

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2023.74-623865

THE MONTAGNARD VILLAGE: UNIQUE HERITAGE OF THE VIETNAMESE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS¹

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Abstract. The Vietnamese Central Highlands is a unique land in the ecological and cultural context of Vietnam. Among the factors making the area distinctive is the traditional type of village known locally as a Montagnard village. A Montagnard village is not only a functioning residence, but also a social-cultural unit that contributes to determining the world outlook, the way of life, the kinds of art, and the diverse norms of behavior of the indigenous residents. This article seeks to analyze the typical traits which serve to differentiate the Montagnard village from the villages of Kinh and other ethnic minority groups.

Keyword: village, Montagnards, heritage, Vietnamese Central Highlands

For citation: Dang Hoai Giang (2023). The Montagnard Village: Unique Heritage of the Vietnamese Central Highlands. *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 7 (4): 71–81.

Received: October 18, 2023

Received in revised form: November 30, 2023

Accepted: December 7, 2023

ДЕРЕВНЯ ГОРЦЕВ: УНИКАЛЬНОЕ НАСЛЕДИЕ ПЛАТО ТЭЙНГУЕН Данг Хоай Зянг³

Аннотация. Плато Тэйнгуен — уникальное место в экологическом и культурном контексте Вьетнама. Среди факторов, делающих этот район особенным, — традиционный тип деревни, известный как деревня горцев. Деревня горцев — это не только место жительства, но и социокультурная единица, способствующая возникновению мировоззрения, образа жизни, видов искусства, разнообразных норм поведения коренных жителей. В статье предпринята попытка проанализировать типичные черты, которые отличают деревню горцев от деревень кинь и других групп этнических меньшинств.

Ключевые слова: деревня, горцы, наследие, плато Тэйнгуен

Для цитирования: Данг Хоай Зянг. Деревня горцев: уникальное наследие плато Тэйнгуен // Вьетнамские исследования. 2023. Т. 7. № 4. С. 71–81.

¹ This study is solely funded by the Academic Publishing Fund of VNU-University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, under Project Number USSH.2023.26.

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Дата поступления статьи: 18.10.2023

Дата поступления в переработанном виде: 30.11.2023

Принята к печати: 07.12.2023

Introduction

If the village is considered the typical cultural space of all ethnic groups in Vietnam [Đặng Hoài Giang 2019], then for the Montagnards in the Central Highlands, the role of the village becomes especially important. Before being pacified and exploited by the French colonialists at the end of the 19th century, the Central Highlands had no state, only ethnic villages. Here, the village is so important that the sense of village community is even more important than the sense of ethnic community [Nguyễn Ngọc 2008: 153]. Despite the enormous changes that the Vietnamese Central Highlands society has experienced since the colonial period until now, Montagnard's village still exists as a unique cultural heritage of this highland region. Therefore, it has become an object of interest for many generations of domestic and foreign scholars over the past century.

Until the end of the 19th century the Central Highlands appeared very faintly in Vietnam's written history. Records about the area known as Dang Trong – a pre-colonial era designation for the middle geographic region of Vietnam – until the first half of the 19th century by Western missionaries and traders only mentioned the Kemoi region (i.e., the Central Highlands) as the rugged mountainous region of Central Vietnam. Only when the French pacified the Central Highlands at the end of the 19th century did the situation begin to change. In the early twentieth century, explorer Henri Maitre, through his outstanding work *The Montagnard Forest* [Maître 2007], provided an overview of the natural scenery of the Central Highlands and the lives of the ethnic groups there. In the following decades, later French scholars revealed many diverse dimensions in the life of the Montagnard villages [Hauteclouque-Howe 2018, Boulbet 1919, Condominas 2020, Dournes 2022].

Historically, Vietnamese people in the lowlands had little knowledge about the Central Highlands. After 1975, Vietnamese scholars from the North began to approach the Central Highlands and study the culture of the Montagnard ethnic groups. The lifestyle, customs, architecture, and customary laws of the Montagnard villages have been mentioned in a number of typical works [Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1986, Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1989, Vũ Đình Lợi 2000, Ngô Đức Thịnh et al 2002, Ngô Đức Thịnh 2007, Nguyễn Văn Kự & Lưu Hùng 2007, Nguyễn Ngọc 2008, Bùi Minh Đạo 2010, Lưu Hùng 2014, Đặng Hoàng Giang 2014, Lê Hồng Lý et al 2019].

