

# Custom and habit characteristics of Mnong people in Vietnam's Mnong epic

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## ABSTRACT

The Central Highlands region of Vietnam is intriguing with the regional culture identity, where many ethnic groups live together. This land still conserves a unique epic treasure with a typical form of narrative singing and contains wide and rich social content. The Mnong epic called *Ot ndrong* is the typical culture characteristics of the Mnong people. In the Mnong epic, all aspects of the material and spiritual culture lives are clearly reflected and considered as the "encyclopedia", "custom memoir" about the Mnong ethnic life. This article studies the custom and habit characteristics of the Mnong people, reflected in some Vietnam's Mnong epics to explain the strong vitality and attraction of this folklore genre for readers, listeners anywhere and in any era.

## Keywords

*Custom, habit, Mnong ethnic group, Mnong epic, Vietnam.*

## 1. Introduction

The Central Highlands region of Vietnam is intriguing with the regional culture identity, where many ethnic groups live together. This land still conserves a unique epic treasure with a typical form of narrative singing and contains wide and rich social content. "The epic of the Central Highlands clearly and deeply reflects its society. In general as well as in details, the life of the village and people, nature and common practice are redrawn, making the epic become the Central Highlands encyclopedia." (Phan, 2001, p.110) In which, the Mnong epic called *Ot ndrong* is the typical culture characteristic of the Mnong people. In the Mnong epic, all aspects of cultural, material and spiritual culture lives are clearly reflected and considered as "encyclopedia", "custom memoir" about the Mnong ethnic life "*Ot ndrong* contains remnants

of primitive customs and beliefs..." (Do, 1993, p.14) "The Mnong epic includes many sections such as the custom memoir, expressed in the form of lyrics." (Truong, 2003, p.120)

While studying the Mnong epic, researchers all agree that the Mnong epic is seen as an explanation of customs and habits with the ancient customs recorded quite vividly and particularly. "The Mnong epic also refers to a lot of Mnong customs and habits such as when taking gongs or drums to play, they must worship the gods, in the family, when men have to go far, women must abstain, when the victorious army returns, the women splashed hog-wash on each person of the army..." (Do, 2008, p.261) "In addition to the phenomena reflecting the backward spiritual life such as amulet, krasue, *ot ndrong* also describes the beautiful customs of Mnong people. Pleasing

customs still are preserved every day, connecting community members to create harmony among the individual of such community.” (Nguyen, 2011, p.132) In some studies, the researchers initially outlined a number of customs and habits in each epic works of the Mnong people. “The *Ting* and *Rung’s deaths* epic mentions a lot of aspects: geographical space, flora and fauna worlds, field production, drinking scene, playing gongs,... However, in addition to the war, the main content of this epic is a custom, and funerals that are talked about a lot.” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006a, p.33) “The custom of the Mnong people is that when they travel far, they pray to the gods. When relatives in the Mnong family come to visit each other, they still bring some rice to give to the host. Their epics (*Sung, Trang and Mung visited Tiang*) quite completely retold this custom.” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006a, p.22-23) “Many customs including travelling far, Mnong people also bring rice to give to the host, in the morning the men just sit and wait for the women cooking rice to eat before doing whatever. When the victorious army returned, the women splashed each of them with hog-wash... also mentioned in the epic of *The leaf kite robs Bing con Jri*.” (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.25) In general, the Mnong epic researchers referred to the problem of the common practice, reflected in the epic treasure of the Mnong people. However, the researchers only comment and evaluate synthetically and initially but have not gone into depth research on customs and habits reflected in the epic of the Mnong ethnic group in the comprehensive way.

## 2. Methods

As a unique folklore genre of local ethnics, the Central Highlands epic contains all the diverse lives of a nation in unforgettable times of the nation's history. “The truly unique epics give us a picture of the national spirit as it presents in the morality of family life, war and peace, demands, arts, customs, interests. Shortly, it gives us a complete picture of the conscious stages and quality.” (Hegel, 1999, p.589-590) The Mnong epic involves many original customs, habits and beliefs of the Mnong people. This article uses the systematic, analytical, synthetic and interdisciplinary methods to study the custom and habit characteristics of the Mnong people, reflected in a number of Mnong epics. Since then, we can see the strong attraction of the epic to many generations of Mnong people and the Mnong epic has become a place to conserve and transmit cultural customs, habits, values and beliefs of the Mnong ethnic group in the Central Highlands region of Vietnam.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. An overview of the Mnong ethnic group and the Mnong epic

#### 3.1.1. The Mnong people in the Central Highlands

Mnong is an local ethnic group that has long lived in the Central Highlands region of Vietnam. According to the 2019 Census, the Mnong ethnic group has about 127,334 people living in 51 provinces and cities, the Mnong people live most in the South Central Highlands provinces such as Dak Nong, Dak Lak, Lam Dong. (General Statistics Office, 2020, p.44) This is the ethnic group belonging to the Mon - Khmer language group. Over the lasting history, the Mnong people have dispersed and separated, thus forming many groups of Mnong people in

different localities such as: Mnong Preh, Mnong Nong, Mnong Nar, Mnong Prang, Mnong Biat, Mnong Gar, Mnong Dip, Mnong Rlam,... The habit of shifting cultivation is the decisive characteristic to form cultural nuances of the Mnong people. Each of these groups of people has their own cultural nuances but still relies on the common cultural background, creating the diversity and unity of the Mnong ethnic group.

