

SEMANTIC MEANING OF SYMBOLIC SYSTEM OF E-DE RITUALS (*)

PHAN DANG NHAT

Up until now, not a few people, looking from the appearance, think that the centre of the backwardness and superstition of the E-de and other ethnic minority groups is their rituals. And ritual practitioners and shamans are considered backward elements that sow superstition. Sometime they are considered reactionaries.

Is it fully true?

To answer this question, first of all we have to decode ritual actions as they are not fully similar to those taken in the daily life, but are mostly symbolic.

Symbol is an important and popular form of transferring culture of humankind. Only humans really have symbols and know how to use them as a cultural tool.

Symbol, according to a most simple definition, is something representing another thing (Needham et al., 1979, p. 7). Symbol can be an object, a group of words or an action. And all symbols can represent an abstract thinking. Symbol is used to infer a thing, a conception, an attitude or a feeling. Most of the symbols are arbitrary and do not have direct and clear connections between the form and the content of expression (just like word and concept in linguistics).

For this reason, the coming into being of a discipline of anthropology - the symbolic anthropology helps us decode the semantic relationship hidden behind behaviors and find out different semantic motifs and

inside of a culture and between cultures (David et al., 2003, No. 10, p. 71; No. 11, p. 75).

We are aware that what is difficult to understand and is mysterious of the E-de ritual actions are their symbolic characteristics. In fact, there are many symbolic systems, very rich and complicated, and cross - cutting. According to a common theory, symbols include tangible symbols, action symbols and linguistic symbols. This is correct to the symbols shown in the E-de rituals. In this paper, to help discuss it clearly, we divide those three types of symbols into two categories: Single symbols and dualistic symbols. And the boundary of the division here is just relative.

1. Single symbolic systems

Single symbols are symbols that only have one side, different to dualistic symbols which comprise two sides: live/death; female/male; light/dark; bird/fish, etc.

1.1. *Symbols in forest rituals*¹

In the past, when there remained thick forests and rich wildlife, hunting was an important activity in the life of the E-de ethnic minority group. The main rituals relating to forests include: the ceremonial

¹ On E-de festivals, in this paper, we mainly use the documents from:

- Le Trung Vu: in the book *E-de Folklore Culture*, many authors and Ngo Duc Thinh as chief editor, Ethnic Minority Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 1992.

- Truong Bi: Fieldwork material
Hereinafter we only cite the name of the author, without referring to its origin.

(*) This article was issued in the *Anthropology Review*, No. 2 in 2004 in Vietnamese.

offerings to the Crossbow, ceremony to fell big trees for making valuable furniture and things, ceremonial offerings to the God of Wind and ceremony to pray for catching honey bees, etc.

In the ceremonial offerings to the Crossbow, a shaman sits eastward and a crossbow is placed on a mat in front of him. He holds in his hand a bronze cup of wine mixed with chicken blood and prays for the Mountain Genie and the River Genie and then pours some drops of blood wine onto the head of the crossbow.

When chopping down a big tree to make some important things such as *kpan* bench or *hgor* drums, the E-de people always make ceremonial offerings to the tree soul.

When chopping down a tree to make *hgor* drum-barrel, *dam dei* (elder or younger brother of the host) prepares a jar of wine and a chicken and goes to the forest, places the offerings on the foot of the selected tree and says the following prayers:

“...Report to and ask permission of this big tree soul,

For us to take the tree home for use by a rich family

The family head has prepared sufficient wine, meat and rice

Selected a good date

To make it into drums for long-term and good use”

The shaman then nails an iron awl into the tree trunk and goes home. The next days, villagers are invited to chop down the tree (Le Trung Vu).

The ceremony for chopping down the tree to make *kpan* has more stages than the one mentioned above. The date to chop down

the tree must be a good day, without a funeral in the village or the sounds of muntjac.² A group of seven key men, mostly *dam dei* (brothers and relatives of the wife of the host) brings along offerings and tools.

When arriving at the foot of the pre-selected tree, the host blows the horn and goes around the tree for seven rounds, while the shaman is dancing with a shield accompanying him. Then the shaman nails an iron awl into the tree. If the awl is tight, it is done. The shaman prays for the Po Rong God (the tutelary god of the host) and the Bung God (who keeps the fate of the host), the Mountain Genie and the Water Genie.

The host strikes the first axe at the tree and then others follow him to chop it down.

Before taking the *kpan* into the house, a ceremony is held on the floor of the eaves. The host holds a shield and a sword, dancing on the *kpan* bench from one end to the other for 7 times in order to drive the devil spirit out of the *kpan*, then informs everyone the name of the *kpan* as Y Dung or Y Dem. So, from now on, the *kpan* becomes a new figure, a member of the family with its *yang* (soul) and its own name and is among the other sacred objects such as gongs, jars and *hgor* etc.

The shaman prays asking *yang* and *kpan* to bring good luck to the family from now on.

