

## Trends of Changes in the Culture of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam (A Case Study of the Bahnar People in Kon Tum Province)

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### **Abstract**

*Changes have been observed in the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province as an objective necessity for their existence and development in the current context. These changes bring about both positive and beneficial features as well as negative and degenerative ones, most notably the possibility of traditional cultural identity fading and becoming distorted. This study makes use of secondary data synthesis and analysis, as well as fieldwork and sociological surveys to collect information and look into three locations, namely Kon Tum City, Dak Ha District and Kon Ray District - where the Bahnar people is most prevalent in Kon Tum Province. How the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province has changed is shown through the following significant patterns: Innovation; Conservation; Exchange and Integration.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Trend of Change, Bahnar People, Kon Tum Province, Vietnam.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The shift observed in the traditional culture of the Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province is an objective social phenomenon that takes place in the development of the socio-economy. In the book titled "Some major orientations for the ideological work today", Central Commission of Ideology and Culture stated that: "Looking back at thousands of years of national history, Vietnam's national culture has evolved by selectively absorbing various elements of culture. In the spirit of national independence, our predecessors assimilated the quintessence of human culture while still taking great pride in the worth of Vietnamese people as well as Vietnamese historical and cultural traditions. Thanks to that spirit, we manage to avoid the sense of inferiority, loss of originality, xenophobia, and cultural distortion" (Central Commission of Ideology and Culture, 1995). This reality requires proper investigation and assessment to find the trends of change, thereby providing fundamental guidelines and solutions to conserve and promote the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum, both now and in the near future. In this article, we focus on discussing the trends of changes in the traditional culture of the Bahnar people - an ethnic group well-known for rice farming and gong culture in Kon Tum Province. As a result of our investigation and consultation with Bahnar artisans, village elders, and specialists studying the Bahnar people in Kon Tum province, we have come to the conclusion that the traditional Bahnar culture in Kon Tum province is evolving and moving in four directions: vanishing; innovation; conservation and exchange and integration. Such division, though, is merely relative, since the trends are actually entwined and overlap one another.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Bahnar ethnic culture in general and changes in the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam in particular are of interest to a lot of scholars. Among numerous studies on this subject, the work *The Bahnar people in Kon Tum* by Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi in 1937 stands out. Since they had spent a considerable amount of time observing and participating in the Bahnar community in Kon Tum, the authors were able to concentrate on a thorough summary of the daily routines and cultural practices of Bahnar people. The study offers a wealth of insightful information regarding the Bahnar people's way of life, traditions, and folklore. Meanwhile, the work *The Bahnar people in Vietnam* by Bui Minh Dao et al. (2006) focuses on presenting a fairly comprehensive picture of the cultural, economic, and social life of the Bahnar ethnic group. This includes information about the residential environment, the residents' current situation, and their traditional crafts and other means of subsistence like farming and husbandry. Another work, *Po Thi Festival in the lives of*

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*Bahnar and Gia Rai people* by Nguyen Tu Chi, Nguyen Duy Thieu (1993), which focuses on socio-cultural issues, particularly the attributes of institutions and social relations, affirms that festivals are always born and associated with a certain community or ethnic group; and that these are an important time to strengthen and foster emotional solidarity within the Bahnar and Gia Rai people, as well as the larger ethnic minority population in the Central Highlands.

In recent years, studies focusing on particular facets of Bahnar ethnic culture have garnered interest from a multitude of experts and State initiatives. For example, on February 14, 2023, Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued Decision No. 238/QD-BHVTTLTDL declaring that the traditional handicraft weaving of Bahnar people in the districts of Dak Ha, Sa Tho, Kon Ray, and Kon Tum City in Kon Tum Province was included in the List of National Intangible Cultural Heritages. These studies, however, mostly address policy issues rather than delving deeply into the cultural transition patterns of the Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam.