Besides the studies on Montagnard villages in general mentioned here, there are also many studies on villages of specific ethnic groups [Mlô Duôn Du Thu Nhung 2001, Buôn Krông Tuyết Nhung 2012, Đặng Hoài Giang 2019, Hoài Giang Dang & Ky Nam Nguyen 2023]. English-language studies on the Central Highlands in general in the post-1975 period are quite little in number, but there are also some excellent works [Hickey 1982a, Hickey 1982b, Evans 1992, Salemink 2003].

Building on the research achievements of these predecessors, combined with my research results after more than 10 years of researching the Vietnamese Central Highlands, this article focuses on analyzing the unique dimensions of Montagnard village throughout its long history as well as in the present period. On that basis, the article offers a few policy implications to help central and local managers design appropriate solutions to promote the participation and contribution of Montagnard villages in the context of development of the Central Highlands today.

Montagnards: Who are they?

In ancient Vietnamese, “người Thượng” (highlander) is often understood as mountain/highland people in general. However, in this article, the concept highlander does not have the general meaning mentioned above but has a more specific meaning – referring to indigenous groups living in an area that is today called the Vietnamese Central Highlands. Thus, this concept is almost similar to the concept of Montagnards that the French have used since the 1940s to denote the indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands with the meaning of respect [Salemink 2018]. It then continued to be used in the South until before 1975 [Cửu Long Giang & Toan Ánh 1974]. Recently, some Vietnamese authors began to reuse this concept with the same meaning [Luu Đình Tuấn & Nguyễn Ngọc 2008; Nguyễn Ngọc 2010; Đặng Hoàng Giang 2014]. In this article, we use the term “Montagnard village” to make mention of the village of Montagnard communities to distinguish with other kinds of villages of Kinh people and ethnic minority migrants who are the outsiders and moved to the Vietnamese Central Highlands from the end of the 19th century to now.

Most of the ancestors of the Montagnards were from the plains who fled to the plateau to seek refuge. Over time, racial mixing between old and new immigrant groups gave rise to different ethnic groups [Nguyễn Văn Huy 2016: 5.10.2020]. The Montagnard community in the Central Highlands is divided into two groups: the first belong to the Mon-Khmer language family (Austroasiatic languages) and the second belong to the Malayo Polynesian family (Austronesian languages). According to the List of Vietnamese ethnic groups published in 1979, the Austronesian linguistic group includes the following ethnic groups: JaRai (Jörai/Giarai), Ede (Rhadé/Rade), Churu (Chru), Raglai (Roglai); and the Mon Khmer language group includes: Bana (Bahnar), Sedang (Xodang), Gietrieng, Brau (Brou), Rmam (Romam), Ma, Mnong, and Coho (Koho) [GSO 1979] (Fig. 1).

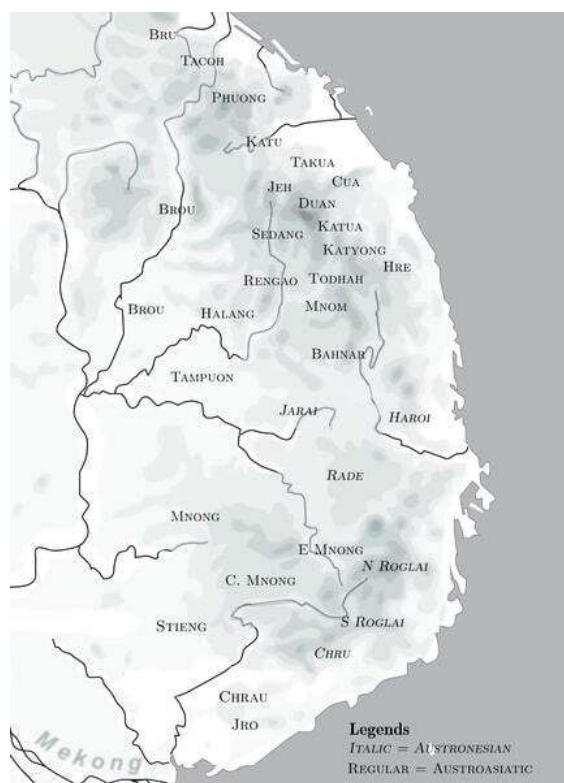


Fig. 1. The ethnolinguistic map of the Vietnamese Central Highlands.

