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## PRESERVING THE EPICS OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** This article is based on the ideas of a presentation at the scientific seminar "The epics of the Central Highlands - Preservation and promotion solutions" planned by the Institute of Social Sciences in the Central Highlands of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. It was then postponed in late 2017 and has yet to be implemented.

In keeping with the theme of the workshop, the purpose of this article is to present a perspective on the preservation of the epics through performance in the community. This point of view derives from viewing Central Highlands epics as a performing art, a form of cultural practice that still exists. These are living epics, not published epics.

Based on the results of ethnographic fieldwork combined with the method of analyzing the art of singing-speech, we discuss the stated prospects for preservation, point out the shortcomings of applying the methods of preservation of Central Highlands epics in practice, and then give our opinion. The Central Highlands epic should be preserved as it existed in its traditional context. It should be heard more often in the community through the lyrics of the artist.

**Keywords:** epics of the Central Highlands, epic performance, preservation of living epics, Central Highlands of Vietnam

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## СОХРАНЕНИЕ ЭПОСОВ ПЛАТО ТЭЙНГУЕН ВО ВЬЕТНАМЕ

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**Аннотация.** Эта статья основана на идеях, высказанных на научных семинарах, посвящённых сохранению и популяризации эпосов плато Тэйнгуен.

Цель статьи – дать представление о возможности сохранения эпосов плато Тэйнгуен как формы живого исполнительского искусства, не зафиксированного на каком-либо носителе. В статье анализируются результаты этнографических исследований и подвергаются критике существующие методы сохранения певческого наследия плато Тэйнгуен.

**Ключевые слова:** эпосы плато Тэйнгуен, эпическое представление, сохранение живого эпоса, плато Тэйнгуен

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## Introduction

In recent years, there have been many comments at scientific seminars, there have been research projects proposing solutions to preserve the Central Highlands epic, but in reality, there have been no positive changes. Professor To Ngoc Thanh said: “After the great victory of the Project on Investigation, Collection, Preservation, Translation and Publishing of Central Highlands Epic Treasures, in addition to "static" preservation in the form of textualized documents, we have put a lot of efforts to bring the epics back to the lives of our fellow citizens through opening teaching classes and organizing recitals among the young. But clearly, those efforts did not get the desired results” [To Ngoc Thanh 2009: 201]. The danger that the Central Highland epics will disappear in the community of ethnic groups is becoming increasingly apparent. Therefore, the issue of the preservation of the epic becomes more urgent than ever.

### **A look at the problem of preserving the epics through two scholarly seminars**

In the two scientific seminars on Vietnamese epics, but mainly on Central Highland epics, the main issues such as epic concepts, epic classification, and epic values (especially cultural value, literary value, historical value, etc.) were discussed. The issue of preservation is also mentioned in several articles after the state of the Central Highlands epics became known, but only at the level of recommendations or wishes, these are not the main goals of the authors.

#### *The First Scientific Seminar on Epics*

A seminar entitled “The Epics of Central Highlands – Vietnam “ was held on May 20, 1997, in Buon Ma Thuot. It was the first scientific seminar on epics in Vietnam. In the proceedings of the seminar, 21 scientific papers and 1 summary of the seminar were printed, including 15 articles by researchers from central institutions and 6 articles by leaders and local researchers. The issue of the preservation and development of the epic is mentioned only in the sentences placed at the end of the speeches of several researchers and managers who participated in the seminar. Let us consider the opinions of some researchers concerning the preservation of Central Highland epics.

