpa, water fields, and fruit orchards. This is the common property of the villages divided for members, families and clans to exploit and produce.

*Forbidden land:* that is the sacred forest, forbidden forests, forests for grave, etc. and the most often is sacred forests (like Yang pri) located at the peak of the mountain. In the opinion of Tây Nguyên people that is inhabited by the supernatural gods, if human infringed they will be punished. Cemetery Forests used to bury the dead of the village and conducting traditional rituals such as grave sending (1, pg.18) are usually located at the northwestern of the village.

The management and use of land of Tây Nguyên's ethnic minorities always follow certain rules. The boundary between the land of the villages, clans, and families sometimes are only big rocks, streams, old tree, etc., which are symbolic conditioning, but it imprescriptible to anyone. Depending on

the specific Tây Nguyên ethnic groups, land use rights to villages, clans and its members also differ.

According to Ma people, the boundary of the highland villages' land is the milpa explored by the whole village. Forest is from the village to the milpa under the management of the village, so the people out of the village are not explored here.

To Mnong people, this ethnic land division is clear and close between the villages. The boundary is absolutely inviolable. Mnong's lands prohibit other neighbour to hunt animals and pick fruit, and even to travel, the Mnong also avoid going through the land owned and marked.

Lands of the Gia Rai, Ede are under the management and harvesting of each family. The Gia Rai has formed the legal provisions to force people to comply with and prohibit the violation. If violated, the penalty is applied severely, from compensation to servants of village's owner.

The Ba Na not only owns the plots of exploited and cultivated land as milpas, water field, but also includes a very large primitive forests around the village under the village's management, and is the village's property. The forests will be exploited for the long run. As the village of the Ba Na rarely move in comparison with other ethnic groups.

In their land using, the Xơ Đăng pays particularly attention to the boundary being contiguous to the neighboring villages. Land and forests are fenced very carefully. The Xơ Đăng has a tradition of inheriting land, including

transfer, sale and the inheritance is limited within the same village. The reason for the transfer or sale of land mainly due to migration rather than for rich and poor (see also: 3,4,5,and 6).

## **2. The changes in manufacturing of Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities**

By the late nineteenth century, in Tây Nguyên, when land was not crowded with population, milpa was cultivated by a closed plot rotation model, which allows people to settle for a long run on a certain geographical area that rarely leads to shifting cultivation of wandering hilltribes destroying natural resources and environment. In the economic activities in Tây Nguyên, growing plays a leading role and milpa plays a key role. Milpa cultivation is not only a livelihood but also the production dominated economic, social, cultural and spiritual life. The existence of milpa cultivation is the main reason defining the characteristics of nature, and self-sufficient economy of Tây Nguyên traditional ethnic groups.

Since 1975, traditional collective ownership of Tây Nguyên people to land and forests were eliminated because all land and forests were nationalized. Traditional economic activities of people here, includes cultivation, animal breeding, handicrafts. Goods exchange and economic arrogation start deformation. No longer holding ownership in the management and exploitation of land and forest, products from cultivation and from hunting and picking cannot meet the life needs of people here.

Over a long time of surviving and developing, until the year the country entered a period of renovation, the traditional production of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups still exists in three forms: milpa, water fields and orchards, but the form of cultivation by the way of closed plot rotation is no longer popular. There are no conditions of closed plot rotation, Tây Nguyên ethnic groups change it into crop rotation in the milpa, or turn closed plot rotation into opened plot rotation which is form of continuous cultivation over years in the same land

Until now, generally, economic, traditional economy of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups still have characteristics of nature, and self-sufficiency on the basis of milpa cultivation as a source of life. However, because land is not plentiful as before, production tool is simple, products is not enough for simple reproduction, people mainly base on exploring and exploiting nature to distribute under the way of original average.

## **3. Some general evaluation**

Land, forest, and milpa always play crucial roles in the life of Tây Nguyên people. Forestland turning into milpa, and fields, or unexploited are located in the residence of the village and belong to the village. To forestland, Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities pay much attention to the right of use rather than ownership, land is seen as essential means of livelihood by clearing trees for cultivation. People inherited divided land is entitled to the natural products and to the ones made from working on the divided land. After a time, from one

to three years or more, depending on each ethnic group, the land will be returned to the village and the members will receive the land divided in a different area. The exploited land will leave fallow, so it quickly turn into secondary forest.

Acknowledging the roles and positions of Tây Nguyên, right after the Liberation of the South to unify the country, Party and State have paid much attention to this area. As a result, after 25 years of reform (1986-2011), Tây Nguyên economy has gained many important achievements, comprehensive development; cultural life in the village also draw the Party and State's special interest on the basis of bringing quintessence traditional culture of ethnic minorities into full plays, with the goal of maintaining and selectively inheriting to construct new positive cultural values, phasing out the bad backward; State has invested several billions to build topic and projects for research, collect epics, folklore, restore cultural heritage of gong, traditional uniforms, traditional costumes; compile customary laws of ethnic minorities Gia Rai, Ba Na, Xơ Đăng, Ede, Mnông, Mạ, Cơ Ho and many other groups. In addition to encouraging conservation of the villages, and developing traditional crafts, communal house, long house is also restored.