Source: [Thurgood 2021]

The Vietnamese Central Highlands: a unique land

According to the National Overall Plan for the period 2021–2030 (vision to 2050) by the Vietnamese government, the Central Highlands is one of six socio-economic regions of Vietnam [Thủ tướng Chính phủ 2023: 1.10.2023]. The Central Highlands has a total area of 54,474 km² – accounting for 16.8% of Vietnam's natural area, with a total population of 5.8 million people, accounting for 6.1% of the country's population. The Central Highlands region includes 5 provinces: Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. These provinces are divided into three distinct regions: Northern Central Highlands (Kon Tum and Gia Lai), Central Central Highlands (Dak Lak), and Southern Central Highlands (Dak Nong and Lam Dong). Regarding geographical location, the North borders Quang Nam province; the East borders the provinces of Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan; the South borders the provinces of Dong Nai and Binh Phuoc, and the West borders the provinces of Attapeu (Laos) and Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri (Cambodia). Regarding natural resources, the Central Highlands has some special advantages in terms of climate, forest land and many rare minerals, especially about 1 million hectares of fertile red basalt soil and more than 3 million hectares of forest, accounting for 35.7% of the country's forest area. Socially, the Central Highlands is an extremely diverse and unique cultural space, with the presence of all 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam, of which ethnic minority groups number nearly 2.2 million people, accounting for more than 37.5% of the entire region's population [Thông tấn xã Việt Nam 2022: 2.10.2023].



Fig. 2. The administrative boundary of the Vietnamese Central Highlands.

Source: [Hồ sơ vùng Tây Nguyên 2020]

Methodology

This article first uses the document analysis method. The main sources of the article include: (i) Studies on the Central Highlands by international scholars. These studies were mainly published in English; (ii) French studies on the Central Highlands; (iii) Studies on the Montagnards in particular and the Vietnamese Central Highlands in general by Vietnamese authors.

A qualitative case study method was also implemented to collect field information. I have done a lot of field research in the Vietnamese Central Highlands during the period 2012–2022. In particular, from 2012 to 2014, I organized fieldwork 3 times in 6 villages – which represent several Montagnard groups: 1 Bana village and 1 Sedang village in Kon Tum province, 1 JaRai village in Gia Lai province, 1 Ede village in Dak Lak province, 1 Mngong village in Dak Nong province, and 1 Ma village in Lam Dong province. Field information was collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations and group discussions. In total, I have conducted 18 in-depth interviews, 3 participant observations, and 6 group discussions with key community members: village elders, village heads, women's union representatives, youth's union representatives, and gong artists. This information allows me to have a panoramic view of the life of Montagnard villages in general, both in the past and present. In addition, from 2012 to 2020, I had 10 field trips to 3 Ede villages in Buon Ma Thuot: Ale A village (Ea Tam ward), Ako Dhong village (Tan Loi ward), Ea Bong village (Cu Ebur commune). In these three villages, a total of 50 in-depth interviews, 2 participant observations and 4 group discussions were conducted. The people who provided me with information included: village elders, village heads, representatives of the women's union, representatives of the youth union, and gong artisans. I spent a lot of time researching the Ede community because this is one of the ethnic groups with a large population and great influence in the Montagnard community. Typical stories collected during these above field trips will be shown in the research results section.

Research Findings

Traditional ownership regime of Montagnard villages

One of the keys to determining the independence and autonomy of Montagnard villages is the existence of village community ownership of land and other resources. For Vietnamese villages in the delta, the collective ownership regime of the village community over resources was born quite early but has increasingly tended to be controlled by the central state, especially since the 15th century. Meanwhile, in the Vietnamese Central Highlands, until 1975, public ownership was still the common form of ownership, if not the only one. Each village is the owner of certain forest land resources. The village residents believe that the village's land and forests are sacred, no one can violate them, no one can defile them [Nguyễn Ngọc 2008: 155]. The village community's land ownership rights are very specifically stipulated in Ede customary law: “This land belongs to the ancestors, and people have passed it down to each other (generation after generation). If some rich chief wants to take over, it's impossible” [Ngô Đức Thịnh et al. 2012: 414].

The achievements of our in-depth interviews in the Montagnard villages indicate similar results. The following is a story provided by a Jarai village elder in Ia Grai district:

“Before 1975, our village land was very large. It must have been 3-4 times wider than it is now. At that time, I was about 20 years old. Although I'm a strong man, but at that time, I was unable to discover all the land of our village in the course of just a half-day. There are so many forests, but the great thing is that everyone knows the boundary between their village and the neighboring village. Grandparents and parents often instruct their children and grandchildren to protect the village's forests and not to encroach on the land of other villages. If you violate the land of another village, you will be punished by their Yang [god]”.

