

# Epic Telling-Singing — Folklore Tourism Potentiality of Central Highlands

## Ethnic Groups: Mnong Epic Telling-Singing Case

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**Abstract:** Central Highlands epic (MNong epic) is an intangible cultural heritage that needs to be preserved urgently. In this article, by means of documentary research and interdisciplinary research, we propose a conservation solution of epic as a folklore tourism potential in the form of “slow tourism”.

**Key words:** epic; intangible cultural heritage; tourism; folklore tourism

**JEL codes:** Z, Z3

### 1. Introduction

Epic is a special kind of folklore, which takes the form of rhymes and poetries but has narrative content. In the world, epic accounts for small quantity and is unevenly distributed among countries and ethnic groups. In Vietnam, up to the present time, epic has only been popular in a few ethnic groups in the Northwest and Central Highlands.

In this article, we are not going to analyze the art form of epic, instead, we approach it as a potential resource of folklore tourism. Therefore, we only discuss researches with scope close to the scope of the article.

### 2. Literature Review

In the two researches: MNong traditional culture and changes in the contemporary society (2018) and The role of traditional culture of the Central Highlands ethnic groups in the sustainable development of the region (2019), Author Do Hong Ky discussed the current situation of epic in the MNong community under impacts of economic, social and cultural modernization. The author offered the solution to portraitize heroic characters in epics, and develop epic clubs to help epics survive longer and bring epics to MNong ethnic group. In the author's view, epic is just a genre of folklore that needs to be preserved, not a resource of folklore tourism.

To conduct research, we use two main methods: documentary research and interdisciplinary research. The documentary research method used to systematize and analyze documents about MNong epics that have been published, and also to give us an overview that there are no research findings on potentials of folklore tourism of “epic telling-singing” of Central Highlands ethnic groups in general and the MNong ethnic group in particular. To respond to research task, we use interdisciplinary research method between literature, culture and economics — tourism to see the correlation between them, and find a way to preserve epics (of the Central Highlands) — an

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urgent task in the economic development and life quality improvement of ethnic groups.

### **3. Findings/Discussion**

Folklore tourism is a concept that has been mentioned by many countries around the world, and in Vietnam, we are also developing this form of tourism to take advantage of folklore potentials for socio-economic development. However, this form of tourism still requires further investment and creativity by tourism developers because its full potential has not been exploited.

#### **3.1 Current Situation of Epic of the MNong Ethnic Group**

The MNong ethnic group has about 89,000 people, inhabiting the districts of Chu Jut, Dak Min, Dak Song, Kien Duc, Tuy Duc, Krong No of Dak Nong province. In addition, the Mo Nong people also live in many areas of the provinces of Dak Lak, Lam Dong and Binh Phuoc. The Mo Nong people have local groups of Prech, Biat, Nong, Bu Noi, Dip, Ro Ong, Gar, Rlam, Kueng, and Prang. The MNong people follow both patrilineality and matriarchy, however, the matriarchy is more popular. Each extended family lives in houses up to 40-50 meters long, which are divided into many compartments. In addition to the same compartment shared by parents and the youngest girl, other compartments are for other nuclear families. Each nuclear family has its own kitchen and rice basket. Running the matriarchal family is the oldest woman. They help each other throughout difficult times. In the extended family's events, nuclear families have responsibility to contribute to and have same rights and benefits (Do Hong Ky, 2019, pp. 14-15).

MNong epic is popular in the districts of Dak Mil, Dak Song, Tuy Duc, Kien Duc (Dak Nong) and Bu Dang (Binh Phuoc). Of which, "Bu Prang"<sup>1</sup> is home to this large and rich collection of epics (Do Hong Ky, 2018, p. 156).

The MNong epics are considered by researchers to be the largest collection of epics in the world. The MNong ethnic group owns about 200 epics. It is just like a panorama of geographical space, history, socio-economic, cultural activities and beliefs of the MNong people in close and reciprocal relationship with the divine world. Epics not only reflect the material world but also the vivid spiritual world of the MNong people. The MNong people always want to be descendants who inherit beauty, appearance, heroism and bravery of girls and boys in the epics. To the MNong people, characters in the epics are not gods they aren't familiar with, but their ancestors, who founded villages and contributed to develop their material lives.

In the Central Highlands, there existed a collection of "live" epics. Before 1986, especially before 1975, epics were often told and sung in the villages of Ede, Ba Na, and MNong .... After 1986, especially in recent times, there has been a dramatic decrease in quantity of such epic performances. Currently, people don't organize epic telling-singing in villages of the Central Highlands ethnic minorities any more (Do Hong Ky, 2019, p. 214).