However, along with economic and social development in Tây Nguyên, land ownership right has many changes. Tây Nguyên ethnic groups are no longer true owner on their land, in fact, currently they are employee at each time and each

specific work on their lands, so they is not responsible for the management and protection. The recipient of agricultural land shall only be allowed to produce stably in the long term on the divided land. Therefore, in the condition that intensive cultivation technique has not developed, labor productivity is certainly not high. Meanwhile, those who are responsible for protection and management of forests mainly aim at taking all forest products and exploiting agricultural lands at the allowed rate for short-term crops, but not pay much attention to cultivating, caring and protecting forest as required.

Population increases, the local people is being pushed back deeper into the forest so the demand for timber and forest products to the construction of houses, appliances, wood burning coal, etc., increasingly far exceeds the natural regeneration of forests. In addition, status of freely migrating, people from new economy deforest to grow farm produce, industrial crops and the situation of transfer of forestland for profit is complicated. Tây Nguyên forest area decreases rapidly leading to the situation of washing away and eroding of several large area which is formerly very fertile, turning it into impoverish soils which trees underdeveloped, productivity of many types of trees as tea, coffee, mulberry and even forest trees low. When forest area narrow down, their water-holding capacity is also severely reduced, causing a prolonged drought in many areas during the dry season as Đắc Lắc, Lâm Đồng, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, the South Central

Province, especially in recent years running water for people and livestock also become scarce. The above implications have led to the fact that annually State lost a large amount of wood from illegally logging, deforesting and burning cultivation, and making forest fires. Every year, Tây Nguyên has tens of thousands of households from all over the country migrating freely to make a living, so leading to the loss of hundreds of billion of forest resources due to deforestation, illegal logging to land for production, etc.

#### 4. Some suggestions

In the new conditions, how to deal with land and forest of Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities are creating severe conflict with the rational use of natural resources and environment. Contributing to solve this problem in the future, we propose some solutions:

*Firstly*, go through several changes of history, along with the impact of natural factors and population, milpa cultivated under traditional way in Tây Nguyên is currently losing the basis of existence and gradually changing partly into opened shifting cultivation in highlands, or dry fields waiting rain which is semi-settled agriculture in lowlands. Therefore, gradually shifting dry field into water field in areas of concentrated population, along major roads is one of important directions to improve Tây Nguyên milpa. To do this, requiring the early replant on the entire land in the region, adding and adjusting the plan to use agricultural land, draw residence groups; reclaiming to expand area where have enough conditions to

adjust agricultural land area of forestation yard and plantation for people who have no land for production. There should be measures to manage the implementation of land planning, prohibit the illegal land sale and transfer, especially production land of local ethnic minorities. At the same time, effectively implementing manufacturing guidelines, loans, sales of farm products to help people have a stable life, settle their residence and agriculture and deforest for milpa land.

*Secondly*, as cultivating activities rooted in the life, Tây Nguyên people should completely replace the milpa by other forms of cultivation meaning that comprehensively changing traditional multi-faceted life of people here. However, if maintaining prototypically traditional forms of production in the context that land is increasingly limited, and not freely rotated plot, in the long run Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities become poor and backward by not promoting the potential of land and leading to serious destruction of forests and environmental resources. Therefore, we continue to improve and develop every form of traditional manufacturing towards an agricultural economy which either has goods purpose or purpose of protecting environmental resources. Tây Nguyên economic development should focus on maintaining forest cover by effective implementation of the protection and regeneration of natural forests, protection forests, national parks and existing natural reserve.

*Thirdly*, reforming and developing economy in general and farming in particular to the peoples of Tây Nguyên, are solving the problem of milpa in fact. So building a new culture and lifestyle in Tây Nguyên is essential to inheriting and improving milpa lifestyle and culture of people here. Effectively implementing policies to support people in housing, clean water, health, and education, constructing basis of cultural community for the village under the motto State and people work together. Replanning residence to build rural infrastructure. Building organizations and works for studying, and reserving national cultural heritage. Strengthening cultural institutions in villages and hamlets through the implementation of democratic regulations, phase-out of backward customs, and superstitions.

*Fourthly*, the characteristic of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups with the low starting point of economy and society in general leads to the process of improving and developing all aspects of life for people in this region which can not be made in a short time, it is a long process in which measures, forms and appropriate steps should take steps, forms and appropriate steps being suitable to the people's qualification should be taken, it also the satisfactory

instruction and investment for the people to adapt gradually.

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