

TÂY NGUYÊN EPICS: DISCOVERIES AND PROBLEMS

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1. Tây Nguyên epics: old problems and new discoveries

1. Nowadays, when speaking of the *tr-ờng ca* (long poem), *anh hùng ca* (heroic poem) or *sử thi* (epic) as an oral tradition of folk literature of ethnic minorities in Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), one can't help mentioning L. Sabatier with the *Đăm Xăn* epic collected and published by him in 1927. He produced the revised second edition (1) in 1933, and Đào Tử Chí translated it into Vietnamese in 1959. The year 1927 is thus considered the first milestone, which marks an important discovery of this unique legacy of oral literature of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên. According to G. Condominas (2), a well-known French researcher on Vietnamese studies, the French translation of the *Đăm Xăn* epic has revealed to the Western world a "wonderful poem", a "masterpiece" of the oral literature of Indochinese ethnic minorities.

D. Antomarchi and G. Condominas discovered and published the *Đăm Di* epic (3) in 1955. As such, the discovery and publication of those very first epics of Tây Nguyên are closely connected with the names of French scholars and colonialist administrators such as L. Sabatier, D. Antomarchi, and G. Condominas.

2. During the 1960s of the 20th century, when Vietnam was still divided into two parts, some cadres from Tây Nguyên came to the North. Among them were Y Đìêng, Y Yung, Kớxo Bôliêu, and Ngọc Anh who

worked jointly to publish the book *Tr-ờng ca Tây Nguyên (Long Poems of Tây Nguyên)* featuring such epics as the *Xinh Nhã*, *Đăm Di*, *Khinh Dú*, *Đăm Đờoan*, *Y Ban* and *Y Bờrao* (4). This well-known book introduced 7 more epics, most of which are of the Êđê, apart from the two made known by the French prior to the 1950s. After the publication of *Tr-ờng ca Tây Nguyên*, some other authors like Y Wang and Nguyễn Hữu Thấu (5) also introduced the *Đăm Xăn* epic. However, their books were chiefly based on the translation made by L. Sabatier.

Those initial discoveries of Tây Nguyên epics are worthy of praise. However, they have left many problems to discuss, concerning the methodology of collection and the text. For example, *Đăm Xăn* is the only epic which has its Êđê original version. The rest are present only in Vietnamese translations. Elements of performance have not been taken for consideration during collection and presented in the texts. It is even thought that these epics were subjected to adjustment and abridgement by the collector and publishers.

3. The period from the 1990s until now can be considered a period of **Rediscovering Tây Nguyên epics** among ethnic groups. It has brought about a breakthrough in discovering and understanding the numerous Tây Nguyên epics. Since 1984, the Institute of Folklore and the Service of Culture and Information of Đắc Lắc have coordinated

to investigate and collect folk literature within the province, of which epics constitute a significant part. Other cultural agencies and individuals in the provinces of Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Phú Yên have also initiated the search for epics.

The collection and publication of epics during the 1980s were relatively modest, with regard to the areas investigated and the number of epics discovered. Collectors in Đăk Lăc discovered several other epics of the Êđê, such as *Hbia Sun-Găn kđiêng*, *Mđrong Đăm*, *Hjong-Hlong*, *HDung -Y Thu*, *Đăm Thí*, *Mhiêng*, *Hbia Bao Mtao Grăn Kđiêng*, and so on (7). In Gia Lai and Kon Tum, a group of collectors led by Tô Ngọc Thanh published the *Đăm Noi* epic of the Bana (8). Nguyễn Thị Hồng came up with the *Giông nghèo tám vợ* (The Poor Giông has Eight Wives) and *Tre Vắt ghen ghét Giông* (Tre Vắt is Jealous of Giông) of the Bana (9). In Phú Yên, Ka Sô Liêng made efforts to publicize some long poems of the Êđê and Chăm Hroi (10).

A great step forward has been made since the late 1980s/early 1990s up until now. The research group of the Institute of Folklore in coordination with the Đăk Lăc Service of Culture and Information revealed a huge system of epics *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông. The ten year plus research has yet to come to conclusion as to the exact number and volume of the epics. Initial results of new findings have been published gradually, for example in *The Archaic Epics of the Mnông* by Đỗ Hồng Kỳ, *Harvest Time on bon Tiang* and *The Magical Nêu Pole* by Trần Văn Vịnh and Điểu Kâu (11). These significant findings were reported to the Scientific Conference

on Tây Nguyên epics held by the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in coordination with the People's Committee of Đăk Lăc province in Buôn Mê Thuật on May 19, 1997. This event inspired the devising of the Project on Survey, Collection, Translation, Publication, and Preservation of the wealth of Tây Nguyên epics. The Government entrusted the project to the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, and provinces in Tây Nguyên to be carried out during the period of 2001-2005.