The MNong people sing and tell epics in three places: indoors, on the field and in the forests. But in recent years, epic telling-singing space has shrunk, even changed and gradually disappeared. When forest area decreases, they no longer go hunting as before, so they no longer stay overnight in the forests; houses are also modernized following the Kinh people, so epic telling-singing has been gradually disappeared. Especially, the MNong people follow the Protestant religion and other religions, their beliefs have changed and are greatly influenced by religions so their devotion to their ancestors and heroes has sunk deep into their memories.

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<sup>1</sup> Now under Quang Truc commune, Tuy Duc district, Dak Nong province.

Over time, artists who know how to sing and tell MNong epics passed away or are old, young people aren't taught yet or do not have passion for epic telling-singing, so they refused to study. Dieu Thi Mai, daughter of Dieu Kau (died in 2008), the artist and translator of the MNong language into Vietnamese, living in Dak Ndong commune, Dak Song district, Dak Nong province is the only person who has deep love for MNong epics.

Thus, MNong epics are disappearing. Realizing the urgency, many state-level and ministerial-level projects have been developed to preserve epics - intangible cultural heritage of the MNong people in particular and of the country in general. In 2001, the project of *investigating, collecting, preserving, translating and publishing the collection of Central Highlands epics* was implemented (2001-2007), and as a result, 26 epics was published. In addition, other epics were published: *The MNong ancient epics* (compiled by Do Hong Ky and Dieu Kau, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993); *Cay neu than (magic Tet pole)* (collected and compiled by Tan Vinh and Dieu Kau, Dak Lak Department of Culture and Information, 1994); *harvest season at Tiang village* (collected and compiled by Dieu Kau, Tan Vinh, Dak Lak Department of Culture and Information, 1996); MNong mystic epics (Do Hong Ky, Dieu Kau, No Yu, Dam Po Tieu, National Cultural Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997); *Telling about descendants of Chep mother* (collected by Truong Bi, translated by Dieu Kau, Dak Lak Department of Culture and Information, 2003); *Tian selling wooden statues* (collected by Truong Bi, translated by Dieu Kau, Dak Lak Department of Culture and Information, 2003)<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, there are two ministry-level topics: *Central Highlands epics with contemporary life — current situation, outlook and solution*, main author: Prof. Dr. Sci. Phan Dang Nhat (2006); *Way to bring Central Highlands epics back to the community of Central Highlands ethnic groups*, main author: Prof. Dr. Nguyen Xuan Kinh (2008).

### **3.2 Folklore Tourism and Its Development**

Nowadays, with the rapid development of technology, urban life is gradually shrinking green space of people. Due to busy work, dust, noise, light pollution, etc., we are giving up our past habits and lifestyles. Therefore, people travel to many places as an "escape" to come back to their life before. During the trips, tourists want to go to other places for a short time to escape their daily life, and also to find an alternative environment that is considered to have unexploited natural landscapes and exotic and fascinating cultures (Dr Greg Richards, 2000, p. 43).

There are many types of tourism, but recently, special attention has been paid to cultural tourism. But, we mean "live" culture, not buildings and temples existing over time, it belongs to the type of folklore tourism. So what is folklore tourism? It is a purposeful tour to the main setting of folklore performances to see and learn about a particular folklore type in a careful way not to affect and interrupt such folklore performances and local people's lives. In this tourism type, domestic or foreign tourists are main payers to locals. Local homeowners or relatives will act as tour guides (Pecsek, 2016, p. 1).

Tourists interested in this type of folklore tourism are diverse, who can be divided into groups: 1) those are folklore researchers; 2) those are eager to learn about folklore; 3) those are folklore lovers; 4) those consider folklore as an entertainment source. Segmentation of visitors makes designing folklore tourism itineraries more effective. Statistics of annual tourist types will give tourism investors and developers an innovative and strategic vision to promote the the development of folklore tourism, especially folklore tourism of ethnic minorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to the article "Reviewing the process of collecting and researching MNong epics" in the book *Learning Folklore of Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities* by Nguyen Xuan Kinh, p. 161.

Bringing folklore of ethnic minorities to visitors is a way of recognizing distinct beauty of each ethnic group's culture: no ethnic group's culture is more beautiful and special than others, instead, each culture has its own characteristics among other cultures around the world.