All village resources are protected, managed, distributed and used properly through customary laws – enforced by the village elder council. The village elder council consists of representatives of the clans in the village, whose leader is called the village owner. Based on customary law, the village

elder council is responsible for dividing forest land among households for farming. What is interesting is that the provisions of customary law are voluntarily implemented by all people. In the community there are almost no conflicts about land. There is also no encroachment or resource conflict between villages, although the boundary between one village and another is only marked by a rock or tree stump.

Structure of the Montagnard village

Each village is a spatial whole consisting of the following 4 elements:

– Agricultural production space: This is the area where people exploit forests for farming, ensuring food sources for households. In this space, the Montagnards have created a unique farming model called "swidden agriculture" with the following steps. First, people burned a patch of forest to prune rice. Ash powder and humus from the soil will grow rice. After a few years, when the land became infertile, they stopped farming and switched to burning other forests. The old land is allowed to lie fallow. After only a few years, on this newly retired land, forest trees will grow again. The forest is very strong. I have never seen anything as strong as the forest. After about 15-20 years, when the family's last piece of forest was burned, people returned to the first piece of land. At this time, it has become a virgin forest for people to exploit anew”.

– Residential space: This is the residence of households in the community. When talking about residential space, we mean architectural style (architectural motifs, architectural materials, how architectural space is used, decorative arts). We also include family type (nuclear or extended) and countless principles that are set forth in the context of family life: forms of inheritance and property division, gender functions, forms of choosing the marriage partner and residence after marriage, form of cooperation between families of the same bloodline... [Đặng Hoài Giang 2019];

– Community activity space: This is where common community activities take place, notably the community house and entertainment area. Community living space has the function of promoting the process of individual socialization – helping individuals immerse themselves more deeply in outside life, enhancing social cohesion and maintaining the cultural continuity of the community through cultural practices organized in a number of special events [Đặng Hoài Giang 2019]. Here are the words of a Ma village elder we taken from our field trip:

“My village has several forests, of which the sacred forest is the most important. The Ma people often call the sacred forest the ghost forest. According to my grandparents, the sacred forest is the home of the forest gods. They look after the lives of species in the forest and are ready to punish anyone who dares to trespass into their territory. Therefore, no one dares to touch any tree in the sacred forest. Every year, our village holds a ceremony at the ghost forest. Now, although the government has managed the ghost forest, in the minds of the people, the ghost forest is still the village's forest. Therefore, we still maintain the ceremony of worshipping the ghost forest.”

Gongs in the life of Montagnard villages

The Montagnards do not cast their own gongs but use their precious forest products to exchange for gongs from the Kinh or Lao people. But the newly brought gong is just an ordinary object. In order for it to become a true musical instrument, the next step must be to "teach the gongs" so that they can "speak" the voice of the village, capable of expressing the deep feelings of the community to their gods, to the vast natural world, and to their ancestors. After a period of use, sometimes the gong loses its voice – like a child forgetting the voice of his ancestors. At those times,

it is necessary to "correct the sound" so that the gong can restore its old sound. Only special artisans have the ability to "teach the sound" or "correct the sound" of gongs. In the Bana language, they are called "pjau" or "njau cing". Pjau or njau means shaman – essentially a mediator between humans and gods.

In Montagnard villages, with a rhythm of life that operates according to the agricultural cycle and life cycle with countless accompanying large and small rituals, each person, from birth to death, is bathed in the sound and melody of gongs. Whether performed in community houses, in cemeteries, at wharf, in fields or in private homes of households, gongs are mainly used in religious events. These are sacred times, when people need to communicate with their gods or ancestors to express a certain need or desire. Thus, in essence, gongs are a musical instrument with the function of connecting people with gods, connecting current people with their ancestors. It is an intermediary tool that ensures the continuity of village culture both in space and time dimensions.

On the other hand, as we have seen, gong culture is shaped in the space of each village. In the Vietnamese Central Highlands society, each village is a separate world. Each village has its own ancestors, its own territory with specific forests and patron gods. Furthermore, each village has its own lifestyle, in addition to similarities with other villages. Gongs reflect the unique voice and aspirations of each village. Therefore, gong activities are closely linked to the spatial context and cultural context of each village. In other words, village space is the atmosphere and practice environment of gong activities. The following quote from a Bana artisan in Kon Tum will clarify this issue:

“The gongs of each village are not exactly the same. There is a difference. You have to pay very close attention to realize this. In terms of form, the Bana gong sets are all the same, but the way the villages play the gongs is different. Because the sound of gongs reflects the thoughts, feelings and voice of each village. For example, the rhythm of the gong in our village is often faster than the rhythm of the gong in the neighboring village. One time our village had an event but a member of the gong team was away. So, the village had to invite an artist from the next village to come over to fill the gap. Although this artist is very good, he is a bit awkward when performing. That's because he's not familiar with our village's way of playing.”

