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Preserving Religious Cultural Heritage in Vietnam’s Central Highlands: Current Practices and Future Directions

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Abstract

Preserving and promoting religious cultural heritage is a highly practical endeavor, as religion not only embodies both tangible and intangible cultural values but also plays a crucial role in maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic communities. This study aims to examine the current practices of preserving religious cultural heritage in Vietnam’s Central Highlands and to propose future directions for enhancing these efforts. Methodology: The study employs a qualitative research approach, combining document analysis with field observations. It focuses on the distinctive religious characteristics of ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands, particularly their traditional polytheistic and animistic beliefs. Findings: The findings reveal both strengths and limitations in the current preservation efforts. While some traditional practices and religious spaces have been maintained, challenges persist, such as limited policy enforcement, insufficient community engagement, and the influence of socio-economic changes on traditional beliefs and rituals. Value: This research contributes to the academic discourse on heritage conservation by emphasizing the dual importance of protecting cultural identity and ensuring religious freedom. It aligns with the consistent policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam regarding the respect and protection of religious and cultural diversity. Conclusion: The article concludes that culturally sensitive, community-based strategies are essential for preserving religious cultural heritage in the Central Highlands. These approaches must address both the spiritual and material dimensions of heritage, particularly in the context of rapid modernization and globalization.

Keywords: Religious Cultural, Current Practices, Future Directions, Religion, Central Highlands, Vietnam.

Introduction

Vietnamese national culture has been formed and continuously developed throughout the country’s long history of nation-building and defense. It constitutes a vast and rich system that encompasses knowledge, ideologies, belief systems, arts, ethics, laws, customs, rituals, and traditions. As such, national culture serves both as a “sediment” of the sentiments and consciousness of previous generations and as a crystallization of the values of truth, goodness, and beauty. These values form not only the internal spiritual foundation of the Vietnamese people but also contribute to the broader value system of humanity. In the 21st century, amid the dynamic processes of globalization and rapid transformations in political, economic, and social life, preserving and promoting cultural heritage has become a vital internal strength for Vietnam. It plays a crucial role in maintaining national identity, ensuring independence and self-reliance, and fostering sustainable development in the context of international integration. Within this broader framework, the preservation of religious cultural heritage in Vietnam’s Central Highlands holds significant academic and practical value. The region is home to diverse ethnic minority communities with unique religious and spiritual practices particularly traditional

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polytheistic and animistic beliefs deeply embedded in their cultural life. However, these heritages are facing growing pressures from modernization, cultural homogenization, and socio-economic change. Therefore, studying the current practices and proposing appropriate strategies for the preservation of religious cultural heritage in the Central Highlands is not only necessary but also urgent, contributing to the sustainable protection of national cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Literature Review

Research on culture and the preservation of cultural heritage has become an increasingly important focus for many social scientists in Vietnam. Notable works in this field include: Italian author Claude Falazzoli, in his book *"Vietnam Between Two Myths"* identifies seven core values of the Vietnamese people: A strong sense of dignity and the determination not to lose it under any circumstance; Diligence to the point of being able to "fill the sea"; Courtesy and subtlety that make the atmosphere here neither crude nor heavy; A deliberate refinement, described as the ability to "split a hair into four"; Cautiousness, with prolonged deliberation, judgment, and decision-making; Pragmatism and a wise, flexible adaptability to all situations; A distinct romantic and emotional nature (Claude, 1981). The study *"Aesthetic Culture and Human Development in Vietnam in the New Century"* argues that culture and personality are closely interconnected and that culture has the potential to foster human creativity (Huyen, 2001). *"International Integration: Opportunities and Challenges for Traditional Values in the Context of Globalization"* highlights the dual aspects of opportunity and challenge that globalization presents for traditional values (Chuan, 2004).

The work *"On Cultural Development and Building Human Capacity in the Era of Industrialization and Modernization"* assert that the enduring characteristics of lifestyle, morality, and traditional values are reflected in virtues such as passionate patriotism, a strong sense of national resilience, community spirit, kindness, tolerance, respect for loyalty and ethics, practicality, diligence, and creativity in labor (Hac, 2010).

Research in this area has been approached from various perspectives, primarily economics, philosophy, political science, and sociology. In conducting this study, the author applies the dialectical materialist methodology with a concrete historical and holistic perspective, alongside a systems approach. The study builds upon previous research findings to refine theoretical foundations and evaluations. At the same time, it employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining analytical and synthetic methods, historical and logical approaches, as well as statistical and comparative methods, to carry out tasks and achieve the set research objectives.