People then offer sacrifices to their ancestors comprising a pig and three jars of wine. Three cups of pig blood mixed with wine are placed on the head of the *kpan*. The shaman uses a cotton stick to dip into the

² Muntjac is also called *mang* or *do* is an herbivorous animal, a species of deer which is harmless. Yet, many mountainous ethnic groups from North to South consider it an animal that shows bad omen. It is a symbol of bad luck. The expression is arbitrary, and has nothing to do with the thing expressed.

blood wine and spreads it on the *kpan* from one end to the other.

Then a party is thrown to congratulate the host.

The main ceremony of offering buffalo sacrifice to the *kpan* is made on the next day. The buffalo blood is spread 7 circles on the main *die* (the pole that tie the central wine jar), and the buffalo tail is put on the front beam of the house.

The host, the shaman, helpers, and seven dancing young women wear traditional dresses. Members of a gong band sit on the *kpan*, playing the gongs for seven consecutive rounds, each ends with a roll of *hgor* drum. Then the gongs stop and horns are blown continually.

The shaman prays asking *yang* to come to receive the offerings:

“...Please have some meat, please have some wine,

And then give your support,

By providing good rice seeds, delicious millet seeds,

Strong hoes and lasting crowbars,

Not to leave the upland fields fallow

Don't refuse to drink light wine; don't criticize if the wine is bitter,

All the ceremonial offerings are made.

Oh yang!...”,

then come the enjoyment of the offerings. At the end of the ceremony, an assistant to the shaman puts a red scarf around the neck of the host and takes him to the side of the main wine jar to report to the *yang* for another time: “This is the host, the master of the *kpan*, reporting to *yang*.” The host holds a shield and a sword, dancing along the

house for seven times. Then the shaman receives the shield and the sword and dance for another seven times and thrusts the sword into the head of the *kpan*, and sprays crocus on it to drive away the devil spirits.

Gongs and drums are played continuously (Le Trung Vu).

The ceremonial offerings to the God of Wind and to pray for catching honey bees are organized at the beginning of the dry season (in early November of the solar calendar).

The owner of the river watering place (*Pô Êa*) is the master of this ceremony. The place to hold the ceremony is a spacious ground at the entrance of the village. There, a symbolic gate called *yang* house is rigged up. A horizontal rope is tight to the top of the two poles of the gate. A *kning* (big wild string used for elephant hunting), a *koku* stick (stick with knots to control elephants) are hung on the rope.

In the middle of the gate is a table with tools to get honey. In front of the table are seven jars of wine tied to a pole on a horizontal row.

All the villagers are gathered there. The master of the ceremony (*pô riu yang*) says the prayers to the God of Wind:

“Here are jars full of sweet wine,

Here is a fat castrated pig,

Don't blow stormy wind

Lightning must be cleared away

Neither shield nor knife touch the village...”

Then says the prayers for catching honey bees:

“Oh bees please stop flying

So that we can gather four or five beehives full of honey

As many as hundreds and thousands of rice grains

More and more bee families and family lines come...”

After reading the prayers, *pô riu yang* takes a can full of water to spray around (Truong Bi).

After briefly discussing steps of some forest rituals, we now turn to main symbols and their semantics as follows:

In the ceremonial offerings to the Crossbow Soul:

- The east is the direction of deities.

- Chicken blood mixed with wine is the symbol of life, strength and luck.

- These two symbols have the common meaning of praying for the Crossbow Soul to bring luck to one's hunting.

In the ceremonial offerings to the tree soul to chop down the tree to make *hgor* drums:

- The number 7 is a lucky number. The E-de people are interested in the numbers 3, 5, 7, and 9; of which 7 is the good number and 9 is the extremely good number.

- Shield and sword are the symbols of power of men. The dance with shield and sword here is to show the power of men to drive away the devil spirits from the tree.

- Pig blood mixed with wine, like chicken blood mixed with wine, is the symbol of life and luck. Spreading 7 circles of blood mixed with wine on *diê* shows the combination of two symbols of fine and good luck.

- 7 rounds of gongs, dancing 7 times, come back to the symbol of number 7.

- The prayers mean the use of linguistic symbols with the contents of good seeds, good production tools and good upland fields.

- Taking the host to the *Kpan* soul is to confirm the right to ownership of the *kpan*.

In the ceremony of the *kpan* there are all three types of symbols: tangible, action and linguistic. These symbols have a general semantics to express ideas: asking permission to transfer the right to ownership, to drive away devil forces, to pray for vitality and good luck, and good and favourable production (seeds, tools, and farmland). Finally, it is to confirm that the *kpan* has a supernatural power (naming) and belongs to the family of the host.

In the ceremonial offerings to the God of Wind and to pray for catching honey bees:

- The coil of string for elephant hunting and *kaku* sticks. It is explained by some people that the wind is considered as strong as elephant, thus elephant hunting tools are used to threaten the God of Wind. To my understanding, those tangible objects should be understood as the symbols of power of men in the fight against nature and the strength of forests and mountains. Like shields and swords are symbols of the power of men in the fight against social forces.

- The prayers are linguistic symbols, praying for the wind to be gentle and the storm to be broken off and praying for catching more bees.

- Water is the symbol of good luck and rain. Splashing water means to use imitating magic to ask for rain.