The highest social organization unit of the Mnong people is Bon, each of which usually has several tens of roofs and is an separate residence unit, the boundary to distinguish between the bons is the natural delimiter line such as a forest strip, a mountain, a stream,... The head of Bon who plays a big role and handles common affairs of bon and village is Bon head called *Ko ranh* or *Rnut*. Mnong people's Bon management tool is customary law, which comprehensively covers human life here.

Mnong people are long-standing agricultural residents. In the traditional economy activities, the Mnong people mainly develop forests for farming, water fields are only available in areas near lakes, lagoons and rivers, so their Bon is usually built in the foot of the mountain, near rivers and streams for convenience of daily activities. Depending on each local group and different place of residence, the Mnong people build houses suitable for their place of residence. In general, the Mnong people's houses are mostly house with no upstairs, which is quite special because the roof often falls near the ground, so the entrance door has an arched structure. Typically, each Mnong people's house is the place of residence for many families with maternal relations. The Mnong people are matriarchal, the woman plays an active role in marriage and

the children were born with the mother's family name and right of inheritance belongs to the girls in the family. The Mnong people want to give birth to several children, especially many girls and in the family, the wives hold the main role but the husbands are not discriminated, everyone in the family respects each other and when their parents return old, they will often live with the youngest daughter.

The Mnong people as well as many other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands live in a pristine natural environment with outdated production levels, so the people here believe in the supernatural power and the relationship between people and many invisible forces. The Mnong people think that the world has three layers: the sky, the earth and the underground. At each layer, there are gods residing and dominating the human life. At the same time, in the spiritual world of the Mnong people, there are also things and people with special abilities that affect the life of the community such as krasues, amulets, witches, ... Due to the supernatural power, amulets, and krasues concepts, the Mnong people have a concept system of the soul and are accompanied by rituals and related performance activities. They believe that everything has the soul (*hueng*) and the body (*sak*) and the soul has a good or bad impact on people's life. Therefore, the Mnong people have a rich system of divine worship rituals and many measures to prevent disasters from coming to individuals, families and communities.

The folklore treasure of the Mnong people is very diverse and rich with many different genres such as myths, legends, tales, epic, rhyme, ... These folklore works reflecting the human's style of living and way of thinking is expressed by extremely high original,

evocative and voluptuous images and similes. In which, the most unique type of folklore of the Mngong people is the epic genre, called *Ot ndrong*. This folklore genre contains impressions of the material and spiritual culture life of the Mngong people at most.

### 3.1.2. Mngong epic

The Mngong epic appeared in a primitive commune society in the final stage with constant war and equal primitive democratic society relations, so the epic reflects the progress of society of the Mngong people through the form of *narrative singing-ot* (narrative poetry) and passed down orally through many generations. Epic narrative singing is an necessary spiritual need in Mngong people life, clearly demonstrating the characteristics of the Mngong people's thinking and reflection art.

The Mngong epic is a coherence of thousands of rhymes, even a thousands of sentences reflecting the history of the ethnic group, the Mngong people's conceptions of heaven and earth, gods, people as well as the customs, habits, beliefs and folk knowledge of the people here. These are stories of love, marriage and family, are advices and lessons, and human behaviours; are standards in social relationships, human experiences and insights in production, weather, crops,... Epic also reflects the formation, struggle, and development of the Mngong people in the historical process with dreams and aspirations for a prosperous, happy life and cultural and spiritual life. "To learn the beliefs, customs, rituals, and festivals of the Mngong people, there is definitely no place as complete as in the *Ot ndrong*." (Do, 2012, p.73)

The character system in the Mngong epic is very rich, diverse and crowded with thousands of characters in hundreds of different villages. In particular, the system of heroic characters is also plentiful and various such as Tiang, Yong, Yang, Leng, ... appearing in many epics as a leader of labor, participating in fighting to protect village and thero activities of the community to bring peace and wealth to the village. In each epic, content and plot are separate, but the epic works of Mngong people still is in relation to each other through names, kinship, marriage, and community of the characters such as Tiang, Leng, Teng, ... The popular artistic methods in the Mngong epic are comparative, exaggerated, and repeated structure, creating its own attractiveness and characteristics.