Results and Discussion

Overview of central highlands cultural heritage

According to administrative divisions, the Central Highlands of Vietnam comprises five provinces arranged geographically from north to south: Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. This region is characterized by mountainous highlands and is home to the majority of Vietnam's 54 recognized ethnic groups. However, several coastal central provinces and some southeastern provinces also include extensive mountainous areas inhabited by ethnic minorities traditionally associated with the Central Highlands.

For example, Quang Nam, a coastal province, has 56% of its area classified as mountainous and is home to several ethnic minority groups, including the Co Tu, a significant group in the

southern Annamite Range. Similarly, western Quang Ngai has mountainous areas inhabited by the Hre people, another important ethnic group. The Raglai people mainly reside in the western parts of Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan provinces. Binh Phuoc, a southeastern province, also has expansive mountainous ethnic regions, notably Cat Tien, which is renowned for archaeological sites associated with the Ma people.

Thus, the concept of the Central Highlands in terms of ethnicity, culture, society, and even geography and history is broader than its strictly administrative definition. Some scholars refer to this broader cultural-geographic region as the Southern Annamite Region. In this broader spatial context, the Central Highlands can be viewed as a sub-region, which, together with the South Central Coastal Region, forms the South Central Region of Vietnam. This sub-region shares close economic, social, and cultural ties and boasts unique cultural values of the ethnic minority communities in both the Central Highlands and the broader South Central area.

Due to its distinctive geographical and cultural characteristics, the Central Highlands possesses a remarkably rich and diverse heritage of both culture and nature. Geological processes over time have left behind striking natural landmarks and unique tourist destinations, such as Yaly Lake, Mount Ngoc Linh, and a variety of primeval and special-use forests including Chom Ray, Dak Uy, and Sa Thay, as well as the Dak To hot springs (Kon Tum); the tropical forests of Kon Ka Kinh and Kon Cha Rang; Xung Khoeng Waterfall, Phu Cuong Waterfall, and scenic streams such as Da Trang Stream, Dream Stream, and Bien Ho (T'Nung Lake) in Gia Lai; Thuy Tien Waterfall and picturesque lakes like Lak Lake, Buon Triet Lake, and Ea Kao Lake, along with national parks and nature reserves like Yok Don National Park and Ea Kao Botanical Garden (Dak Lak); Gia Long, Dray Nur, Dieu Thanh, Ba Tang, and Dray Sap Waterfalls (Dak Nong), and numerous natural attractions in Da Lat, the tourism hub of Lam Dong.

In addition to these scenic natural landmarks, the Central Highlands is also rich in cultural heritage not only representative of the local ethnic groups but also crucial in affirming the "unity in diversity" of Vietnamese culture as a whole, an organic part of humanity's shared cultural legacy. Most notably, the region is home to the Cultural Space of Gong Music in the Central Highlands, an exceptional intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage. Beyond the archaeological evidence of the ancient indigenous origins of the Central Highlands' peoples, the region also features numerous Cham artifacts and architectural relics, including reliefs, statues of Shiva and Buddha, discovered in Kon Tum, Gia Lai, and especially the Yang Prong Tower in Ea Sup District (northwestern Dak Lak and southwestern Gia Lai), which testify to centuries of cultural exchange in the region.

The Central Highlands also holds many significant historical sites linked to Vietnam's struggle for independence and nation-building. The Tay Son Thuong Dao Historical Complex, consisting of six relics located in the forests of An Khe (Gia Lai), stands as historical evidence of the Tay Son Uprising and the remarkable legacy of the national hero Quang Trung (Nguyen Hue). The Lac Giao Communal House in Buon Ma Thuot reflects the historical processes of settlement, coexistence, and integration between the Kinh (majority Vietnamese) and ethnic minority communities in this red-soil highland region.

Other important relics, such as the Buon Ma Thuot Exile House (Dak Lak), Kon Tum Prison, and Dak Glei Prison (Kon Tum), highlight the resilience and sacrifice of Communist revolutionaries who laid down their lives for national independence. Revolutionary and resistance sites like the Kroong Hoa resistance village, the Dak To – Tan Canh battlefield, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and dozens of sites tied to the Spring Offensive of 1975, demonstrate not

only the strategic importance of the Central Highlands but also the crucial contributions of its ethnic communities to the national liberation struggle.