A decade has elapsed since the start of the project on Tây Nguyên epics. A panoramic picture of Tây Nguyên epics is becoming more and more visible, taking many people aback because of its monumental diversity and values. The owners of Tây Nguyên epics now include not only the Êđê and Bana, but the Mnông, Giarai, Xơ Đăng, Raglai, Xtiêng, Chăm Hroi, and even the Mạ, Kơ Ho, and Churu. Epics are also found in high density outside Tây Nguyên, for example in the neighbouring provinces like Bình Phước, Ninh Thuận, Khánh Hòa, Phú Yên, and perhaps even in Bình Định, Quảng Ngãi, and Quảng Nam. The epics which have already been collected number hundreds, far exceeding the estimated figure. Besides the separate medium-length epics, *sequential epics* have been also discovered. Each sequel of epics incorporates many works, which share the same characters, topics, and style of presentation. Examples are the monumental epics *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông and *Đăm Giông* of the Xơ Đăng. The survey has helped us define the areas with a relatively high density of epics,

such as the area of Êđê epics at Sông Hinh, the area of Mnông and Stiêng epics which lies between Đắc Lắc and Bình Phước, and the area of Xơ Đăng epics around Kon Tum town. This further makes us think of the possible existence of “source area” of epics of each ethnic group. In addition, other variants of the discovered epics such as *Xinh Nhã* and *Đăm Xăn* have also been found. They may change our interpretation of these “classical” epics.

Thus, over 70 years after the first attempts to make known Tây Nguyên epics, Vietnamese epics collectors and researchers have **reaped a bumper harvest** which inspires not only the circle of domestic researchers but also attracts the interest of international organizations and scholars.

1.2 New findings and new issues

In parallel with the discovery and collection of Tây Nguyên epics, the Vietnamese researchers focus on the issues of an academic character concerning epics and have achieved certain results. Eminent authors include G. Condominas, Hoàng Thiểu Sơn, Võ Quang Nhơn, Phan Đăng Nhật, Đỗ Hồng Kỳ, Nguyễn Hữu Thấu, to name but a few. (13) However, in the light of new discoveries, many issues on Tây Nguyên epics require further research.

1.1 With regard to the concept “Tây Nguyên epics”

The concept “Tây Nguyên epics” has been much referred to in social life over the last decade. However, almost no authors have treated it as a scientific term. In 1981, Associate Prof. Võ Quang

Nhơn touched upon the genre of “heroic epics of ethnic minorities in Tây Nguyên” in his book *Folk Literature of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*. The suggested definition did not cover all the significance of the genre. Only at the symposium held in Buôn Ma Thuột in 1997, whose content would be included in the book *Tây Nguyên epics* published in 1998 did this term come into official view (14). At this very symposium, some authors, including Nguyễn Duy Quý, Võ Quang Trọng, Vũ Ngọc Bình, Tr- ờng Bi, and the author of this paper, used this term as a scientific concept. They had the intention to develop a relatively complete concept of “the epic region of Tây Nguyên” (15).

So, what is the concept “Tây Nguyên epics”? In my opinion, this is a kind of folk narration within the frame of a genre called “epic” or “epopée” (*sử thi* in Vietnamese) by international scholars. It closely connects with the peculiarities of Tây Nguyên with regard to the natural environment, traditions of the local ethnic groups, the level of socio-economic development and cultural characteristics, which all together ensure the consistency of the genre in the following aspects: the length of the epic, the mode of performance, the form of oral transmission, content and artistic characteristics, which result in a cultural totality to be named “epic culture”.

Besides this concept, some researchers have spoken of the need to name types of epics and each epic. According to the modes of performance, Phan Đăng Nhật distinguishes the *Khan epics* of the Êđê, the *Hmon epics* of the Bana, the *Hri epics* of the Giarai, the *Ot Ndrông epics* of the

Mnông, the *Akha Juka epics* of the Raglai, the *Mo epics* of the M-ông, and the *Khấp epics* of the Thái (16) (the last two types of epics do not belong to the region of Tây Nguyên).