1.2. Symbols in the life cycle rituals

Following is a brief introduction of life cycle rituals such as ceremonies praying for easy child delivery, naming ceremony, full age, wedding, New Year and new house ceremonies, etc.

The ceremony praying for easy child delivery is held when a woman is in 3-month

pregnancy. Offerings include a jar of wine and a cooked chicken. The shaman sits eastward. The pregnant woman sits in front of him placing her legs on an iron axe blade and bronze bracelet. After praying, the shaman used some cotton to dip into the blood wine to spread on the pregnant woman's legs, asking for good health to the fetus. A moment later, he takes some bead-tree leaves to spread dog blood on the forehead and around the belly of the pregnant woman to drive away evil spirits.

The naming ceremony is held a day after the baby is born. There are two steps in the ceremony. The first step is the ceremonial offerings to *Yàng Bah Huê*, the tutelary god for new born babies and humans. The offerings include a jar of wine and a chicken.

The midwives sit in front of the shaman. As E-de women deliver their children in a sitting position, there must be two midwives to help her. A midwife is in charge of delivering the new born baby (*Ma Bôi*) and the other supports the mother's back (*Pê Grang*). After the ceremony, the host invites the two midwives to enjoy the offerings.

Next is a ceremony of blowing into the ears (*Băng Kiga*) of the new born baby. The midwife chews a piece of ginger and blows gently into the two ears of the baby and prays for God (*Aê Diê*) to provide vitality to the baby to help it be healthy and intelligent, because with sensitive ears, the child can learn good things.

The E-de people think that the new born baby does not have a soul that is why when holding the naming ceremony the child is also given a soul. The offerings include a jar of wine, a chicken, an eggplant (stuck on an iron awl), a ginger, and a tree leave (with

a big dew drop). The dew drop is where the soul of the ancestors stays and this soul will enter the child as it does not have a soul yet.

After the prayers said by the shaman, the midwife takes the eggplant to dip into the dew drop and put it closer to the mouth of the baby and reads out the names of the baby's ancestors one by one. Until any name when the baby sticks out its tongue to lap the dew drop, it means the baby agrees to take that name. It also means the baby takes the soul of the one bearing that name and the soul will enter the baby's body (Le Trung Vu).

Maturity ceremony is one of the important ceremonies of the life-cycle rituals of the E-de ethnic group.

When the baby is born, in its naming ceremony, *dam dei* (its mother's younger brother) puts a bronze bracelet on its wrist and offers sacrifices including a set of loin-cloth, a pair of buffalo skin sandals, a dried gourd crust containing water, a shield and a knife. All of them are put in a bamboo papoose and is kept carefully by the mother.

The child has to undergo 7 ceremonies praying for its health, after each ceremony, a notch is made on its bracelet. When the bracelet has 7 notches, the child is grown up (about 17-18 years old). At this time, the parents of the young man ask villagers, family clan chief and his uncle to hold a maturity ceremony for him.

The offerings include a 7 - span long castrated pig, 7 jars of wine, 7 *gong* poles to tie wine jars (on the main *gong* pole there are 7 notches), 7 *ding ea* bamboo tubes (each 7 - joint long) to fetch water to put into the wine jars. Seven young women carry 7 bamboo papooses containing gourd crusts, and seven young men carry seven *ding ea* containers to fetch water to pour into 7 jars of wine.

The young man, the subject of the maturity ritual wears flowery loin-cloth and *kir nut* shirt and a black turban and a piece of flower fabric is placed across his chest (fold into a long piece with the width of a hand size), and a pair of buffalo skin sandals, and carries a dried gourd crust, a shield and a knife (which are the offerings at the naming ceremony when he is just born).

Early in the morning, the young man goes to the river watering place to wash his head and his face. He gets water into the empty dried gourd and takes home to be offered to *yang*. He steps to the staircase where two banana trees are already grown. He brandishes his sword to chop down the right hand side banana tree, and brandishes his sword again to chop down the left hand side banana tree and proceeds to the staircase.

His mother, wearing a new dress stands waiting for her son by the staircase. She welcomes him saying: "Hi son, mum is saying hello to you. Welcome son, mum is welcoming you. Where do you come from? Have you come back from the successful fight against the enemy in the eastern region and from the shield dance in the western region?"

The young man replies moderately: "Hi mum. I'd like to say hello to the mother of the E-de forest. You are right. I've tested my sword. Big trees have fallen down. Small trees have been uprooted. I have danced with my shield in the western region, with my sword in the eastern region. I bring glory to you, mum."

The mother stands back. The young man enters the house; put his sword leaning against the eastern wall and sit down opposite to the shaman in front of seven wine jars tied to seven poles in a vertical row

in the middle of the house. The shaman sits in front of the first wine jar, facing eastward.

Gongs and drums play the *mpoh éa* music piece while the shaman says the following prayers:

"Oh Gods!

I call on the eastern Gods, the western Gods, the tutelary Gods and the Nurturing God.

This young man stayed peacefully in a watch-tower yesterday morning and the day before yesterday can now return home in peace and luck.