The Mngong epic is performed according to the narrative singing style with the body language and gestures of the epic narrative singing artisan. An epic narrative singing artisan is a person who converges many elements and has a good memory, a rich imagination, remembers many epic stories and rich and diverse characters and details. In addition, the epic narrative singing artisan who has an inspirational voice, real-life experience, a thorough understanding of customs and beliefs of the community. During epic narrative singing, the artisan plays different roles with different emotional expressions and character personalities to be able to convey emotions and attraction to the listener. In the process of epic narrative singing, the artisan can lie down or sit to sing the story, but most of the artisans who sing the epic are usually resting their hands on their forehead, concentrating their memories to express the story fully, specifically and the most vividly. Epic narrative singing is a typical

form of folk cultural activities of the Mnong people. "The more *Ot ndrong* is told, the more interesting it is, the more it is told, the longer it is" and the more attentive listeners are, the more excited and passionate they are because it has useful content, which helps them to understand the world of ancestors, heroes, gods and their own life, desire to reach a good and perfect life.

### 3.2. Customs and habits associated with Mnong community cultural activities

#### 3.2.1. Reception custom

Although Mnong people live a closed life but very hospitable. Every time guests come to the house, the host welcomes them extremely considerately and prepares the best dishes for the guests as they can. Reception custom is one of the customs that is repeated many times in the *Ot ndrong*. Guests coming to the house, whether familiar or strange, are welcomed respectfully by the host. They are not only greeted by one person, but also by the whole family with sincere and open hearts. The Mnong people believe that the guests coming to the house are not only joy but also an honor for the family and village. Reception custom is a beautiful song about the being human and the hospitality of the Mnong people.

It has become customary, when guests come to visit Mnong people's house, they will always bring some rice and white salt to the host. The gift is not great in terms of material value, but it contains a enormous spiritual meaning, showing the guests' concern for the host and wishing the host a good luck, their love will be forever pure like rice, passionate and ardent like "three-year salt". The characters of Ting and Rung bon Tiang visit the villages of Ndu, Yang con Gut when coming to Srail area to

find salt for food, they visit the house and give rice to the host:

*"Ting scoops a bowl of rice to present to the host*

*Rung scoops a bowl of rice to present to the host*

*Master Ting and Rung carry the bowl of rice by two hands*

*They put the bowl of rice in front of Ndu and Yang."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2301)

When welcoming guests to the house, everyone in the family cheerfully greets and wears the best clothes such as: wearing a blue shirt, a red bag and jewelry such as beads, ribbons, brass ring, silver flower on head,... The host spreads flower mats, a blanket, a beautifully embroidered fabric, and brings chair for the guests to sit. When a guest enters the house, the host will bring the tobacco and betel, which is the best and carefully selected to invite guests. Besides inviting betel and tobacco, the Mnong people also invite guests to use their salt because the salt to the people here is extremely valuable. The Mnong people create salt by cutting the young bamboo tube to dry and then burn ashes, using the filtered ashes to make salt or they even gather the banana peel and dry and burn it to make salt. The Mnong people also invite guests to eat, drink wine and the host always invites guests to taste the first wine, then everyone drinks wine in circles. The Mnong people choose the most delicious rice including *ba ke* and *ba san* rices, and sticky rice to prepare meals for guests and the best dishes for guests include fermented rice with meat broth, tiny shrimp broth, sour bamboo shoots broth, beef meat, buffalo meat, frog meat, chicken breast meat, fresh frog meat, fresh fish meat, *pon* bird meat, *rkeh* bird meat, *lon* fish brain dish, *jich*



bird meat, ... Hundreds of *Ot ndrong* verses describe concretely from the scene of washing rice to cook rice, prepare a meal and present dishes to welcome guests. Before eating, the host gave the bottle gourd to the guests to wash their hands to both show their attentiveness and reflect their custom and habit of eating with fingers:

*"Guests from far away are invited to eat  
Bring the bottle gourd to the door to  
wash the hands."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p. 1676)

When the family had a large number of guests coming to visit and stay to eat, the Mngong people often serve the rice to the banana leaves and arranged them in long rows:

*"They serve the rice and arrange in long  
rows*

*They serve another row of rice cooked in  
ter tubes*

*They serve the broth cooked from the  
young kring meat."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p. 1677)

When inviting guests to dine with the family, although the host prepares delicious dishes to invite guests, he always tells the guests humble words about the dishes prepared by the family are simple and frugal:

*"Please take out the husk*

*Please pick up the litter*

*Please pull out the mess."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1680)

Responding to the host's humble invitation, guests also use beautiful words to praise the host because of his enthusiastic and attentive welcome:

*"Your rice is white like a lycium  
ruthenicum*

*Your rice is white like a flower of cotton  
plant on the field."*(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1680)

During the meal, the host always invites guests to eat comfortably and freely like at home and drink a delicious cup of wine brewed for a long time:

*"Roch, Rong taste the first wine*

*Roch, Rong taste the first wine and have  
lots of good things to say about it*

*Let's taste the wine."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1988)

When welcoming guests to the house, the Mngong people also play the gongs, the sound of which could be heard throughout the mountains and forests as if to praise the richness and peace of the village and make the cows stop eating grass, the fishes stop feeding, the squirrel and the cricket listen, the *rling* and *rlang* birds sitting silently in the trees, the gongs sound make the roofs vibrate, ...