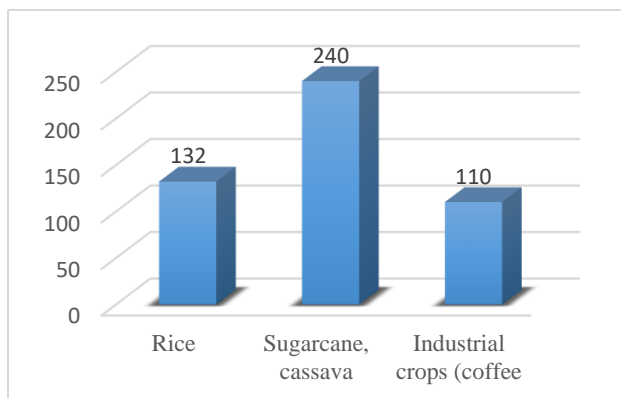
### Trends Of Changes in the Traditional Culture of Bahnar People in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam

#### \*Trend Of Innovation in The Traditional Culture of Bahnar People in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam

**Livelihood and Production:** One of the most evident examples of the change in traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province is the creativity in their means of subsistence and production activities. The most noteworthy innovations are those related to production methods and tools; specifically, mechanization in agricultural production is currently gaining popularity. Both the introduction of new plant varieties for high productivity and the use of machinery in agriculture, such as plows, rice grinders and threshers, water pumps, harvesters, etc., have been increasing. Additionally, the traditional rice-growing method known as "fire-stick farming" has been supplanted by the cultivation of rice in paddy fields and other industrial crops like sugarcane, coffee, pepper, rubber, etc.

When asked what their current main crops are, Bahnar people responded with 132 replies for rice, 240 for sugarcane and cassava, and 110 for industrial crops including pepper, coffee, and rubber. The findings indicate that the Bahnar people no longer farm rice, but rather cassava and sugarcane. Village elder A Huy provided the following explanation for the reason behind this change: "Villagers no longer have land to grow rice; they only have the mountain fields to grow cassava or sugarcane for money to buy rice"(from the in-depth interview with elder A Huy of Kon Hra Chot Village, Thong Nhat Ward, Kon Tum Province). About this matter, the CPV Standing Committee of Kon Tum Province (2021) said that: "At the moment, the focus is on developing the cultivation of medicinal plants into a key economic sector and turning Kon Tum into a key medicinal plant area of the region and the entire country, in order to promote the socio-economic development of ethnic minority and mountainous areas in general and the Bahnar ethnic group in particular" (Nguyen Ha and Le Huong, 2021).

**Graph:** The main crops that Bahnar people grows



**Source:** 2019 field survey results

It is evident that the Bahnar people's way of life has changed as a result of the trend of innovation in livelihoods, particularly in production techniques and tools. This is clearly manifested in their culinary culture, architectural design, and clothes.

**Culinary Culture:** The innovation is quite evident in the life of Bahnar people. During festivals, in addition to traditional dishes, new dishes (mainly from the Kinh people) also appear. On the offering tray, there are a variety of candies and beverages, including beers and soft drinks to go with the traditional home-cooked liquor. Ms. Y Hip said: Rather than depending solely on their own produce, Bahnar residents can now purchase a wide variety of vegetables, meats, and fish for events like weddings and funerals. We can prepare meals that were previously limited to festivals whenever we have the money to purchase cooking supplies." (from the in-depth interview with Ms. Y Hip in Kon Tum Ko Mam Village, Thong Nhat Ward, Kon Tum City).

**Traditional Costumes:** Costumes are significant in the material traditional cultural heritage of Bahnar people. As a result of their interactions with several ethnic groups from various locations and the process of socioeconomic development, Bahnar people have made numerous innovations and adjustments to their traditional clothes. The process of "Kinh-nization" best exemplifies the innovative trend in traditional Bahnar garments. The Bahnar people's costumes essentially still feature traditional patterns, however the styles and decorations have been simplified. Bahnar people now borrow and employ ornaments and patterns from various ethnic groups in addition to their own. Besides the standard black color, more liberal patterns, richer hues, and neutral tones are employed.

