

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

VO THI THUY DUNG. *Beliefs and festival of the M'ngong people in Dak Nong Province**Speciality: Cultural studies**Serial number: 62317001*

Dak Nong province is the main concentration of the M'ngong in Viet Nam's Central Highlands. This ethnic group still preserves a number of their traditional cultural values and beliefs. Beliefs constitute an important part in the people's rituals and festivals. Over the time, socio-economic conditions in the Central Highlands have considerably changed, especially their traditional culture, including beliefs and festivals. The thesis *Beliefs and festival of the M'ngong in Dak Nong Province* has a profound and practical significance in the context when the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands in general and the M'ngong people in particular are facing challenges in maintaining their traditional identities. The dissertation consists of four chapters. *Chapter 1: Theoretical background and an overview of the M'ngong people in Dak Nong province*

The M'ngong people belong to the Mon-Khmer language group in the Austroasia family, supposedly appearing in the Central Highlands thousands of years ago. In Dak Nong Province, the M'ngong people have seven subgroups (Preh, Nong, Nâr, Prâng, Biät, Gar, and Đip), scattering in most of the province's communes, accounting for over 9% of the local population and

nearly 50% of the M'ngong population in the whole country. The differences in dialects and customs among subgroups are insignificant and most of people can understand their languages while they still maintain a consistency in culture and a fairly clear sense of ethnicity.

Traditionally, the M'ngong people had a self-sufficient economy. They mainly lived on slash-and-burn cultivation and milpa. In the past, their main crops included rice, maize, beans, egg-plant, chili-pepper and others. They also engaged in hunting and gathering wild fruits and vegetables. Their handicrafts, such as plaiting and brocade weaving, were underdeveloped, closely associated with and mainly serving agriculture and daily demands. At present, in the advent of scientific and technical advances, they have used some machines, applied crop-rotation and grown high-value plants (pepper, coffee and cashew-nut) in order to develop household economy. The M'ngong people follows matriarchy. Families of each M'ngong clan usually settle together. In a hamlet, there are several clans. A traditional M'ngong hamlet is a complete social unit that maintain its own socio-economic and cultural independence as well as self-governance in line with customary laws.

The M'ngong possess an abundant culture and performing art, with many genres, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, epics, proverbs and folk songs. They also have a number of musical instruments made of stone, bamboo and buffalo horns; their

plastic arts and sculpture are quite rich.

Chapter 2: Traditional beliefs of the M'ngong people.

The author focuses on researching three forms of traditional beliefs of the M'ngong people, namely totemism, polytheism and animism.

- *Totemism (totem)*: Currently, the M'ngong people have over two hundred clans, many of which are named after animals, plants and things, such as Kpor (leaf), Ya (crocodile), Dâng Ja Reh (Alang grass), R'pu (buffalo) and so on. The M'ngong avoid killing and eating some certain animals and plants. In the M'ngong culture, buffalo is a long-standing "totem" and the "buffalo soul", rather than other souls, is believed to help humans maintain a close relation with gods. The M'ngong raises buffaloes with a special sentiment. Many clans have a taboo on killing buffaloes and taking buffalo meat; they will never kill a buffalo without a spiritual reason. On important events, a buffalo can be slaughtered after people carry out various rituals and grieve for the buffalo. According to the author, the buffalo might be a totem of the M'ngong people and some other ethnic group in the Central Highlands during a certain period of history.

- *Polytheism*: The M'ngong people do not worship a single god. Various rituals, regularly carried out in daily life, show a clear sign of their polytheism. For a single person, many rituals will be organized during their life, especially at each and every turning point. In community activities, god-worshipping ceremonies are an indispensable part. For all affairs

relating to the hamlet, from selecting the place to establish the hamlet to building the communal house and applying a penalty, worshipping ceremonies must be conducted to ask for gods' permission. And farming activities, from selecting land-plots, burning the fields, sowing seeds to harvesting, must be accompanied by god-worshipping rites. In addition, there are also taboos in order to not make gods burst into anger and cast calamities (epidemic, drought, crop failure).

- *Animism*: In the M'ngong's conception, a person consists of two parts: souls and body. Their souls include those of buffalo, deer, cricket and locust. The buffalo soul is the main one, and a person will die if their buffalo soul dies. Deer, cricket and locust souls are auxiliary ones; if they escape out of a person's body and get lost or caught by evil ghosts, the person will fall ill. When a person dies, their souls will leave their body and go to a land governed by two gods Dê and Dom. A good person can reincarnate as a human again while bad people will become wandering ghosts. A difference in the M'ngong's animism, in comparison with other ethnic groups, is that a person's souls are not immortal though they can be reincarnated. Evidences of the M'ngong's animism are still seen in their fairy tales and mythology.