He is now grown up, grows bananas, bananas ripe, grows sugarcane, sugarcane is sweet.

This man, thanks to the help of God, is as strong as cast iron, as durable as bronze and as solid as iron.

New strength, new breath, always healthy, safe and sound

A castrated pig and seven wine jars are ready to offer to Gods

Pork meat is shared by everyone

Whether the wine is strong or weak, let's drink!

To pray for everything lucky and good

Oh, God!"

Then the shaman holds a ceremony of blowing into the young man's ears. At this moment, his elder sister or sister-in-law feed him rice and put the bracelet into his wrist, meaning giving him more strength. He stands up and turns his head southward and dances with a shield and a sword four times. Everyone splashes water at him. He then turns northward and dances three rounds while other people continue splashing water at him. If he is successful in

using his shield to ward off the water after seven drives of water splashing, he is recognized by the village patriarchs as being grown up and is capable enough to burden community affairs.

At the end of the 3-day ritual, the young man returns his shirt, loin-cloth, sandals, gourd crust, shield and knife (offered during the naming ceremony and used in the maturity ceremony) to his mother (Le Trung Vu - Truong Bi).

Betrothal ceremony is the start of the 4 wedding rituals. Young E-de women are free to select their lovers. If she finds someone to her liking, she reports to her parents to prepare a betrothal ceremony. The offerings made by the girl's family to God include a jar of wine and a bronze bracelet. Then the girl family, the girl (according to Truong Bi, the girl does not go to the boy's family) and a match-maker go to the boy's family. If the boy's family is located in another village, the delegation will bring along some sticky rice to be eaten on the way.

The mother's younger brother takes the bronze bracelet in his hand and asks the boy for the last time. If the boy agrees, a ceremony is held to hand over the bracelet. The boy and the girl together hold the bronze bracelet in their hands. This is a marriage promise. Since then, the two families, each appoints a guardian (*miết ava*). *Miết ava*, on behalf of the two families give advises to the boy and the girl and makes all arrangements to resolve any disputes between the two of them or between the two families (Le Trung Vu - Truong Bi).

Can wine drinking festival to welcome the New Year is held annually at the end of the harvesting season, from December to

March the following year on the solar calendar. The festival is held at the house of the head of the village (*khoa buôn*) with the participation of all villagers. The E-de people always look for the New Year Festival. They sing:

“The cold weather passes
Rice has been harvested
The weather is dry and fine
Villagers organize a festival

Together eat buffalo meat and drink
Can wine

To welcome the New Year.”

The centre of the festival is the *blang kbao* pole. The pole is 6m high. On top of it is a small altar with offerings to invite ancestors to come to attend the festival. Along the pole, are knife-shaped wooden or bamboo pieces stuck with crescent moon shapes. Eight long-bamboo branches are placed around the pole, with bamboo fibers dyed with different colours tied to the top of the branches blown by the wind.

On the festival day, an ox is tied to the *blang kbao* pole. Villagers, young and old, clad in their Sunday best gather around the pole to watch the buffalo stabbing. Gongs and drums are played. A strong young man, pre-selected, wears loin-cloth without a shirt, with a knife in hand dances in front of the buffalo for a long time. Suddenly, he cuts the left back leg of the buffalo. He then tries to seize a chance to make another cut on the buffalo right back leg. The buffalo, seriously injured, gets so angry. The young man continues to dance with the knife. He aims at the right position to stab into the heart of the buffalo. The buffalo falls down amidst the cheers of all the attendants.

When the young man gets off the knife, the blood flows out. A man waits to get the blood to mix with the wine in jars. Seven big jars of wine are tied to the poles in the yard. The buffalo flesh is then cut into small pieces and put on banana leaves to be brought to the ceremonial place. The village patriarch sits by the wine jar side, holding a bamboo pipe in his right hand, and putting his right leg on a knife blade. The Shaman spreads buffalo blood mixed with wine on the head of the village patriarch and prays:

“Oh, Heaven yang, Earth yang!

Oh, Mountain yang, River yang, East yang, and West yang!

Come here to attend our village festival

Give good health to the village patriarchs and everyone

To be as strong as iron and as durable as bronze

More rice and maize will be in the upland fields

More pigs and buffalos will be at home and in farms”

When the shaman finishes the prayers, everyone responds, shouting:

“Oh, yang!”

Then the patriarch sucks out *can* wine from the bamboo pipe and hands over the pipe to others amidst jubilant gong and drum beats. People drink wine while eating grilled buffalo flesh throughout the night. Young and old villagers eat and drink, dance and sing to the tune of the gong and drum beats around the fire to welcome the New Year (Truong Bi).

The ritual to welcome the new house has several small ceremonies.

First is a ceremony of lighting the fire. All stoves in the house are lit up. In an E-de house-on-stilt, there are often many stoves: the main stove, the guest stove and the children stove. The shaman says the following prayers:

“Oh, Mtao Tlua and Kbua Lãn God

The Mgo hi God is under, the Mgo hãn God is over

We now pray to report that here

The firewood already huddled, the fire started and burned out

The fire in the kitchen is busting into flames

Fires, don't reach the clothing on the hangers

Remain there to grill foxes regularly in the morning.