The Bahnar people's traditional clothes have undergone significant modifications due to a combination of factors including urbanization, socioeconomic shifts, increased cross-cultural interactions, and the convergence of ethnic groups' cultural values. Bahnar people can now select costumes based on what better fits their daily routine and performance. Traditional attires are currently inconvenient for commuting in today's world because Bahnar people no longer go on foot but rather by bicycles, motorbikes, or cars. Because they historically relied on self-sufficiency in their production, Bahnar women were expected to be skilled in weaving and sewing in order to provide clothing for their families. Now, instead of devoting their time and energy to cultivating cotton and woven fabrics, Bahnar people can easily select from a wide selection of affordable ready-to-wear clothing thanks to the expansion of the market economy and the opening of doors to other ethnic groups. It is evident that the modern world is developing along with the intersection and integration of various ethnic groups and geographical areas. The awareness, wants, and preferences of Bahnar people, particularly those of the younger generation who wish to adapt in order to keep up with the prevailing trend, are greatly impacted by this.



Traditional costumes of Bahnar people  
(<https://danviet.mediacdn.vn/upload/3-2013/images/2013-08-16/1434776708-trangphuc2.jpg>)



Traditional costumes of Bahnar people in Kon Tum  
(<http://thuvienkontum.vn/vi/tai-lieu-so/Tai-Lieu/Trang-phuc-truyen-thong-cua-Toc-ng-voi-Bana-o-Kon-Tum-47/#.Xu1vu10zbct>)



**Photo1:** Historical and contemporary traditional attire worn by the Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province

**Houses:** The Bahnar people's modern homes have had numerous modifications in line with the trend of innovation. The transition from stilt houses with thatched roofs to houses with tiled or cement roofs, concrete



columns, etc., demonstrates changes in the materials used in construction. The Bahnar people's innovative and rejuvenated housing is a result of various factors, the primary ones being shifts in their living and economic circumstances. Artisan A Luu said: "Bahnar people, especially the elderly, prefer stilt houses because they are cool in summer and warm in winter. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, we are unable to construct them because they are quite expensive (the price of constructing a single stilt house is equivalent to that of three level-4 houses). Additionally, as the forest gets smaller, it becomes harder to find wood, thatch and bamboo to build stilt houses" (from the in-depth interview with Artisan A Luu in Kon Klor 2 Village, Dak Ro Na Commune, Kon Tum City).

Not only the material culture, but the spiritual culture (language, customs, beliefs, etc.) of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province also clearly shifts toward the trend of innovation, which manifests in the simplification and elimination of outdated customs and cumbersome procedures. The innovation is especially best observed in terms of language. Numerous terms from the Kinh language, particularly those pertaining to science, engineering, and technology, are being borrowed into the Bahnar language, causing it to become "Kinh-nized". As K. Marx and F. Engels said: "First labor, after it and then with it speech – these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man" (K. Marx and F. Engels, 1994). And "Comparison with animals proves that this explanation of the origin of language from and in the process of labor is the only correct one" (K. Marx and F. Engels, 1994).

The universal law governing all things and phenomena is transformation and development. Therefore, culture as a manifestation of social consciousness is not exempted from this fundamental law. The process of contact, adaptation, and progress has led to the Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province transforming their traditional culture toward innovation. This is an entirely objective outcome. Just like Prof. Nguyen Thanh Liem said: "No matter how much people strive to maintain it, no culture can stay still or exist in its original form. Studies in cultural anthropology have demonstrated that no culture is able to maintain all of its traits. Every culture, including those cut off from the outside world, undergoes gradual changes over time. Depending on the circumstances, the pace of change might be extremely rapid, fast, moderate, or very slow. Most cultures change very slowly without great collisions and conflicts" (Nguyen Thanh Liem, 2021).

### **Trend Of Conservation in the Traditional Culture of Bahnar People in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam**

Festivals, clothing, language, and culinary practices of the Bahnar people in Kon Tum province are the main areas where their traditional culture is being conserved.

**Culinary Practices:** The Bahnar people still mostly make soups, boiled dishes, and grilled foods, despite having access to a wide variety of cooking supplies. Typical foods like grilled pig, sticky rice, chicken, salt and chili, fish cooked with fermented bamboo shoots, etc., still have a role in daily life as well as on holidays.