### 3.2.2. Flying kite custom

Flying kite is one of the Mngong people's favorite folk games. The Mngong people go into the forest to choose materials to make beautiful kites, that fly high and the sound is good, melodious and resonant. The Mngong people cut down flexible bamboo trees or "nua" to make the kite's body, take the sap from the forest trees to glue the kite's wings and long forest ropes to make kite string. In order for the kite to fly high and make a resonant sound, the Mngong people also made the flute tied to the kite's body. Young men in village often choose the place to fly kites as open spaces and compete to see whose kite flies the highest and longest.

*"In long house the sound of mbuat is  
played*

*A big bon is noisy and boisterous*

*From the village yard heard the leaf  
kites*

*From the stream bank heard the sound  
of pulling thread*

*From the bon heard the sound of gongs  
From the grass heard the buffalo's  
chasing each other*

*From the grass heard the kite flute  
sound.”* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1226)

The epic of *The leaf kite robs Bing con Jri* narrates particularly the Mnong people's kite making: cutting flexible bamboo, “nua” to make the kite body, looking for the sap to glue the kite, finding a long rope to make the kite string. Besides Let and Mai gods also help Tiang village to make the kite's wings covered with silver and gold. In the Mnong epic, the magic kite is the means to help the boys of Tiang village cross the condensed waters to steal the two beautiful girls, Bing and Jong, to be wives. The kite is not only beautiful, but also has a size comparable to that of the universe:

*“The gold-silvered kite sparkles in the  
sky*

*The kite flies high up two layers of cloud  
The kite flies high up two layers of moon  
The kite flies to the south*

*The kite flies over the south grass.”*  
(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.1492)

The flying kite custom reflects the traditional culture space of the Mnong people. Customs and habits associated with community activities have portrayed the material and spiritual culture life with the pure, rustic and sincere soul beauty of the Mnong people in ancient times.

### **3.3. Customs and habits associated with the life cycle beliefs of the Mnong people**

#### **3.3.1. Marriage**

According to the traditional custom of the Mnong people, the wedding ceremony is usually conducted through various stages: proposing, betrothal ceremony, engagement, and wedding ceremony. The Mnong epic is vivid, clear in the rituals of a wedding, the gifts prepared by the groom's and bride's families to give to each other. The boys and girls in the Mnong epic come to each other from the love, the bond between the two families. As soon as they were born, they were bonded together by their parents or relatives by promises, by hand-over souvenirs like necklaces. When the girl's family has accepted the betrothal, the boy or girl will later grow up to be husband and wife. In the marriage of the Mnong family, when the boys get married, the cost of the wedding is undertaken by both parties and the newlyweds reside on one party, that party must bear the more.

*“Bing gave birth to me with a dash of  
water*

*Bing have just given birth to me with  
wearing beaded necklace*

*Bing have just given birth to me with a  
wedding promise*

*I gave knives to you maternal uncle and  
paternal uncle*

*I gave harpoons to father and brother*

*I gave rakes to sister and mother*

*With the help of Tiang's knife for  
umbilical cord*

*The beaded necklace offering for  
opening eyes was given by Tiang*

*Tiang chosen to marry first.”* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2166)

The Mnong people has an idiom "children of maternal uncle and paternal uncle" which means that you should marry each other to maintain the race. In *The leaf kite robs Bing con Jri* epic, Leng as well as some other heroes in the epic do not follow this custom. Due to his stubborn nature, he likes to show his unusual things and wants to feel superior to other people, Lieng did not marry to "children of maternal uncle and paternal uncle" but took over Bing con Jri on the other side of the sea.