Barbecue rabbits regularly in the afternoon

If the children play with fires, the fires extinguish themselves

If the char coal is still burning, don't blow them out.

Oh, God!”

Everyone pulls down the bamboo pipes to drink *can* wine from the jars.

Next is the ceremonial offerings to ancestors, inviting them to come back to attend the celebration of the new house, asking them to witness and support their children. Offerings include a jar of wine and a small pig.

The ceremonial offerings to the House God are then made. Offerings are seven jars of wine and a buffalo or a big pig. The shaman says the following prayers:

“Oh! Yang Ngo, Yang Yu, Yang Kgy,
Yang Kdlông!

Oh! Pô Rông, Pô Kriê, Dhia Anak,
Jia Kmă!

Oh! Yang in the East! Oh! Yang in
the West!

Oh! Yang in the South! Oh! Yang in
the North!

Come to attend a ceremony to welcome
our new house

Wishing that the house will be cool and
fresh and the family be harmonious

Having much rice and maize and many
buffaloes, cows, pigs and poultry

Guests from near and far coming to
visit in a joyful atmosphere

Oh, Yang!”

(Truong Bi - Le Trung Vu)

In the life cycle ritual, besides familiar
symbols, we can see many new symbols
typical to each ceremony:

In the ceremony praying for easy
childbirth, iron axe blade and bronze
bracelet are symbolic of strength, more
specifically here is the strength of the fetus.
The semantics of the iron axe has two layers.
The closer layer means “as hard as iron, as
durable as bronze” and the other layer which
is deeper is retrospective of the history of
human civilization, praising the discovery of
bronze and iron. It is iron and bronze that
created new capacity and power for humans.
In the epic *Đẻ đất đẻ nước* (The making of
the land and water) of the Muong ethnic
group, there are some woeful and majestic
chapters such as chopping Chu, Pulling Chu,
Building Chu House and Praising Cun Can
— a representative of humankind for

discovering bronze ore and iron ore, which
were symbolized by magic trees called
“Stone Chu trees, bronze Chu leaves, brass
flowers and tin fruits.”

In this ceremony, bead-tree leaves and
dog blood do not create strength but are used
to drive away evil spirits which are often the
cause of difficult childbirth.

The center of the Buffalo Eating
Festival to welcome the New Year is the
blang kbau tree, a silk cotton tree of 6m
high. This is a universe tree which is often
present in the East-West cultures. It plays
the role of customs clearance between
heaven and earth. Colourful bamboo fibers
symbolize high reproduction.

The Buffalo Eating Festival (*bong huả
kbao*), is often called the Buffalo-Stabbing
Festival. It is not a separate festival, but an
item in a ritual. It is to offer sacrifices. In the
upland agriculture, with the farming
techniques of making holes to sow seeds, the
Central Highlands people did not know how
to use draught, thus buffaloes were only used
to offer sacrifices in major festivals.

A village patriarch, who represents the
village, sits with his legs put on an iron knife
while the shaman spreads blood wine on his
head. Here we meet again iron and blood,
the symbol of power.

All those symbols are harmonized with
the prayers expressing the aspiration for
good health and vitality and good rice and
sweet potato crops, just like the prayers of
the Kinh “good harvest, cereals, good health
and prosperity”: “Health to the village
patriarch and everyone. As hard as iron, as
durable as bronze. Upland fields are full of
rice and maize. Pigs and cows are in big
herds in the fields.”

The typical symbol of the New House Ceremony is fire. All stoves (sometime 5 or 7 stoves) are lit up. Fire means light, against darkness. The discovery of fire is one of the biggest discoveries by humans, taking humans into a new stage of civilization.

The fire here also represents the victory in hunting: “To grill foxes regularly in the morning. Barbecue rabbits regularly in the afternoon.”

The symbols of the New House Ceremony are summarized in language — the prayers: “Wishing that the house will be cool and fresh and the family be harmonious; have much rice and maize, many buffaloes, cows, pigs and poultry. Guests from near and far please come to visit in a joyful atmosphere.”

In the Maturity Ceremony, many symbols represent the imposing things.

We can see many times the number 7, the number of maturity. Seven jars of wine, 7 *gong* poles, 7 *đing êa* bamboo tubes; 7 - joint *đing êa* tubes, 7 young men and women fetching water, 7 - notch bronze bracelet, and dancing with sword 7 times. The dress and arms are symbolic of the full age (7 - notch bronze bracelet, loin-cloth, buffalo-skin sandals, gourd crust, shield and knife).

The scenes of chopping down banana trees, dancing with shield and splashing water are typically imposing, proving the full growth of the young man.

2. Dualistic symbolic systems

The conception of every living thing has two opposite parts; we call it *dualism*, and are rather popular among the E-de people.

Things have two sexes — male and female. There are male gongs and female

gongs. They are opposite each other in terms of locating: *ana* gong is placed on one end and *mdu* gong is placed on the other end of the gong band. They are in opposition in terms of the way of playing: *ana* is hung for playing while *mdu* lies on a soft support.