**Costumes:** The traditional costumes of Bahnar people have drastically changed for a variety of reasons. This is especially true for those who reside in Kon Tum City's center districts, where there is a considerable cultural interaction between many ethnic groups. Nonetheless, traditional garments are still worn by the elderly and in certain isolated, mountainous places. In the village, the elderly continues to wear garments that they weaved themselves. Older people are always more likely than younger people to be dressed traditionally, and women are more likely than men to do so. The percentage of village elders who wear traditional clothes, broken down by age and gender, is 63.5% for male and 84.5% for female; the middle age group follows with 32.5% for male and 76.5% for female; children make up 17.5% for male and 19.5% for female; for the youth, the number is 14.5% for male and 21% for female.

**Spiritual Culture:** Despite the fact that industrialization and innovation have brought about significant changes to the Bahnar people's spiritual culture, they nonetheless make an effort to uphold and preserve parts of their distinctive cultural and spiritual identities. This is seen in the movement to preserve spiritual culture with an emphasis on language and holidays. Regarding the language used by Bahnar people nowadays, 289 respondents (or 54.7% of the total) stated they speak Bahnar; 321 respondents (or 61% of the total) claimed they speak Vietnamese; and 389 respondents (or 73.6% of the total) said they speak both Bahnar and

Vietnamese. The use of Vietnamese or Bahnar language depends on the circumstances and context. The Bahnar people's language has been preserved in large part thanks to this flexible language use. Artisan A Luu said: "Now, Bahnar people speak Vietnamese when they go to the market, school or meetings in the province, wards, and communes. When they are at home or around other Bahnar people, they use Bahnar language." (from the in-depth interview with Artisan A Luu in Kon Klor 2 Village, Dak Ro Wa Commune, Kon Tum City).

**Table : Languages currently spoken by Bahnar people**

No.	Language	Frequency	% column
1	Bahnar language	289	54.7
2	Vietnamese	321	61.0
3	Both (Bahnar language and Vietnamese)	389	73.6
Total		528	

**Source: Results of field survey in Kon Tum Province in 2019**

Along with supports from the local authority, the amount of cultural and artistic teaching activities in the village, particularly Xoang dance and gong dance, is increasing. Mothers and grandmothers will teach their children and grandchildren to dance and sing, especially in households where there is a strong singing and dancing tradition. To learn gong dance and Xoang dance, other families bring their kids to classes run by the skilled families or the wards/communes in the area. These classes are currently centered in Kon Tum City, Sa Thay District, Dak Ha District, and Kon Ray District in Kon Tum Province. A gong and Xoang dance class was organized in Hamlet 5, Tan Lap Commune on August 24, 2020 by the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in collaboration with the People's Committee of Kon Ray District, according to the Kon Tum Province Publicity and Education Commission. One of the responsibilities associated with carrying out the "Conservation and promotion of space of gong culture in Kon Tum Province in the 2016-2020 period" is this one, which was authorized by the province's People's Committee in Decision 1183/QD-UBND dated October 7, 2016. Three artisans and twenty-four learners, aged ten to fourteen, representing various ethnic minorities in Tan Lap Commune's Hamlet 5, Kon Du Village, participated in the class. Over the course of the 15-day session (August 28, 2020 – September 7, 2020), local artists taught learners the fundamentals of gong performance and traditional Xoang dances. In addition to igniting their passion for gong performance and improving their knowledge of the need of preserving their community's cultural identity, this class assisted the local ethnic minority youth in continuing to inherit, protect, and promote the values of gong culture. (Kon Tum Province Publicity and Education Commission, 2020).



Ms. Y Muk teaches her daughter how to weave brocade  
(Source: Kon Tum Newspaper - Bahnar families keep the traditional profession)



Mr. A Hung and Ms. Y Muk introduce the profession of weaving to tourists  
(Source: Kon Tum Newspaper - Bahnar families keep the traditional profession)

**Photo 2:** The teaching of traditional crafts of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province today

## **Some Contributions of The Trend of Exchange and Integration to the Traditional Culture of Bahnar People in Kon Tum Province, Vietnam**

Trade exchanges have been making their way into the more isolated Bahnar villages, fostering social, cultural, and economic interactions between Bahnar people and other ethnic groups as well as establishing a relationship between the upstream and downstream regions. Cultural and social development, integration, and interchange go hand in hand with this kind of economic growth. This tendency, which is occurring in many areas, has given rise to new incentives for more cultural growth, as well as new elements and values. It has also helped to establish a democratic and open environment, dynamism, and inventiveness. The trend of exchange and integration in the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province is vividly expressed through tendency of interaction and integration in both material and spiritual domains, with an emphasis on language and festivals.