The naming of each epic is also worthy of note. The ethnic groups themselves do not give their epic creations any name. When necessary, they usually name an epic after the heroic character or the major events narrated in it. Therefore, one epic may have several names.

2. Tây Nguyên epic: definition of the genre

The discovery of hundreds of ethnic epics in different places presents the urgent task to define the genre for each epic. Therefore, our collectors are always concerned about the questions *What is the epic?* or *What is Tây Nguyên epic?* Indeed, this issue is also discussed by international scholars, who do not always reach a consensus, however (17). Within the scope of our ongoing project in Vietnam, it is necessary to reach a consensus on this concept to make it the basis for identifying Tây Nguyên epics.

In our opinion, Tây Nguyên epics have the following fundamental characteristics:

- In comparison with other genres of folk literature, *epics have considerable length*. Each of the collected epics lasts at least 2-3 cassette tapes (over 90 minutes each). The longest epics may require 10 tapes on average or even over 30 tapes for recording. Their publications can total 600-1000 pages each. As to sequential epics, like the *Đăm Jông* of the Xơ Đăng, each part includes 2-3 tapes. Given its 40-50 parts, each epic can have the length of 100 tapes, equivalent to tens of thousands

of textualised pages. According to Associate Prof. Phan Đăng Nhật, in comparison with other worldwide famous classical epics like the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Ramayana*, *Kalevala* and so on, Tây Nguyên epics are shorter in length. However, they outnumber the former in terms of quantity (18). This estimation should be proved by further findings, especially after textualising the available epics.

- The mode of epic performance constitutes a criterion for identifying Tây Nguyên epics. Singing-narration (hát kể), in which rhymed speech plays a pivotal role, is the mode of performance shared by all ethnic groups in the Tây Nguyên region. Different ethnic groups name this mode of performance in different ways: *Khan* by the Êđê, *Hmon* by the Bana, *Ndrông* by the Mnông, *Hri* by the Giarai, *Akha Juca* by the Raglai, and so forth. So we can say that narration is secondary to singing in epic performance. On the other hand, not all epics are performed in such way; it can be applied to folk-tales and stories in verse as well. This mode of performance imbued with community sense contributes to popularize Tây Nguyên epics and to preserve them from generation to generation.

- The content of each epics or the time it reflects is abundant and wide-ranging; it depicts the course of cultural and social formation and development of an ethnic group. In this panoramic picture heroic characters who symbolize the strength and aspiration of the whole community stand out in relief, and represent the Genuine, the Good and the Beautiful, which the whole community strives for. They show their roles in the creation of

the universe, culture and social management. Their images are, however, best highlighted in the context of war.

- Concerning their artistic creativity, Tây Nguyên epics are characterized by monumentality, mysticalness and exaggeration. Within the context of community performance full of lyricism, these features mesmerize the audience from one night to the next.

3. Classification of Tây Nguyên epics

In his categorization of the Êđê *Khan*, Associate Prof. Phan Đăng Nhật bases himself on the system of Meletinski (19), in which the *Khan* is considered the archaic epic different from antique epics such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (20) In our opinion, Tây Nguyên epics will have to be categorized as archaic epics, if we are to follow Meletinski's system. Such was the case when Phan Đăng Nhật classified the *Đăm Xăn*.

Tây Nguyên epics do not constitute a unity. According to some researchers, they belong to two sub-types whose names are yet to reach a consensus. Võ Quang Nhơn, Đỗ Hồng Kỳ, Tr- ơng Sỹ Hùng and others put it that the *Đẻ đất đẻ nước* (Birth of Earth and Waters) of the M- ờng, and the *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông are *mythological epics*, and the *Đăm Xăn* of the Êđê a *heroic epic*. Their viewpoint is shared by Prof. Đinh Gia Khánh, and later, Phan Đăng Nhật, who rely on the classification adopted by Chinese scholars: the first kind of epic is called *genesis epic*, which designates the creation of the sky, earth, universe, and human beings; the second kind of epic is named *epics about social institutions*, which denote the arrangement of social order by means of war.