The Necessity of Preserving Religious Cultural Heritage

Following the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was officially adopted. In Vietnam, tangible and intangible cultural heritage are considered two integral components of the nation's cultural legacy. These forms of heritage are closely intertwined, mutually reinforcing, and honoring one another, while maintaining a degree of relative independence.

Tangible cultural heritage refers to visible and material objects that embody the vivid memories of humanity physical evidence of various civilizations and cultures. Meanwhile, intangible cultural heritage is invisible and is transmitted orally, through apprenticeship, and through other forms of traditional knowledge and practice. The survival of intangible heritage greatly depends on the awareness and behavior of its cultural bearers and community custodians. In many cases, the creators and owners of intangible heritage are entire communities, whose will, aspirations, needs, and even interests significantly influence whether a particular cultural element is preserved or disappears. They are the key actors who determine what aspects of intangible heritage should be safeguarded, and how they are preserved, utilized, and promoted to meet the cultural needs of individuals and communities.

Religion is a form of social consciousness that has existed since the early days of human society. Throughout history, religion has exerted profound influences on political life, ideology, culture, society, psychology, morality, lifestyles, and customs in many countries and ethnic groups. Religion serves not only as a repository of tangible and intangible cultural values but also plays a critical role in the preservation of ethnic cultures. Through both material and spiritual practices, religious and belief systems have infused national cultures with rich and diverse symbolic meanings.

Religion is essentially a cultural phenomenon. Professor Tran Quoc Vuong affirmed that: "Religion is both a product of culture and an organic component, a constitutive factor of culture". In agreement with this view, Professor Ngo Duc Thinh, former Director of the Institute of Folk Culture, stated: "Ultimately, all systems of religious and belief symbols are systems of cultural symbols. They not only embody the value systems of ethnic groups but also express the unique identities and cultural nuances of these communities in specific historical periods. Within these systems, religion and belief have generated, integrated, and preserved numerous artistic and cultural phenomena rich in ethnic identity. When analyzed from a systemic perspective, religion and belief constitute the core elements of this cultural system, while cultural and artistic expressions are its secondary manifestations. This explains why it is impossible to separate religious elements from the cultural practices attached to them.

Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Therefore, the preservation of religious cultural heritage is, in essence, a means to conserve and promote the traditional cultural values of the nation. The shift in the Communist Party of Vietnam's perspective on religion particularly regarding the preservation of religious cultural heritage since the post-1986 renovation era has been one of the key achievements of Vietnam's 40-year reform process. Prior to 1990, only three religions in Vietnam were officially recognized with legal status. However, following the issuance of Resolution No. 24 of the Politburo of the 6th Party Central Committee on "*Strengthening*

Religious Affairs in the New Situation” (October 16, 1990), many other religions and sects were officially granted legal recognition.

Currently, Vietnam recognizes 12 official religions and 32 religious denominations, along with over 60 emerging religious phenomena. In 2003, the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 9th Tenure, issued Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW on Religious Affairs. This resolution built upon and further developed the viewpoints outlined in Resolution No. 24 (6th Tenure), marking a significant milestone in reaffirming the consistent policy of the Party and the State: *to respect and guarantee the freedom of belief and religion for citizens during the process of building socialism in Vietnam.*

In addition to issuing this dedicated resolution, the Party has addressed religious issues in a number of official documents including directives, announcements, and especially in the Resolutions of the 9th, 10th, and 11th National Party Congresses, as well as in the 1991 Political Platform for National Construction during the Transition to Socialism, and its supplemented and developed version of 2011. These documents collectively affirm that: *Belief and religion are spiritual needs of a segment of the population, and will continue to exist alongside the nation throughout the socialist construction process in Vietnam.* Religion holds cultural and moral values that should be respected and promoted.

The Party’s consistent policy is to respect and guarantee the right to freedom of belief and religion, including the right to follow or not follow any religion, and the right to engage in normal religious activities in accordance with the law. The Party’s renovated thinking on religion is clearly reflected in the 1992 Constitution and the 2013 Constitution. Article 24, Chapter II of the 2013 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam states: Everyone has the right to freedom of belief and religion, to follow or not follow any religion. All religions are equal before the law. The State respects and protects the freedom of belief and religion. No one shall violate the freedom of belief and religion or take advantage of belief and religion to violate the law.