In such an opposition, the female plays the key role (matriarchy). The *ana* gong is placed in the living room and in front of the house entrance like a house mistress. Meanwhile the *mdu* gong is placed hidden at the end of the gong row. Thanks to being hung up, the *ana* gong gives out overall resounding sounds. On the contrary, due to being placed on a soft support, the *mdu* gong is not resounding.

The *knak* gong has two types: the *knak hliêng* refers to girls and *knak khok* refers to boys. The *knak hliêng* gongs have the same rhythm and the *knak khok* gongs have another same rhythm, thus creating multi rhythms in a gong orchestra.

In addition to gongs, other musical instruments, such as *đing năm* (drum), *bró*, *đing buót klé* (drum), *gông*, etc. are also divided into two groups of female and male (*hliêng/khok*).

These two opposite groups form a musical band and the performance of the female and male sounds forms the music.

The drum has two faces made of female and male buffalo skins. The female buffalo skin face is called the female face and the male buffalo skin face is the male face. With both female and male faces, the drum has good resounding sounds.

In the plastic art, there are opposition and harmony between colours: hot/cold, black/white and green/red, and opposite

positions: front/back, right/left, horizontal/vertical and empty/full parts, etc.

For humans, there are many customs and habits that clearly identify male/female, mother/father, and maternal/paternal sides. The female sex, the mother and the maternal side always play the key role in the daily life and rituals.

The dualism thinking is quite popular among many ethnic groups in Vietnam.

Through the Mo system, we can see that the Muong thinks that every living thing comes from material and the two first and foremost important elements are soil and water. Every living thing must move, must “stand and rise up.” But they cannot move if they are not fully created. And the basic perfection is the pair, things of the same sex and things of the opposite sex that co-exist just like soil and water, moon and stars, rice and wine, areca trees and areca fruit, cassava plants and roots, birds and fish, buffaloes and cows etc. males and females, sky and moon, daytime and nighttime, and dark and light, etc.

Of the ethnic groups in Vietnam, the Cham has built a very close and highly general dualism ideological system:

With regard to gods, there are the Earth Genie and the Mother Genie, belonging to the female sex; the God of Heaven and the God of Father, belonging to the male sex. The mat used in the ceremonial offerings to the Earth Genie is faced down while the mat used in the ceremonial offerings to the Heaven God is faced up. The offering goat is divided into two parts, the upper part from the navel upward - the Yang (male) part is placed on a higher plate while the lower part — the Ying (female) part is placed on a lower plate. The hand of banana as offering

to the Heaven God is placed with face upward and as offering to the Earth Genie is reversed. The land has an areca tree tribe — in the mountainous region and coconut tree tribe — in the coastal region. In terms of housing, there are female houses and male houses. There are water fountains and fire fountains. For the calendar, it has 4 celestial stems belonging to the earth and four celestial stems belonging to the heaven. For cakes, there are long-shaped *linga* cakes and flat *yoni* cakes. All pair parts: Earth/Heaven, Female/Male, Mother/Father, Woman/Man, Short/Tall, Sea/Mountain, Water/Fire, and Yoni/Linga, etc. though are two but actually one, with dichotomy yet unity. They are elements that make the universe, the world, the society, humankind, material and spirit. Division and unity are the rule of movement of every living thing. With division and unity, there is reproduction, development, and destruction to be reproductive.

Like other ethnic groups, the dualism thinking of the E-de is shown throughout their rituals and form dualistic symbolic systems and the rituals themselves regulate the opposite relations in society and nature.

2.1. Wedding rituals and female/male regulation

Normally, young men and women are not allowed to have pre-marital sex. In the betrothal ceremony, there is a ceremony of holding bronze bracelet. On a selected date, the match maker, representing the bride family, takes a bronze bracelet to the bridegroom family (the bronze bracelet has already been offered to God, asking for God's witness). An elderly from the bridegroom family, holding the bracelet in hand, asks the young man whether he agrees. If the young man agrees, he holds the bracelet with his hand.

In the agreement ceremony, a hand-over of the bronze bracelet is held at the bridegroom family. After reaching an agreement between the two families, the bride and the bridegroom exchange bracelets with the witness of deities and the two families. Then the bride family hands over to the bridegroom family 8 bronze bracelets, a bronze bowl and a blanket. Bracelet (just like wedding rings) is a symbol of love and a promise of loyalty. The ceremony of holding and handing over the bronze bracelets creates a harmony and close ties between the young man and the young woman and between the bride and the bridegroom families.

After handing over the bracelets, the relationship between the young man and the young woman is not only harmonious but also shifted to another sphere — the marriage relationship which cannot be changed spontaneously. The E-de customary law confirms this in Article 95:

“You have exchanged the glass- bead necklaces and bronze bracelets. His are handed over to hers and vice versa. Yours are handed over to hers and vice versa.

Buffaloes are not forced to be tied to any rope, young men and women are not forced to marry. If two of you agree with each other, put the bronze bracelets on the mat. They themselves hold the bracelets, no one hand over to them.