Phan Đăng Nhật makes a step forward when he uses this system to classify some epics which have been made public. According to him, *genesis epics* encompass the *Đẻ đất đẻ nước* of the M- ờng, or even the *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông. On the other hand, epics about social institutions comprise a large number of epics, including the *Ch- ơng Han*, *Đăm Xăn*, *Đăm Di*, *Chilokok*, *Khinh Dú*, *Xinh Chi ôn*, *Djông*, *Đăm Đơ roăn*, *Y Prao*, *Đăm Noi*, *Mhiêng*, etc (22).

The above-mentioned classifications are based on the social contents of epics. If we consider the modes of performance and the structure of the epic, etc., we can present another classification. Given the hundreds of already found epics, it is urgent to elaborate well-grounded ways in order to facilitate their more scientific and profound interpretation.

4. The epoch in Tây Nguyên epics

We use the concept "epic epoch" to designate the socio-economic content of an epic, and to determine the social background and social setting of its birth and transmission.

a) Some researchers put forth different hypotheses about the time when Tây Nguyên epics came into being. When introducing the epic *Đăm Xăn*, Đào Tử Chí writes that it might have come into existence in around the 17th century (23). Proceeding from the social changes and cultural relations between the Chăm and the Êđê reflected in the *Đăm Xăn*, Võ Quang Nhơn thinks that this epic saw the light around the 14th century, or even earlier, around the 12th – 13th century (24).

Tây Nguyên epics could not be born simultaneously. Genesis epics (or

mythological epics) probably appeared earlier, as they reflect earlier societies. Moreover, the history of Tây Nguyên should not be viewed from the existing position, which considers Tây Nguyên a backward region in Vietnam. New archeological findings, for example in Cát Tiên (Lâm Đồng) to the south of Tây Nguyên and Lung Leng (Kon Tum) to the north, testify to the presence of some highly-developed cultural centers in Tây Nguyên before and after the beginning of our era. Later on, Tây Nguyên fell into decline due to certain environmental and socio-economic factors. Is it true that Tây Nguyên epics, a kind of immaterial culture which has attained a relative height, were the products of the past heyday of the region? This is a big question to be answered.

b) Tây Nguyên epics present a vivid and diversified society. Depending on each kind of epic, whether they are genesis epics or epics about social institutions, the social milieu they reflect has different features. In general, however, Tây Nguyên epics share common social, historical, and cultural contents as follows:

- They reflect a primitive conception of the universe and the supernatural world (heaven, earth, and the underworld), a world-universe where humans and deities are distinguished in their unity. In the *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông, gods also live in Bon (village) like humans. They also catch fish, small shrimps and communicate with men in an equal footing.

- Epics, especially genesis ones, reflect the concept of the origins of the universe, human beings and culture. In the *Ot*

Ndrông of the Mnông, dragonflies have intercourse with foam in rocks to create the cosmos; gods created humans from rice paste and breathed souls into their bodies; every cultural dimension, from the culinary style, the mode of dressing, dwelling to festivals, is connected with the creativity of a god, or a hero of culture.

- Heroic characters constitute the major and most focused topic of genesis epics and epics about social institutions. In the process of creation of the universe, of culture as well as in conflicts or wars between communities, between humans and gods, these heroes represent and symbolize the community strength. In the epics, war is a daily occurrence with various nuances. One wages war to defend one's village community against the enemy, such as the war between Dăm Xăn and other hostile tribe heads like Mtao Grú and Mtao Mxây to protect Hơ Nhí and the village; or the war of revenge in which Xinh Nhã defeats Chi Lơ Bú, who has destroyed the village, killed Xinh Nhã's father, and captured his mother as a slave. War may break out on other pretexts, such as the vying for beautiful girls among heroes. In the *Ot Ndrông* of the Mnông, the hero Lênh captures young girls Pinh and Jông. It is the vestige of marriage based on "wife capture" common in Tây Nguyên in the past. The goal of such a kind of war is not to occupy land, but chiefly to appropriate wealth and women. This reflects a great conflict in the course of development of Tây Nguyên society. Though abundant in land, Tây Nguyên is, however, sparsely populated. Its human force is limited. In general, the causes and forms of war may be different but the common point is the reflection of

the evolution of ethnic societies in Tây Nguyên, from separate, small communities to a more advanced society by means of war to gather people, wealth and power.

- Among social relations of the ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên, community sense and matriarchal society are markedly presented in the epics. Community, first and foremost, is the village community, which is most representative of the social relationships of Tây Nguyên ethnic minorities. This community sense stems from the shared habitation, ownership of land and natural resources, spiritual and cultural life. The community sense is not in oppositional to, or separate from the heroic character. It is just a concentrated demonstration of the strength and aspiration of the whole community.