The wedding preparation is also specifically and meticulously illustrated by the artisan in the epic. Weddings are the joy not of a family but of the whole community. When a family has a wedding, the whole community will work together to prepare for the most important event of a person's life. Everyone prepares sticky rice, wax lamps, candles, handfuls of sticky rice, firewood, ... for the wedding of two girls, Bing and Jong con Jri. During the wedding, the Mnong people often held a buffalo stabbing ceremony and before the buffalo was stabbed, people worshiped the god and blessed the couple to be healthy and happy. The wedding of Bing and Jong con Jri with Lieng, Kong con Tiang also held a ceremony to stab buffalo, cut meat, drink wine and everyone enjoyed dancing together:

*"They cheered for the empty water pipe  
They cheered and danced  
The shout rang out into the sky."*  
(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2389)

The Mnong people have the custom of giving sticky rice at the wedding ceremony with the meaning of glutinous and fragrant sticky rice, expressing their wish that the couple will stick together endlessly:

*"They prepare rice for the wedding ceremony"*

*They prepare sticky rice for the wedding ceremony*

*They deliver sticky rice to Bing con Jri*

*Bing con Jri invite relatives of husband's side."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2394)

The Mnong people follow a matriarchal regime, so during the wedding ceremony, the girl's family must prepare gifts to give to the boy's family. The gifts prepared by the bride are not only given to the husband, parents but also her husband's cousins to express gratitude, filial piety, and attention of new family member such as: beaded necklace, scarf, shirt, ...

*"Bing gives souvenirs to each person  
Bing gives it to mothers Dum and Brah  
Give Dum a beaded necklace  
Give Brah a roll of white thread  
Give Dam and Brah a new shirt."*  
(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2395)

During the Mnong people's wedding, the gong sound is used to double the joy and happiness of the family. The sound of Mnong people's gong both informs everyone, and is an affirmation of the wealth of the village. Like a mirror reflecting reality, the Mnong epic has meticulously and truthfully recorded customs and habits to transmit to the next generations.

### 3.3.2. Funeral custom

The Mnong people think that each person has a body and a soul. The soul has one main soul, which is the buffalo soul and the other is the spider soul. If the secondary soul dies, he will only get sick, when the main soul dies - the buffalo's soul dies - he will completely die. The epic of *Ting and Rung's deaths* clearly



reflected that concept of the Mngong people. The *ntring* buffalo bearing Ting's soul and the *ntrang* buffalo bearing the soul Rung was stabbed to death by Ting, Mbong con Bang, and because the buffalo's soul died leads to the death of Ting and Rung in Tiang bon. The epic narrative singing artisan gave a detailed description of Ting and Rung's funerals from Ting's last words to news of their deaths, from making coffins to the funeral scene. The below is the advice of Ting and Rung before their deaths:

*"I stay to protect the spring*

*I stay to protect our village*

*I stay to protect mountains and forests*

*Ting said until then, was silent and stopped talking*

*Rung said until then, was silent and stopped talking*

*Whoever asked, Ting no longer answered*

*Whoever asked, Rung no longer answered."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2325)

According to Mngong people's conception, when a person dies, the soul will leave the body to go down to *Phan* bon (the bon of dead person's soul). When Ting and Rung died, their souls found their way to *Phan* bon, but since both of them had already eaten scorched rice, they could not redeem their souls. During Ting and Rung's funeral, mother Rong play drums to inform relatives near and far, and when they heard the drums, wherever they were on the field, in the forest, whatever they were doing (hunters, cuckoo shooters, blackcock shooters, the lovers, rabbit stalkers, the wild boar shooters, the wood choppers, water collector ...), all returned to the village to care for the family of deceased person:

*"Mother Rong plays the beh, yau*

*Mother Rong only plays every three hours*

*The drum's soul flies straight into the sky."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2407)

When someone died in the village of the Mngong people, the whole community will come to condol and take care of the funeral with their families. The epic narravite singing artisan tells hundreds of sentences about the names of bons attended the funeral: Ting, Mbong con Kop; Long, Liang con Srai; Ndu, Yang con Gut; Kra, Nang con Sre; Ting, Mbong con Rach; Ndu con Dach; Yang, Ndu con Khir; Yang con Nglaih bons,... Villagers in the bon stop all production and entertainment activities to take care of bereaved:

*"In the bon heard the cry of the elderly*

*In the bon heard the funeral cries*

*There was no voice and laughter in the bon*

*The sound of gongs was silent in the bon*

*The sound of gongs was silent in the bom*

*There were no cheers and happy drinking in the bon."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2331)

The Mngong people think that dying is to live in the next world with their ancestors, so the dead need some fortune to live like when they were alive, so the Mngong people have the custom of sharing their wealth to the dead. This custom was mentioned a lot in *The Ting and Rung's deaths* epic when talking about the Ting and Rung's funerals. People divided to the dead hundreds sets of gongs, hundreds of rows of small jars, protective knives, armpits shields, trumpets, horns, towels, flower shirts, nto jars,

gri jars, rlut jars, some salt, some rice, bracelets, ear rings, beaded necklaces, crowned teeth, ...