But if on the next morning you get up when the sun rises, you say one thing in the previous night and another thing on the next day. You turn your head forward and backward and say something differently. You don't want to marry her. This brings shame to the young woman. You must return to her an amount of money worth a *kô* (equal

to 2 songs) as compensation and offer sacrifices of a pig worth a song (equal to 1 silver Indochinese piaster used before 1945).

2.2. *Funeral rituals and live/dead regulation*

In an E-de funeral, there are tangible and action symbols opposite each other like a paradox. Besides the mourning cry for the loss of the dear one, there are dancing and singing and young men and women exchanging love songs (In the Gia-rai funeral, there is even a procession of reproduction around the tomb in which people carry the reproduction spirit symbols, teasing each other and laughing).

In the E-de funeral, buffalo blood wine which is used to spread on the village patriarch to wish for good health to him and all villagers and on the pregnant mother's legs, praying for the healthy fetus, is now used to spread on the coffin. Similarly, the crescent moon shapes are drawn on the coffin. They are also engraved on the head of the staircase to welcome visiting guests to the family.

This confusion and opposition must be decoded.

This is not an accidental confusion, but a demonstration of a consistent and systematic conception in the E-de funeral rituals. By arranging symbols having opposite semantics, the E-de people bring *vitality to death*. Singing and dancing, in particular, the exchange of love songs represent joy brought to the sadness to regulate them. Blood wine and new moon (not old moon) symbolizing vitality and development are spread and drawn on the coffin to regulate life and death.

Not only that. Fire which is lit up simultaneously in the ceremony to welcome the new house is now burned up on the grave. Before leaving the tomb, a banana is grown on the grave and a strong chicken is released there. Tomb statues, in addition to their liveliness, bring vitality. There are statues of persons sitting with arms clasping their knees or holding their jaws. It is explained that these statues represent persons crying. Another explanation with deeper philosophy is that they are the symbol of the fetus, representing reproduction — future, opposite to the death present here.

Bringing life to death is a way regulating ying and yang in the E-de funeral. Besides, there are action symbols *considering the deceased having activities like they are living*. The fact that sharing all property with the deceased, including precious things such as gongs and jars and ordinary things such as clothing, bamboo papooses, gourd crusts, etc. and women pressing cooked rice into small balls to put into the grave symbolize this behavioral mode.

Finally, there is a ceremonial action that directly affects only one person in a funeral but very important. That is the bathing of the widow or the widower. This is a modality of *making the death not to haunt the life*. The bathing ceremony should be held lastly when all basic things of the funeral are completed. It marks an important change in the life of the mourner. Before holding the ceremony, the mourner is closely tied to the decease. Then, if he or she takes any action of love affairs, the widow or widower is charged with “stepping over the head of the decease” and is heavily punished by customary law. Article 116 of the customary law says:

“She (he) calls for a man to illegally sleep together, takes a man into thick forest or bushes.

While the tomb is being built, the grave remains there and all the funeral affairs for the soul of the dead have not yet been completed, banana and sweet potatoes have not yet been grown (on the grave) chicken and duck have not yet been released, and the farewell and tomb leaving ceremony has not yet been held.

So she is sinful. She must be brought to trial in front of the family and relatives of the dead husband.”

Right after the bathing ceremony, the widow or widower is fully free and can wipe out tears to join the crowd in dancing and singing. After that he/she can enter into other love affairs or remarry.

This is the third regulating modality in the funeral of the E-de called *making the death not to haunt the living*.

Those action symbols, regulating life and death originate from a traditional conception of the E-de. Like other ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands, the E-de believe that right after dying, the soul of the decease hangs about the tomb. Therefore, it is needed to care for the soul, “keeping the grave.” After “leaving the grave”, the soul is released and goes to ancestors in Atau Village. There, the soul evolves seven times (To Ngoc Thanh, 2003, p. 5) and finally turns into a dew drop. The dew drop, through the naming ceremony (as discussed earlier) becomes a young person in the family and community. Le Trung Vu calls it a close life cycle, with a 3-point space and 7-time evolution (Le Trung Vu,

1992, p. 230). So, human life is a continuous cycle, in which the grave leaving ceremony is an important stage in this cycle, in order to promote the evolution toward the stage in which the soul comes back to a new and young person. And in the death, considering its process, there is life. In another words, the grave leaving ceremony is to prepare for a new life incarnation.

This is a common conception of many ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands. As discussed earlier, we know the conception of a close life cycle of the Banah ethnic minority group. In his research study of funeral rituals of the Gia-rai ethnic group, To Dong Hai writes: “The death of a person is not a complete end of his/her life. It is only a process of evolution of a human life from one stage to another, from *bôn plei* of the living to *bôn plei* of the dead, and after a certain period of time, after some evolutions in the other world, the life of that person will be restored in the world of the living, but under a new form, in another *body*” (To Dong Hai, 2002, p. 98).