In line with the Constitution, the Government of Vietnam has issued numerous decrees, directives, and circulars. Among these, the most significant is the Ordinance on Belief and Religion, supported by Decree No. 92/2012/ND-CP (issued November 8, 2012) detailing the implementation of the ordinance. These serve as legal foundations to ensure the right to freedom of belief and religion for citizens, while also providing a legal framework for local authorities to manage religious activities in accordance with the law.

These regulations, which are aligned with real-world practices, not only create favorable conditions for religious activities but also reflect an encouraging and protective approach to ensuring religious freedom in practice. This, in turn, plays an important role in preserving the nation’s cultural traditions during its path of development.

Current Practices Religious Cultural Heritage in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

Although the Central Highlands was introduced to organized religions relatively late, it has now become a region with distinctive religious characteristics. A dominant and influential aspect of the lives of individuals and communities among the Central Highlands’ ethnic minorities is the traditional polytheistic belief system, rooted in animism the view that all things possess a spiritual essence. Religions only began to appear in this area around the mid-19th century, gradually expanding into various provinces across the region. Among these, Catholicism and Protestantism have had significant influence, impacting not only religious and spiritual life,

culture, customs, and practices but also contributing to the socioeconomic development of ethnic minority communities in the region.

Based on the Party's policy of renovation (Đổi mới), the State's guidelines, and the directives of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Central Highlands Steering Committee and the Provincial Party Committees of the region have issued action programs, directing Provincial People's Committees to concretize these into plans, guidelines, proposals, and directives. These efforts have produced meaningful outcomes in the preservation of the religious cultural heritage of the local communities.

As of now, six religions have been officially recognized by the State in the region: Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Caodaism, the Bahá'í Faith, and the Minh Sư Đạo (Southern Buddhist Sect). With active support from the provincial Committees for Religious Affairs, local religious organizations have been facilitated in consolidating their organizational structures, dividing and establishing grassroots units.

For instance, by 2013, Catholicism in the region had developed 15 deaneries, 247 parishes, and 443 religious establishments. Protestantism, as of mid-2013, had seen the formation of 210 congregations across 8 officially recognized denominations, and 917 out of 1,304 religious groups had been approved for registration. Religious organizations have been supported in ordination, clerical appointments, and training classes. The number of religious followers has increased in line with the region's mechanical population growth.

According to the reports of the provincial Religious Affairs Committees, as of mid-2014, the total number of religious followers in the Central Highlands had reached 2,018,000, accounting for 39.37% of the regional population, an increase of 73.36% compared to 2002, the year before the issuance of Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW. As of mid-2013, there were 922,924 followers in the region (including over 340,000 ethnic minority followers, accounting for 36% of all Catholic followers). Buddhism gained 157,512 new followers between 2002 and 2013, bringing the total to 601,353. Caodaism had 21,962 followers by 2013, an increase of 5,318 over the same period.

The territorial spread of religions particularly Protestantism and Catholicism has expanded rapidly. Along with the increase in scale, religious activities at home and in places of worship are respected. Normal religious practices in parishes and sub-parishes are maintained through annual activity registration with commune-level People's Committees, with official approval, monitoring, and support from local authorities.

In places without clergy or places of worship, especially during major religious festivals, local governments cooperate to allow religious authorities to assign clergy to conduct ceremonies. For Protestant denominations, in compliance with Directive No. 01/2005/CT-TTg issued by the Prime Minister, in addition to allowing the registration of religious groups, provincial authorities have also permitted individual believers to conduct worship at home, especially when group registration is unnecessary or the believer is the sole member of a household.

Annual festivals of various religions are facilitated by local governments, while major religious commemorative events are allowed to be conducted solemnly (Such as the 150th anniversary of Catholic missionary work in the Central Highlands; the concelebration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Portieu Providence Congregation on (January 14); the 80th anniversary of Protestantism coming to Dak Lak, Lam Dong; the 65th anniversary of coming to Gia Lai, the 100th anniversary of Protestantism coming to Vietnam; the Vesak Festival (Buddhist calendar 2552), the memorial ceremony of the day King Buddha Tran Nhan Tong entered nirvana; the

30th anniversary of the founding of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha of Buddhism; the 60th anniversary of the Vietnam Buddhist Family; the 45th anniversary of the founding of the Cao Dai Holy Temple in Dak Lak, etc.. Charity and social work by religious organizations are also encouraged and supported by local authorities. All civil rights of religious followers and clergy are respected and guaranteed.