*"They divided a part of the bracelet for the dead*

*They divided a part of the beaded necklaces for the dead*

*They divided a part of crowned teeth for the dead*

*Broken rice bowl divided to Ting*

*Boken pot divided to Rung."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2455)

During the Mnong people's funeral, relatives cried a lot in *nhim khit* way, expressing their grief, recalling the life of the deceased and everyone released their hair to mourn:

*"Master Ting was dead, Tiang's house was shaking*

*Master Rung was dead, Tiang's house was poor*

*They leaved our miserable children and grandchildren."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2438)

Mingled with the choky sob of relatives is the cry of the whole village. The cry to send the dead to *Phan bon*:

*"Everyone unbound long hair on their backs*

*Mouth choked and tears poured out*

*They mourn the dead...*

*In the village cried*

*In the village, there were the elderly cries."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2446)

*"The long house was extremely sad*

*There were no cocks crowing, buffalo chirping*

*No one invites each other to drink."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2446)

During the funeral, the Mnong people performed a sacrifice ceremony both to worship the god and to solemnly send the soul of the dead to *Phan bon*. They cut rice plants to tie their buffalos and hold a buffalo feast. They killed buffaloes, drank wine, invited Ting and Rung's soul to drink wine for the last time before going to *Phan bon*. During the funeral, no one wanted to eat or drink, even though there were big buffaloes and cows, because they felt choked by the pain that could not be gone: refusing drink and eat, giving meat for each person and house. The funeral scene of Ting and Rung is depicted by exaggerated method with the countless number of the crowds of hundreds, thousands participating in the funeral:

*"They passed through the village gate, the fence*

*They passed through the old bamboo forest, went to a crossroads*

*They went to a crossroads*

*They built a statue of Ting at a crossroads*

*They built a statue of Rung at a crossroads."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.2459)

### 3.3.3. Taboos

The Mnong people think that "all things have soul" and believe that gods always dominate people's lives such as fortune, crop failures, natural disasters, epidemics, the dead,... so people here have a system of taboos and their own rules of conduct. In the epic, abstinence custome appeared a lot, creating a very typical spiritual life of the Mnong people: taboo when guests come to the house, taboo when someone goes far away, taboo when chopping of wood,... They believe that such taboo will bring good

things to their lives, their families and the community.

According to custom of the Mnong people, when a pregnant woman or an animal gives birth, strangers are not permitted to enter the house. Taboo also depends on different types: the calving goat abstains in three days, the pig farrows abstain in four days, and if someone gives birth, "*it will end all eight days*". When someone in the house goes far away, the people at home must abstain extremely carefully from food, drinks and actions. They even abstain from receiving guests when the guests come their house, going to the fields in two or three years, and allowing widows and widowers to borrow hoes, rakes and axes,... The *peng*, *rnhong* trees are cut down to make a loom for Bing con Long, Yang told everyone at home to abstain:

*"You must abstain from food and drinks*

*If you burn the ash to make salt, the goer has a stomachache*

*If you eat the fruit, the goer gets pimples*

*If you play around with a boy, the goer gets stung by a bee*

*If I chop the wood, the goer's harpoon handle will be broken*

*If you scoop up water, the buffalo's soul will be died*

*If you drop gossypium herbaceum, the goer will be bewitched.*" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1733)

Even when chopping the wood, they also abstain from cutting trees stamped by monkeys, crawled by squirrels, and perched by peacocks because they think that something unfortunate will happen. When going away, the Mnong people always pay attention to the surrounding phenomena that they think are fore-runners and signs sent by the god. If you walk out the door

and hit the rice-pounding pestle and the rattan ropes to tie the small jars are broken, the pig and the dog has a runny nose,... you should not go anymore because it is a bad fore-runner foretold by the god. Besides, in ot ndrong epic reflects many bad fore-runners along the way that people need to avoid such as: *klang* bird whirring in the sky, buzzard flying in the sky, *rling* and *rlang* birds chirping, two snakes swapping each other on the road, fallen trees, deer running across the road,... All these signs are called bad fore-runners, and predictive for the outcome of the action, the advices of the gods but also the base for the characters to act.

During the festival occasions, the Mnong people were very careful and performed the community's prohibition against the gods. The Mnong epic recounts the cause of the calamity is the human carelessness, making the gods angry, blowing spells or bringing the sound of gongs to the enemy, causing them to steal the Tiang bon. The times when Tiang bon brought gongs to play but did not worship the gods or drunk wine without inviting them, all of them encountered disasters.