Ngo Van Doanh has a similar comment on the conception of the life and death of the people in western Central Highlands: “For the Gia-rai and the Banah ethnic groups, the grave leaving ceremony is a ceremony to farewell the soul of the dead to its world to live, or imaginably speaking, the grave leaving ceremony is a ceremony to revive the dead, but in another state. It’s not accidental that the architectural images and sculptures (sepulcher and tomb statues), forms of performance (masks, puppets, dances) and other activities (eating, exchanges of love

songs, young men and women having heart to heart talks, etc.) in the grave leaving ceremony show many images of reproduction and the process of forming a new person. So it can be said that the grave leaving ceremony is a festival that revive the dead and is a form showing many artistic activities about the conception of the death of the Gia-rai and the Banah people: death means shifting to life in another state or another world so as to return to life of a person” (Ngo Van Doanh, 1995, p. 32 - 33).

In short, in funeral rituals, through the use of opposite symbols, the E-de people deal with the death by regulating life/death, with the modalities of bringing vitality to the dead, considering the dead as being alive with normal activities and wiping out the haunting of the life by the death. This way of behavior originates from the conception of the evolution from life to death and from death to life (This is not the theory of samara of Buddhism). This is a common conception of many ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands. Back to the question raised at the beginning, the paradox in the funeral ritual is thus the expression of a conception of flexible, dialectic and reasonable evolution between life and death.

We have just discussed the wedding and funeral rituals. There are other rituals that show symbols regulating dualistic relations. The ceremony praying for rain regulates the relation between humidity and dryness, drought and flood so as to have favorable rains and wind. The ceremony praying for good health regulates the relation between illness and health. The ceremony

praying for good harvest regulates plentifulness and poverty (These ceremonies have already been described above).

So, rituals do not only express concepts of life of the ethnic minorities, but also regulate opposite relations, including those between men and those between men and nature, in order to bring harmony to humans and their outside world in terms of key aspects of life: *material life and spiritual life*.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

1. Back to the question raised at the beginning, if only looking at the appearance of ritual actions and take the criteria of the majority group to value them, we can easily have prejudice comment that those rituals are the center of all superstition and backwardness of the E-de and other ethnic minority groups.

On the contrary, we should consider rituals as symbolic systems. And to symbols, the relation between the thing representing and the thing being represented, the thing expressing and the thing being expressed is often arbitrary and default. Therefore, when having a cursory look at their appearance, it is hard to understand them or misunderstand their contents. This is the reason of mistaken prejudice.

Based on the above-mentioned conceptions, we have analyzed single and dualistic symbolic systems in the rituals of the E-de ethnic group, finding out their semantics. From their appearance which is hard to understand by the outsiders and sometime are not good looking, those

rituals contain profound and lofty notions, very practical to the people and regulate all relations in the community and relations with nature in order to bring about a plentiful, rich, harmonious and happy life.

2. The 7th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted a Resolution on cultures of ethnic minority groups saying: “Preserving and developing the values and identity of the traditional cultures of ethnic minority groups in the common development cause of all ethnic groups in unified Vietnam” (Vietnam Communist Party, p. 35). To preserve and develop the values of the cultures of ethnic minority groups, it’s necessary to respect, based on understanding and wipe out prejudices. The E-de rituals mentioned above are examples. They can be applied to other ethnic minority groups.

3. However, in the E-de rituals, there are many things excessive and strict which waste time and money and are not up-to-date. Therefore, in the real interest of the E-de people we should help them understand clearly that rituals do not have an absolute role and so they should be readjusted. It is needed to improve activities of the real life to meet the aspirations and expectations of the people as expressed in rituals. Techniques, including traditional and modern should be selected and applied. In health, combination should be made between local traditional medicine and western medicine. In management, execution and behaviors, both customary and State laws should be respected.

4. We must eliminate old prejudice against rituals of ethnic minority groups and the use of administrative measures and force to wipe out those rituals. This is the issue of religious belief of which the Resolution of the 9th Party Central Committee "...confirms that religion and belief are the spiritual needs of a section of the population... it is necessary to respect the objective fact and have a sense of responsibility to ensure the freedom of religion and beliefs" (Commission for Ideology and Culture of the Party Central Committee, 2001, p. 270 — 271). Banning them is not only contrary to the objective fact and violates the freedom of religion and beliefs of the people but also creates a spiritual gap to be misused by the enemy: "Banning the people to hold those rituals, we create a spiritual gap in their spiritual life. That gap will immediately be filled by Protestantism because *"When the Party goes away, the priest will come."* Christ gives people's flesh and blood to deities, Christ administers the souls of the people whom we lost (to be more precise, instead of "administering", we discussed more - PDN). As for their bodies, we have tried hard to "eliminate poverty" for Christ to mind his pity Christian believers."³

³ According to To Ngoc Thanh (2003), in a survey among the Banah, the 7 evolutions include: "The dead is turned into a tiger. The tiger is stabbed to death and turned into wild cat. The wild cat is turned into a fox. The fox dies and is turned into a chevrotain. The chevrotain dies and turned into a mouse. The mouse dies and turns into a poking mouse. The poking mouse dies and turns into a morning dew drop."

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