### **3.3 Epic Telling-singing of MNong People — Folklore Tourism Development Potential and Solutions in the Form of “Slow Tourism”**

Intangible cultural heritage is a spiritual product associated with a community or related individuals, objects and cultural spaces, which has historical, cultural and scientific values and demonstrates the identity of the community. It has been constantly preserved and passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, teaching knowledge and skills, performances and other forms<sup>3</sup>. Central Highlands epics in general, and MNong epics in particular are an intangible cultural heritage that need to be preserved. Central Highlands epics are nominated by the state to the list of the intangible cultural heritages in need of urgent protection 2027. The list of intangible cultural heritages in need of urgent protection is the most important one because its objective is to provide appropriate protective measures to protect expressions of cultural heritages that are facing threats to their survival — that is, transfer and further creativity<sup>4</sup>.

MNong epic is considered by Mo Nong people as a valuable asset inherited from their ancestors. When epics were still in their golden age, everyone in the village, after finishing their meals, would gather to listen to epics told and sung by artists at the community house. The artists told and sang epics as if they were the characters, their voice was low at some times and high at the other times, sometimes it resonated, which mesmerized listeners: everyone including the old and children remained silent all the time. It seems that they kept quiet not only because of good content and attractive way of telling, but also of the devotion, worship, praise, and pride for the characters in the epics considered as their ancestors by the people from generation to generation. So what is the solution to bring epics back to their “golden age”? We must find motivation to “revive” epics, instead of replicating and performing for recording on stage and viewers just have a quick look at it, and as a result, it just a tape recording “MNong epics” that is just of historical value.

In order to revive epics, it is necessary to mention two factors: 1) Artists; 2) Motivation to revive.

About artists, even in the traditional society, there were not many people who knew how to sing and tell epics. An epic artist must have the following qualities and conditions: 1) Have good memory at birth; 2) Don't sing and tell epics for their own benefits; 3) Have perception, belief in the magical reality mentioned in epics (Do Hong Ky, 2019, p. 216). This requirement depends on the 3 criteria of competency, quality and faith, so artist training courses must use these 3 criteria as teaching orientation. However, how to attract learners to become artists? An artist shall not tell and sing epics only because of his love for national traditions and cultural identities, but it must be a career contributing to the economic development of the community and help individuals earn good income.

About motivation to revive, today, room for epic telling-sing has been decreased, we need to “revive” epics according to the context of the era by coordinating with the development of folklore tourism and current “slow tourism” trend in the world. Slow tourism is all about life in a certain place at a slow pace, and according to this trend, foreign or local tourists spend more time in a tourist destination experiencing and acquiring their understanding. Localities can cooperate with the authorities to organize this form of tourism, with some initial suggestions such as:

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<sup>3</sup> [https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Di\\_s%E1%BA%A3n\\_v%C4%83n\\_h%C3%B3a\\_phi\\_v%E1%BA%ADt\\_th%E1%BB%83](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Di_s%E1%BA%A3n_v%C4%83n_h%C3%B3a_phi_v%E1%BA%ADt_th%E1%BB%83).

<sup>4</sup> [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000189113\\_vie/PDF/189113vie.pdf.multi](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000189113_vie/PDF/189113vie.pdf.multi).

*Place of residence:* people's houses in villages of ethnic groups.

*Tour guides:* people living in the village who are well trained and have knowledge in culture in general, and epics in particular, of ethnic groups.

People in the village will welcome tourists, arrange their accommodation in a thoughtful way but the accommodation shall not far from houses of people in the village. While tourists stay in the village, tour guides will design an experience program for them including an epic telling-singing session of the MNong people including artists and all people in the village. When tourists stay in the village will get two-way benefits: 1) From the tourists' side, they will experience life in ethnic villages, learn many things from ethnic culture, which are brand new experience different from their daily life; 2) From the ethnic groups side, in addition to profit they get, the ethnic groups can also exchange with new cultural identities and promote their own ethnic culture.

Over time, the development of folklore tourism, in addition to contributing to the socio-economic development of the MNong ethnic group, will lead to the development of the epic telling-singing. Therefore, local authorities and ethnic groups need to invest in this direction, which is also a form of preserving MNong epics in particular and the Central Highlands epics in general.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Nowadays, folklore tourism is not a strange concept in the direction of tourism exploitation, but the question to raise here is "should we develop folklore in a dynamic or static direction to serve tourism?". With the trend of "slow tourism", folklore tourism will be exploited and have highest effectiveness. The epics of the Central Highlands have been and will be the intangible cultural heritage that need to be preserved of Vietnam. Epic researchers, especially Do Hong Ky, a MNong epic researcher, have proposed an epic conservation solution, that is, portraitizing epic characters and establishing epic clubs. In this article, we propose a direction of conservation emphasizing epic is a potential, a "resource" to develop cultural tourism in the Mo Nong community in particular, and the Central Highlands community in general.

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