Renewed Perspectives, Openness in Policies, and Implementation of Religious Heritage Preservation in the Central Highlands – Current Situation and Strategic Directions

The renewal of viewpoints and openness in policies, along with the effective implementation of these policies, have brought about positive changes in the religious life of the Central Highlands. This has fostered a sense of enthusiasm and trust among religious communities in the region towards the Party's guidelines and the State's policies. Notably, the policies toward Protestantism have opened the way for the “normalization” of religious activities, a crucial development in this region.

Future Directions for Preserving Religious Cultural Heritage in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

The respect and assurance of religious freedom in the Central Highlands have proven to be an important factor in ensuring the well-being of religious communities, allowing them to live fulfilling lives while practicing their faith. It also provides advantages for state management in the region. To further improve the preservation of religious cultural heritage, particularly in the context of current integration and globalization, it is essential to strike a balance where the freedom of religion is upheld and traditional cultural values are preserved. To achieve this, multiple synchronized measures need to be implemented. From the research conducted, we suggest some strategic directions as follows:

Firstly, in terms of institutional frameworks, it is necessary to amend and supplement the existing legal documents and create new legal frameworks. These laws should define the fundamental principles in managing religious activities and handling violations by both the religious institutions and the state authorities. It is important to ensure that the state's consistent policy of respecting and guaranteeing religious freedom is upheld, while also effectively managing religious activities within the scope of the Constitution and the law. In practice, many regulations regarding religion in the Law on Beliefs and Religions are no longer suitable or lack enforcement mechanisms, leading to varying interpretations and applications. Therefore, it is urgent to enact a religion law to provide a strong legal tool to further promote religious freedom in practice.

The religious framework in the Central Highlands includes both national-level institutions (such as the Constitution, laws, decrees, etc.) and local/regional institutions specific to the area. Therefore, local governments should base their regulations not only on the national legal framework but also on the local realities to issue specific legal documents on religion that better guarantee the freedom of religion for citizens and more effectively utilize the role of religion in the sustainable development of the region.

Secondly, it is essential to strengthen propaganda and education efforts to raise awareness among government officials and the public regarding the preservation of religious heritage. This can include organizing conferences, seminars, and workshops on the preservation and promotion of religious cultural heritage in the Central Highlands. It is also necessary to increase investment in physical infrastructure and targeted support through the national cultural programs and projects dedicated to the preservation of traditional culture. Activities should include

inventorying, compiling scientific records, and evaluating the status and effectiveness of heritage preservation work, while developing annual investment plans for the restoration, upgrading, and protection of religious heritage sites.

Thirdly, it is important to focus on building a cultural environment. In the Central Highlands, most religious followers are also ethnic minorities. Thus, preserving cultural heritage must be intertwined with ethnic work, promoting awareness among ethnic communities about the importance of their spiritual, ethical, and cultural values. This will help preserve and enhance positive traditional cultural values in their modern lives. It is necessary to establish cultural norms that combine good traditional values, and organize healthy cultural activities that engage the people.

Fourthly, continued attention should be given to effectively implementing the Program for the Preservation and Promotion of Outstanding Traditional Cultural Values. This includes balancing the allocation of funding for the program's projects, supporting cultural preservation efforts, and providing training for cultural workers and artists from religious communities in the region. Additionally, programs that invest in remote and disadvantaged areas should be integrated into efforts to support the region's cultural infrastructure, enhancing the cultural participation of local populations.

Conclusions

In recent years, the Central Highlands provinces have witnessed significant progress in raising awareness and implementing policies that respect and ensure freedom of religion. This shift has positively contributed to the preservation and continuation of traditional cultural values in the region. From the perspective of cultural heritage, the religious cultural heritage of the Central Highlands embodies profound historical, artistic, and spiritual values. It reflects the creative expression and sacred worldview of ethnic communities and plays a vital role in nurturing their collective identity and faith.

Religious beliefs and practices, manifested through both material expressions and spiritual activities, have enriched the ethnic cultural landscape with diverse and vibrant dimensions. Therefore, the preservation of religious cultural heritage in the Central Highlands is not merely a matter of protecting religious practices it is fundamentally about safeguarding the broader traditional culture and ensuring the vitality and continuity of Vietnam's national cultural identity. As the country continues its path of modernization and international integration, preserving religious cultural heritage should be approached through culturally sensitive, community-centered strategies that harmonize tradition with development. Only then can this invaluable heritage be sustained for future generations, serving both as a cultural foundation for ethnic minorities and as a shared asset within the national and global cultural heritage.

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