Ethnic minorities in Tây Nguyên, typically those belonging to the Austronesian ethno-linguistic family, follow matriarchal society. Therefore, the epics portray various social matriarchal relations in a focused manner, especially the practice of *chủ nuê* (in which a man gets married to a sister of his dead wife).

There seems to be a contrast between the matriarchal society, where the role of women is highlighted, and the role of men, particularly Mtao, i.e. military chiefs – a new class in society. These men hold the most wealth and power. According to Võ Quang Nhơn, the epic *Đăm Xăn* depicts a fierce struggle between the matriarchal society and the new force represented by heroic Mtao. At first, Đăm Xăn flatly refuses the marital relation based on the traditional custom of *nối dây* (*chủ nuê*). Then he chops down the *Smuk* tree (the

sacred totem tree) instead of protecting it. Finally, he divorces his wife and tries to win the Sun Goddess' heart, only to buy himself a tragic death (25) All these details show a traditional matriarchal order in society and its contradictions brought about by the process of evolution, as well as manifests the “social institutional” character of this type of epic.

As epics reflect various historical, social and cultural dimensions, they are seen by many as a “walking encyclopaedia” telling the life the Tây Nguyên ethnic groups. Certainly, epic researchers have not unveiled the whole vivid picture of the traditional society in the hundreds of discovered epics. They have come up with several rough sketches only, mainly through typical and familiar epics such as the *Đăm Xăn* or *Xinh Nhã*. Some newly-discovered epics are waiting for analysis and interpretation which may help us better understand the social picture. Of course, like other forms of literature and art, epics reflect society by means of artistic language. Therefore, when studying the history and society of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups through epics, we have to work out a suitable mode of “decoding” so as to identify their history and society in a more accurate manner.

5. Artistic characteristics of epics

Perhaps, we have not acquired the sufficient amount of epics necessary for comprehensive research on their artistic characteristics. Therefore, basing ourselves on the available research results, we can only present some initial remarks and regard them as suggestions for further research.

First and foremost, Tây Nguyên epics are a genre of oral literature; so the language of expressions is certainly of prime importance. Epics use rhymed speech, i.e. an intermediate form of daily language and poetic language. By the way, rhymed speech is used not only in epics but also in other forms of oral literature, including everyday conversations. This is understandable because it is easier for ethnic groups that do not have a system of writing to memorise and spread folk literature through rhymed sentences. These sentences often contain opposite elements in sound and rhythm, for instance:

“Sa êtuh cô chua, đũa êbao cô kjuk”

(One hundred people make beds, two thousand people dig holes)

or

“Dlăng mnuih kpluk kplak dôk buh,
mnuih jũ ai knam, tam si muôr hdam”

(People walk back and forth cutting rice; they look like black clouds, rushing around like ants and termites)

Epic language is rich in comparisons, images and musicality. *It uses plants, birds, or animals to talk about human beings and their emotions.* Êđê khan epics describe the beauty of young men and girls with a lively comparison: “*He walks on the road as fast as a Prao huê snake. He worms his way through thatch-grass like a Prao hómát snake. Each time he treads on the threshold of the door, the house-on-stilts shakes seven times,*” or “*She ambles about. Her movements are as lithe as a prolific Blô branch and as flexible as treetop branches swinging in the wind*” *She walks like a flying phoenix,*

like a hovering eagle, and like flowing stream water” They describe the sounds of gongs: “*Beat the gongs so that their sounds can spread far and wide. Beat them so that the sounds can go down through the floor and touch the ground. Beat them so that the sounds can escape the roof and reach the sky. Beat them so that monkeys will forget to hold tree branches tight and evil spirits will forget to harm human beings. Beat them so that rats will forget to dig holes, snakes lay immobile, hares startle, and deer forget to browse...*”

Exaggeration is one of the descriptive techniques of epics. Epics describe: “*Buffaloes and bulls bustle like ants and termites,*” or “*Male servants hustle chest to chest, female servants breast to breast.*” They feature rich tribal chiefs’ houses as ones having golden roofs, silver floors, and lead staircases. Such overstatements do not sound unreasonable to readers. Instead, they harmonise with the monumentality and excitement of the epic atmosphere.