Discussion

First at all, while ownership by the monarch and private ownership were two common forms of ownership in the lowlands in Vietnam, in the Central Highlands, until 1975, Montagnard villages were still based on collective ownership of village communities of forest land resources. This regime has been institutionalized in customary law, which is the basis for the long-term existence of Montagnard village as the most basic social unit in the Central Highlands. At the same time, it is also the key to helping villages protect, exploit and use resources in a sustainable way.

Secondly, each Montagnard village has a strict spatial structure, with residential space located in the middle, surrounded by agricultural production space, religious activity space and community activity space. In fact, these spaces are the result of the process of humans exploiting and adapting to the forest ecosystem. Therefore, the nature of the Montagnard villages is that of forest villages, completely different from the "wet rice villages" of the Kinh people in the lowlands. The Montagnards have a very clear "forest consciousness": they are very knowledgeable about the forest, value the forest, only exploit in the forest what is sufficient for their needs, and have important rituals to protect the forest... In contrast to the misconception that the Montagnards rely on slash-and-burn agriculture

to survive, indeed, they are masters at protecting the forest. However, since 1975 until now, the Montagnards have no longer had the opportunity to protect forests according to their traditional experience because the entire Central Highlands forests have been assigned to state forestry companies to manage. But reality shows that state companies are not capable of protecting forests, and the Central Highlands has become the most deforested area in Vietnam. In that context, the Vietnamese Government should promote forest allocation to Montagnard villages and give them more rights, instead of still mainly assigning forestry companies to manage them.

Thirdly, the Montagnard village is the performing environment for gong activities. Therefore, the Central Highlands gong cultural space, according to UNESCO's expression, is essentially a village cultural space. Gongs are the language of each village. Therefore, preserving the Central Highlands gong space means preserving it in the village space, not on stage – as is done commonly nowadays. In other words, preserving the gong cultural space is only meaningful when associated with preserving the village cultural space.

Conclusion

Each community, based on their specific environmental and social conditions, has its own choice on how to organize and operate society. For the Montagnard ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, the village is their optimal choice. Unlike the societies in the lowlands of Indochina and mainland Southeast Asia, in the traditional Central Highlands society, the central state did not exist. The village became a "self-governing state" of all Montagnard ethnic groups. According to Tù Chi's expression, on this vast plateau, the village is the country [Tù Chi 2003: 555]. Each village has absolute ownership rights to a certain area of mountain and forest land. This right has been bestowed by the Yang (god) since the founding of the land and is concretized in customary law. Based on specific provisions of customary law, the village elder council operates the life of each village in a neat and smooth manner. Each village is a tight spatial structure with four interrelated elements: residential space, agricultural production space, community activity space and religious activity space. This entire space is covered by religious belief and this belief is concretized by countless rituals associated with the community's agricultural production cycle and the life cycle of each person. Therefore, village space is the space to create, enjoy, practice and transmit the cultural values of the community. Gong activities are an indispensable part of all large and small village rituals, whether at the family or community level. As sacred objects capable of expressing the voice, thoughts and wishes of the village, gongs have become a means of connecting people with the gods, the natural world and their long-standing traditions. Therefore, the so-called Central Highlands gong cultural space is actually the village cultural space.

In order for Montagnard villages to contribute more to the overall development of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, the central and local managers and policy makers should consider the following issues: (i) Firstly, respect the role of traditional institutions such as village elders' councils and customary laws, and create appropriate mechanisms to combine state law and these institutions; (ii) Secondly, for the Montagnard communities living near forests, the state should transfer these forests to them to manage and exploit. This is the best way to promote the forest protection experience of the Montagnards, and at the same time, help them increase their income thanks to forest resources. For key protection forest areas and special-use forests that cannot be allocated to the community, it is necessary to replicate the co-management model between the forest management board and local communities; (iii) Thirdly, to effectively preserve gong cultural space, central and local conservation

programs should pay more attention to preserving village space because gong activities are associated with each specific space village.

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