Not only fore-runners, even the Mnong people also consider dreams as how the supernatural world tells people in advance whether what they intend to do is good or bad, should or should not. "The dreams are sent by the gods, things will happen like in dreams... That is reason why people act to fulfill their dreams." (Do, 2008, p.48) Therefore, before deciding anything of the family and the community, the Mnong people have to wait for the advices of the supernatural world through dreams. In the *Ting and Rung's deaths* epic, Yang con Rung seemed to foresee bad things that happened to his village through his dream. He dreamed that a bunch of bananas were fallen

down, kites were swept by the wind, spilled rice, broken arbalest, lose teeth, dreaming of being bitten by roe deer,... When he got up, he returned to his village in the morning and saw that Ting and Rung were very weak. The dream also see the future of the marriage-related actions of the characters such as in the *Buffalo Eating Ceremony* epic, Ting, Mbong and Kler dreamed of meeting two girls, Bing and Djan - wives of Yang con Rung and Tiang con Rong - being abandoned by their husband. He was enthralled by the beauty of the two girls, so when waking up, he invited more people to rob Bing and Djan to be his wives. Bing con Long in the *Ting and Rung's deaths* epic dreamed of being given a loom made of *peng and rnhong* (rosewood) trees by the god of gongs, and everyone in the bon went to the sea to cut it.

### 3.3.4. Spell custom

The Mnong people believe that besides the system of gods, there was an invisible force with great power, the spell spirit. Spell soul exists in a turmeric-like tuber called wormwood. The Mnong people believe that spell has the ability to induce and spread deadly disease to others. In the Mnong epic, the spell soul is embodied as two goddesses named Vah and Vanh and these two goddesses often bring troubles to the village. During the naming ceremony, the Mnong people often use *Tor* charm mixed with lebbek to wash the child's hair and put charm into the child's ears to pray that the child will grow up better.

In the Mnong epic, spell is mentioned with many different types such as: amulet makes people love each other, for itchy body, makes the person sleep well, amulet makes the rock crack, amulet makes the dead come back to life, ... The Mnong people believe that spell is a

miraculous means with all-powerful power and spells can help characters overcome all difficulties and challenges on the way to find happiness:

*"They used spell to help Ting fight  
Spell is available for blind eyes  
Blowing the dried frog back to life  
Blowing the dried fish back to life  
Blowing dry meat on the stove back to life."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009a, p.667)

Charms can also dictate, manipulate, distract and dominate all human activities, making people seem hypnotized and unable to control themselves. In the *Ting and Rung's deaths*, Tiang bon cut down *peng and rnhong* trees to make loom for Bing con Long, the trees fell on Ting and Mbong con Unh; Kong, Yang con Beh bons, so the angered gods blew spells into Roch bon, and Rong con Briang to ask them to take revenge. There are also types of spell that make people unbearable itchiness, causing the whole village to sleep so deeply that "grabbing the feet and pulling the head but falling down". Spell can also help the dead come back to life and is considered a "reincarnation" remedy for humans. Leng con Rung of the Tiang bon exhausted to death by the stream bank while trimming the tree for Ting, Mbong con Kop bons, was brought back to life by the spell god:

*"They started taking spell  
They chewed and blowed spell  
They spitted spell out on the dead body  
They spreaded spell on the dead body  
Just finished, the body was moved  
Just finished blowing, the mouth was open"*

*Just finished blowing, Lieng was alive.”*  
(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009a, p.871)

### 3.3.5. God praying ceremony

In the Mngong epic, the praying of god appeared with a very high frequency. God participates in almost all human activities and has a close relationship with human, "all in the natural world have a human being, from there nature becomes a great society - the society of life and mankind is just a small part of that great society" (Linh, 2005, p.44) The gods became forces to help the heroes and the villages on important occasions, so human prayers always reach the gods quickly.

The divine system in the Mngong epic is very large with hundreds of gods such as: god of gong, god of the small jar, mountain god, river god, god of the great drum, god of the charm, god of bird, god of big tree, ... Gods reign in all three layers of the world and each village has its own protective deities such as: Bon Tiang always receives the help of the goddess Deh, Dai, Let, Mai con Jri; Bon Roch, Rong con Briang are helped by the gods of Ting and Mbong con Toch, ... The gods is always respected by people through specific rituals and actions. Every time people pray to the gods, the gods are always ready to leave their work to help those they protect. When playing the gong, Mngong people also perform an worship ceremony and invite the gods to drink the first wine. When praying, they invite many gods from different places to come and drink wine such as: forest god, mountain god, stream god, six-legged and three-handed forest god, ten-legged and nine-handed forest god,... When going far or going to battle, people often stop beside the the old banian tree, tie a rope to

worship the god and pray to the Gods bless everyone with good luck and a hundred victories when going out to the battle:

*“Please help us win*

*After the battle, we will offer the first wine*

*After the battle, we will offer meat and liver.”* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.1925)

### 3.3.6. Buffalo feast

*The Buffalo feast* is a long-standing cultural feature still preserved in the lives of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands and is a feature of high integrity folk cultural activities. The buffalo feast is usually held on the occasion of the family and community good crops. The buffalo feast was held to give thanks to the gods, to pray for a rich and healthy and happy human life. The Mngong epic described specifically the scene of tying the buffalo during the buffalo feast of the Mngong people. In the epic, Ting, Mbong con Kop wanted to be enough rich and popular everywhere that "*an underwater crocodile has to praise*", so they asked Leng bon Tiang to make the New Year's tree during the *Buffalo feast*. The Mngong people think that the New Year's tree is sacred, where people communicate and send their wishes to the gods. Therefore, the trees mentioned in the *Buffalo feast* must be decorated beautifully and exquisitely to express the prestige of the village. The picket used to tie buffalo is made from a rice plant, a cotton tree or perhaps a stone pillar. After they cut the picket, they will square and carve sophisticatedly and skilfully.