Monumentality is found in epics of any ethnic groups. In the first place, epics reflect great events of an ethnic group and give a panorama of the whole epoch. Moreover, the technique epics use to reflect reality is that of exaggeration accompanying an overwhelming atmosphere caused by various forms of performance which sometimes include some air of mystery. All of these create a magical and extraordinary sense of an epic which blends well with the historical air of the past. Perhaps, an epic would lose its originality without such a sense.

The way a heroic character is portrayed in an epic is also worthy of discussion. An epic hero is a representative of his community rather than an isolated individual. He is of extraordinary dimensions in which the community deposits its great and romantic aspirations. However, such a hero still has his own fate and personalities. For instance, Đăm Xăn does not surrender himself to the restrictions of matriarchal society. Instead, he fights against brutal hostilities such as Mtao Grú and Mtao Mxây, or even tries to win the Sun Goddess' heart, with his extraordinary deeds. Xinh Nhã has a different fate. After hard training, he becomes a hero who fights the brutal tribal chief Chi Lớ Bú in attempts to avenge his father's death and save his mother. Lênh, Yang, and Tiăng in the Mnông people's *Ot Ndrông* are also heroes and each of them has his/her own stature, fate, and appearance. That is the success of the unknown authors of these epics in figuring out their heroes.

6. Tây Nguyên epics are "living" ones

While such ancient epics as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Ramayana*, or *Kalevala* exist mainly in print or have been transformed into other art forms, Tây Nguyên epics are still circulated among people in their original form and sung during their community activities. They are passed on from generation to generation and perhaps have taken on some creation and perfection. So Tây Nguyên epics still live their own life in the community. This is a unique character of Tây Nguyên epics.

As an intangible cultural heritage circulated orally, Tây Nguyên epics lie

deep in people's memories. They become visible, through the performance by epic tellers, on special occasions such as weddings, festivals, celebrations of a newly-built house, reception of important guests, or parties for babies reaching one month and one year of age. So they are in close touch with epic tellers and community activities, or in other words, with human beings and human society.

Nowadays, though the number of Tây Nguyên ethnic people who can perform epics has decreased, epic tellers, either knowing only some parts or several complete works, can be found in almost every village. Particularly, some can tell tens of epics. According to our statistics, each ethnic group has tens, even hundreds of epic tellers. Most of them are older people and men. But women are not rare among them at all. The problem is that they are of old age and their memory has started to deteriorate. If we fail to record epics from them, it will be hard to foresee losses of this precious cultural heritage.

The vitality of epics depends not only on the life expectancy of their tellers but also on the setting of their performance. Some four or five decades ago, epics were performed quite regularly in community ceremonies attracting hundreds of listeners and lasting overnight. Such performances took place either in the community house or guest rooms of long houses. During harvests, they might take place in a watchtower near rice fields. Epic tellers, depending on their ethnic origin, either lay or sat while telling an epic. Listeners would sit around a fire. But among the Bana people, when an epic

teller starts singing the Hmon, fire must be put out so that only darkness prevails, and gods and heroes can return to them. Listeners keep absolute silence. They eagerly listen to the melodious singing. For such a performance, no musical instrument is used. Instead, the singer uses his voice, gestures and facial expressions to illustrate the story and the characters' mood.

Those who just wish to learn the words of an epic by heart can also attend such performances. They love epics and have a good memory. Certainly, they can memorise an epic after listening to it several times. Quite a few people learn an epic from their parents. In this way, epics can be passed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, over recent decades, such performances have become less frequent under the influence of different social and cultural factors. Another reason is that some senior epic tellers pass away each year while younger people are no longer interested in learning epics. This has driven Tây Nguyên epics into the danger of disappearing. If we fail to preserve epics and maintain epic performances, our future generations will only see Tây Nguyên epics lying dead in books.

7. The Tây Nguyên epic region

In the early 1990s, when doing research on the cultural regions in Vietnam, we came up with a new notion "*vùng thể loại văn hoá*" (cultural genre region) in which we considered Tây Nguyên epics one of Vietnam's cultural genre regions (26). At the conference on Tây Nguyên epics held in Buôn Ma Thuột in 1997, we made known a report titled

"*The Tây Nguyên Epic Region - Some Basic Viewpoints*" in which we gave the following definitions: "An epic region is a cultural genre region where, in a certain territorial space, ethnic groups have created and circulated epics that have similarities in the content, structure, art peculiarities, mode of performance, transmission, and nuances of expression, creating a solid cultural totality to be passed down from generation to generation."