In terms of language: Bahnar people used to speak just their language. But now, they are able to speak both languages when they interact with Kinh people and other local ethnic minorities. Artisan A Luu said: "Now, Bahnar people speak Vietnamese when going to the market, school or meetings in the province, wards, and communes. When they are at home or talking to other Bahnar people, they use Bahnar language." (from the in-depth interview with Artisan A Luu in Kon Klor 2 Village, Dak Ro Wa Commune, Kon Tum City). Bahnar people have incorporated numerous parts of Vietnamese language into their speech due to their direct interactions with Kinh people and numerous other ethnic minority groups in the area. These are the terms for new social relations and mechanisms that were not previously included in the Bahnar language, like the Party, the Government, the National Assembly, and the Fatherland Front; terms for administrative divisions like commune, district, and province; and terms for science and technology like automobile, motorcycle, television, refrigerator, camera, computer, gas stove, etc. The Bahnar language's tone has also undergone significant modification as a result of socioeconomic interactions. Compared to those in Kon Ray District or Dak Ha District, Bahnar residents in Kon Tum City speak softer and use fewer words in their sentences. This is the prevalent pattern among the Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province in particular and among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in general. In the research titled "Preserving and promoting traditional culture of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands", author Ngo Duc Thinh stated that: "Cross-cultural interactions among ethnic groups in the Central Highlands and with the outside world have a variety of impacts, both beneficial and detrimental. First and foremost, these interactions and influences help to foster interethnic understanding and unity, which is crucial in hastening the cultural transformation of various ethnic groups and opening the door for a variety of new cultural phenomena and values to permeate and have an impact on daily life, including language, writing, education, science, food, clothing, travel, lodging, cultural activities, and entertainment" (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2017).

Apart from the customary celebrations, the Bahnar people are now also fond of modern holidays such as National Solidarity Day, Independence Day on September 2, August Revolution commemoration on August 19, Lunar New Year, etc. In particular, the National Solidarity Day is an important cultural occasion for not only Bahnar people, but also the province's numerous ethnic minorities. This is the result of cross-cultural interactions and idea exchange. Another study titled "Cultural changes and cohesion of the Muong ethnic community today (a case study of the Muong people in Hoa Binh Province)" additionally confirms that: "The festivals of the Muong people today have been combined with many modern cultural activities to fit the current conditions better" (Nguyen Thi Hang, 2016).

Exchange and integration are clearly a trend in the objective development of all cultures. This is a must for ethnic groups to stay ahead of the curve and continuously improve national culture. In order to thrive, Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province cannot stay outside of this trend. According to researcher Pham Duy Duc: "In the current trend of globalization, proactively expanding international exchange and cooperation on culture is an urgent requirement to both introduce Vietnam's cultural achievements to the international community, and at the same time to benefit from the progressive and positive achievements of world culture in order to enrich the culture of our nation" (Pham Duy Duc, 2004). Thus, in the process of cultural exchange and integration, each Bahnar resident must feel a sense of preserving their traditional culture.

## CONCLUSION

Philosophically speaking, culture is a form of social consciousness that is shaped by the features of the economy and has its own environment as well as opportunities for growth and change. The traditional Bahnar culture is changing as a result of socioeconomic growth and cultural exchanges between various regions and ethnic groups. One way that the Bahnar culture improves and replenishes itself is by absorbing beautiful and distinctive aspects from other civilizations, while also screening and discarding outmoded practices, beliefs, and rituals. However, Bahnar people's traditional culture is changing, and these changes also clearly show how their identity is vanishing. Thus, it is crucial to identify the trends of changes in the traditional culture of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province in particular, for it provides the theoretical and practical foundation for developing the appropriate guidelines and policies that will protect and advance the traditional cultural values of Bahnar people in Kon Tum Province both now and in the future.

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