*“They cut a piece of rice plant*

*They bring the rice plant home*

*Brothers gather to carry the picket*

*They bring rice picket and went home*



*They bring rice picket home*

*They bring rice picket Leng's house."*

(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2374)

The New Year's tree in the epic of *Buffalo feast* is decorated with skill, talent and sophistication and has become a symbol of the rich and peaceful life of the village during the festival season. On the New Year's tree, the artisan carves the statue of people, pictures of tiny shrimps, crabs, birds, beautiful girls of the village,...

*"The statue of the person in front of the house*

*High New Year's tree shines the land*

*High New Year's tree shines the sky*

*Raised New Year's tree brighter than daytime*

*Shining the Mbuat*

*Dark sky becomes bright."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009a, p.1200)

When the New Year's tree is finished and built, the Mnong people will tie the buffalo to the picket and hold the *Buffalo feast* as sacrifice:

*"Song pulls the clasp of the buffalo's shed*

*Song opens the buffalo's shed door*

*Song pushes the buffalo from its shed*

*Song beats buffalo with branches*

*Song hits the tail of the buffalo*

*Aggressive buffalo is tied up by an collar*

*Buffalo aggressively runs out to chase people."* (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009b, p.2373)

The most important ritual of the *Buffalo feast* is the buffalo stabbing scene, so when doing the buffalo-stabbing ceremony, everyone prayed to invite the gods to testify their sincerity, receive gifts and join the village:

*"Ndu holds the sword in his raised right hand*

*Dong holds the sword in his raised right hand*

*Ndu, Dong lowered the sword at the same time*

*The sword cut off the two buffalo's legs*

*Dam bri buffalo is in pain and struggle for a while*

*The struggled buffalo makes the mud*

*Ndu puts buffalo to the sword*

*Dong puts buffalo to the sword."*

(Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2006b, p.1446)

When the buffalo stops breathing, "putting all four legs to the sky, lay dead by the foot of Kapok", the priest in the village will bring a small copper pot to catch the buffalo blood mixed with wine and use knife to cut its ears, nose, eyes and tail, each a little bit displayed on the offering tray. Wine mixed with blood is smeared on the trunks of the New Year' tree. During the *Buffalo feast*, the Mnong people have the custom of dividing buffalo meat to each person in the village from the elderly to the young, boys and girls in the bon and the children still in their mother's wombs to show an equal relationship and strong attachment in the community:

*"Four of you please take your share of the meat*

*They cut the meat into pieces ...*

*Pick up the ribs putting on the small basket*

*They pour blood into the ter tube*

*Tang remind Yong, Yang must remember*

*Yang must remember to divide it sufficiently*

*From the south must be divided by cups*

*To the north must be threaded each piece*

*Everyone has a share.*" (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2009a, p.1450)

Characterized as a mirror reflecting life, the Mnong epic not only records in words the material and spiritual culture life of the Mnong ethnic group, but also lights up their high qualities. Those are people who love labor, industriousness, innocence and purity with very beautiful aspirations: the dream of a prosperous life and peace so that the vibration of gongs resonates forever in life and festivals; the dream of discovering and winning the mysterious nature, ... All that beauty has made the attraction for the Mnong epic and conserves and transmits cultural values for eternity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The epic of the Central Highlands reflects the formation and definition of cultural life and the development of ethnic society in the Central Highlands. The Mnong epic depicts the ethnic culture with the customs, habits and beliefs that express the conceptions of the world view and philosophy of life of the Mnong

people. In the Mnong epic, each custom and habit is a different coloured piece, a separate perspective on life and human, but they all contribute to brighten the spiritual beauty of people in the epic era with great aspirations of profound human significance. Nowadays, many Mnong people's customs and habits are fading away, some are customs that need to be preserved by the people, but there are also customs that need to be eliminated in the life. From the cultural point of view, "once again it is affirmed that the rules of formation and development of cultural phenomena in community life come from the position and perspective in which that community exists. Perhaps that is also explanation of the vitality and attractiveness of this folklore genre throughout the course of history." (Vu, 2016, p.52) Through the long course of history, the Mnong epic is still considered as an "encyclopedia", "custom memoir" that contains a strong appeal to readers, listeners everywhere and in any era.

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