In our research we recommend the following criteria for identifying an epic region:

- Large amounts and density of found epics;
- The found epics belong to almost all localities in the Tây Nguyên region and its neighbouring localities with four Tây Nguyên provinces being the core. Indigenous people of these localities are real owners of Tây Nguyên epics.
- Tây Nguyên epics are archaic ones, thus different from antique epics.
- Tây Nguyên epics are living. They still exist in community activities of the indigenous people through singing-narrating performances (oral transmission).
- The unity in the content and artistic value of epics.
- The organic relation between epics, their singing performance and traditional cultural activities, creating a cultural totality imbued with Tây Nguyên peculiarities (27).

Associate Professor Phan Đăng Nhật has developed the idea of the Tây Nguyên

epic region into a research work which has been published (28).

The question is in what historical and social conditions Tây Nguyên ethnic groups have been able to preserve their epics while in other regions epics have almost disappeared from community life. The answer to this question will help to interpret a historical cultural phenomenon and present us with a proper approach to working out measures to preserve epics and epic performances in community cultural life.

In the first place, unlike other regions of the country and perhaps the Southeast Asian region, Tây Nguyên region evolved quite independently, almost free from the influence of Chinese and Indian cultures. Some researchers often talk of Tây Nguyên as a “non-Chinese and non-Indian” region. Until the mid-20th century, the age-old lifestyle of many Tây Nguyên ethnic groups remained almost intact. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, epics and epic performances still maintain a balanced, harmonious and organic relation with other cultural activities, creating a necessary social environment for the survival of epics as a typical and peculiar cultural factor. Several decades ago, epics were still circulated among local populations through public singing and reciting performances which drew broad interest. Local populations and their needs for cultural enjoyment are the breeding ground for the preservation and circulation of epics. Another factor helping to preserve epics is that epics and epic performance are not connected with religious ceremonies. Therefore, when a religion dies out or changes, the existence of epics will not be affected directly.

Such historical, social and cultural conditions in Tây Nguyên that used to help preserve and circulate epics for a long time are now disappearing. Tây Nguyên is no longer an isolated region. Its integration process is even more rapid than other rural and mountainous regions of the country. Changes in the economy and society are also breaking down the cultural structure, depriving it of its purity. Traditional and new values intermingle with each other in a disorderly manner, leading to changes in the needs and tastes of the people, especially the youth's, for traditional culture in general and epics in particular.

In the face of this situation, we have to foresee the inevitable dying out of epics and particularly the performance of epics. However, we cannot let epics die a “historic death.” We have to work out various measures to preserve this precious cultural heritage of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups. There are three major ways to preserve epics: a) **static preservation**, i.e. doing surveys, collecting, and recording epics in the form of written texts, visual video tapes and audio tapes, with which researchers can study and discover the multi-faceted values of the epics and people can retrace their own ethnic epics, b) more importantly, **mobile preservation**, i.e. bringing epics back to community activities so that the people who created them can continue circulating and preserving them. The underline is how to pass down epics from old singers to younger generations, how to restore the tradition of epic performance, and how to awake young generations' historical consciousness through such performances,

and c) **promoting** the outstanding values of epics through modern art, literature, films, novels, short stories, fine arts, or music. This means making the typical values of the epics embodied in new literary and art creations, helping to enrich the culture of Tây Nguyên ethnic groups.

8. Tây Nguyên epics and Southeast Asian epics

Epics are a general phenomenon of human culture. Vietnamese epics in general and Tây Nguyên epics in particular are a Southeast Asian cultural phenomenon. It is common knowledge that the Tây Nguyên ethnic people speak languages that belong to the Austronesian and Austroasiatic linguistic families. They are also found in the Southeast Asian region, especially on Southeast Asian islands. For a long time, researchers have discovered a cultural link between Tây Nguyên ethnic groups with those in Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (29). Tây Nguyên epics must have a connection with those in this region, especially those of Malaysia and Indonesia. In such countries, attempts have been made to collect and do research on their epics. This will open a new approach to comparative study of epics of various nations in this region (30). An international conference on Asian-European epics will be held in Malaysia this October. Hopefully, this will be a good chance for regional as well as European epic researchers to meet and exchange their research results. This will also be a good occasion for Vietnam to “regionalise” its research on epics and can be regarded as a sign of Vietnam’s integration into the region and the world.

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