Chapter 3: Traditional festivals of the M'ngong people

The M'ngong people conduct many important ceremonies relating to human life. Life-cycle rituals are attached to some certain stages and milestones of life, from a foetus forms in its mother's

womb, an infant is born, a child grows up and becomes an adult, gets old and passes away. Child-birth and childhood ceremonies include: The worship ritual conducted when a woman gets pregnant (in a hope that the mother and her baby will be safe), the ritual to protect the child in the womb (in the sixth month of the gestation period, the ritual is held to drive away devils, incubi and the child-eaters *briăng*); the ceremony to name the newborn and worship its souls (eight days after a child's birth, a ritual is conducted to find out which ancestral souls reincarnate into the child and the child will be named after the person); the ear-blowing rite (to keep the child's ears clear and help it become a member of the community). The ceremonies relating to adulthood are: the teeth-filing ritual, conducted when a child reaches the age of 15 in order to recognize it a member of the community; the adulthood-reaching ceremony, carried out for boys when they enter the start of adulthood (at the age of 15-20); the wedding ceremonies (consisting of three events: proposing a marriage, making a betrothal, and wedding). Old-age and funeral ceremonies include: The buffalo-eating rite to celebrate an old person's good health (the M'ngong people have a system of health-celebrating rituals for the whole life, the biggest one is organized at the age of 70, in which buffalos will be sacrificed); the funeral (the M'ngong people organize different funeral ceremonies for those who die a natural death - old age and diseases, and those who die a sudden death - accidents. Seven days after the burial ceremony,

a ritual is held to see off the deceased's souls. After three years, a ceremony is organized to make their last farewells).

Ceremonies and festivals relating to production activities of the M'ngong people are imbued with polytheistic characteristics and closely associated to the dry rice, from selecting land-plots, sowing seeds, protecting crops to harvesting rice and bringing it to the granary. These ceremonies can be divided into three groups: those relating to the field clearance (the ritual to select land-plot; that of field clearance; the ritual to express gratitude to axes and knives; the ritual to burn the field; the ritual to close the field); those relating to milpa cultivation (the ritual of sowing rice seeds; the rice-worshipping rite; the ritual of planting the ceremonial pole to worship rice; the new rice worshipping ceremony); the harvest-related ceremonies (the worship ritual to start plucking off rice; the celebration of gaining seventy baskets of rice; the rite to celebrate one hundred baskets of rice; the celebration of finishing rice-plucking and starting rooting up stubbles; the worshipping ritual before bringing rice out of the granary; the rice-bathing ceremony).

Besides, the M'ngong people also conduct the ceremonies to make friends, to build the hamlet's gate, to erect the hamlet's fence, to establish a close tie between the two hamlets, to make enchantment, to show gratitude to the banyan tree's god, to honor the holy stone, to hunt wild elephants, to pray good health for elephants, to cut elephant's tusks, to sell an elephant, and those carried out when a wild elephant is wounded or killed and

when a tamed elephant dies. In the life of the M'ngong, most of traditional festivals and ceremonies are specific events of some certain belief. Conversely, beliefs are the roots of festivals, affecting the festivals' content and functioning as the standards to form values of the festival culture.

Chapter 4: Current changes of beliefs and festivals of the M'ngong people in Dak Nong province

In the current life of the M'ngong people, beliefs and festivals more or less have been modified in line with socio-economic changes. In life-related ceremonies, wedding ones have been considerably simplified or become similar to those of the Kinh people; the longevity celebrations are organized within a family or clan rather than on a large scale as in the past, many families even no longer hold these occasions; traditional funeral ceremonies also become more simply and gradually influenced by the Kinh's culture.

Among production-related beliefs and festivals, the most recognizable change is the way of looking at the role of gods. The belief in gods still exists but not dominates the daily life as in the past. Besides, with the advent of new religions, a portion of the M'ngong people have been converted from polytheism into monotheism. The concepts of gods' power, favors and

protection, therefore, no longer have a strong impact on the community's members. The changes in awareness have led to changes in spiritual activities. Many ceremonies have disappeared, especially those relating to field clearance and cultivation; others are not conducted regularly or have modified considerably. With atheists, their ceremonies have been simplified significantly. Meanwhile, for those who follow some certain religion, they no longer conduct agricultural ceremonies but read prayers instead. The changes are also different from region to region. It is very difficult to preserve and highlight cultural values of the M'ngong people if there are no joint efforts of governments at all levels and the M'ngong people themselves. Through analyzing positive and negative sides of the current changes in the M'ngong's culture and beliefs, the author proposes some solutions to preserve and highlight values of their culture, beliefs and festivals in three fields: economy, culture and society. The dissertation was defended successfully in 2017 at the examination council of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (National University of Ho Chi Minh City).

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