In the book “The Epics of Central Highlands”, Professor Dinh Gia Khanh suggested that the value of the epics should be exploited and promoted [Dinh Gia Khanh 1998: 46]. Professor Ngo Duc Thinh warned: “Nowadays, the artists who memorize and tell epics are becoming more and more rare <...> many undiscovered and uncollected epics are in danger of being lost. We must hurry by all means to save these precious legacies that have been and are gradually being lost forever” [ Ngo Duc Thinh 1998: 56]. Professor Phan Dang Nhat affirmed, “The epics of the Vietnamese ethnic groups is a living epics” [Phan Dang Nhat 1998: 79], after which he suggested some solutions for preservation: “Transform these epics into cultural art forms”, “Nurture epics movement among the masses”, “Put epics into the educational system” [Ibid.: 84]. Researcher To Dong Hai suggested: “Quickly deploy the collection of original epics to translate and publish in bilingual”, “Open training classes for epic performers.” [To Dong Hai 1998: 137]. Professor To Ngoc Thanh expressed his wish: “I wish someday singing-talking activities will be restored by the culture and information industry and by the

people, after finding people who can perform epics and teach the young. And if necessary, organize singing-talking contests” [To Ngoc Thanh 1998: 227]. Cultural manager Nguyen Thanh Chinh, director of Dak Lak's Department of Culture and Information, suggested: “It is necessary to form a movement of tales and folklore activities, turn these activities into spiritual food that is indispensable in people's life” [ Nguyen Thanh Chinh 1998 : 178].

The most important suggestions related to the preservation of epics were compiled quite comprehensively by Professor Ngo Duc Thinh in the summary of the seminar: “It is possible to organize and put typical epics into teaching in schools, creating excitement for students to memorize each epic passage in their native language; print pictures with ethnic language notes describing epics for young children. Encourage the elderly to teach the young to sing epics, introduce the epic singing in ethnic cultural festivals...” There is a very remarkable suggestion: “find the right ways to revive the epic singing-talking performances in ethnic villages, so that this kind of folk performance becomes one of the cultural activities at the grassroots level, contributing to enriching cultural life at the grassroots level” [Ngo Duc Thinh 1998: 350].

#### *The Second Scientific Seminar on Epics*

The second scientific seminar on the epics took place about 11 years after the first seminar. It was an international seminar entitled “Vietnamese Epics”, which was also held in Buon Ma Thuot city. However, when the proceedings were printed (2009), it was titled: “Vietnamese Epics in the Context of Asian Epics.” Of the 23 papers printed in the Proceedings, 11 were written by Vietnamese authors. Among the articles by Vietnamese authors, there were 8 articles on the Central Highlands epic, 1 theoretical article on the cognitive process of the epic in Vietnam, and the remaining 2 articles were on foreign epics. Perhaps because the seminar took place in the context of the just completed and highly praised Project to Research, Collect, Preserve, Translate, and Publish Central Highlands epic treasures, it was a major cultural event of the period. This is an ambitious project approved by the Vietnamese government, funded by the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, directly managed by the Institute for Cultural Studies in cooperation with the Central Highlands and surrounding provinces. After the project is completed, there are still many issues to be resolved, so the article “Summary of the International Seminar on Vietnamese Epics” leaves the issue of epic preservation open. However, there are several articles in the proceedings of the seminar that deal with preservation issues, which we would like to address below.

Professor Phan Dang Nhat's article “Thinking about ways to preserve and promote the value of the Central Highlands epics in modern society” outlines 3 methods for preserving and promoting the Central Highland epic: preservation through “a variety of materials (such as books, photographs, audio tapes, video tapes)”;

preservation through “contemporary cultural and visual arts (such as film, theater, sculpture, comics)”;

preservation “in the environment of folk cultural activities” [Phan Dang Nhat 2009: 218].

In the article “The fate of the Central highlands epics in contemporary society” Professor Tho Ngoc Thanh expressed a rather optimistic opinion: “We can preserve and promote this value in life today, but in ways that are not the same.” Before giving some ideas on how to solve the problem of epic preservation, he wrote: “So can we somehow prevent the 'fate' of the country's large-scale epics? In my opinion, it is possible if we adopt some changes concerning the fate of the epics.” One of Professor Tho Ngoc Thanh's recommendations is this: “We should regularly hold recitals as an artistic performance in a community house or even in a community cultural centre, where the presence of the participants is voluntary. It is very good to have a knowledgeable person explain and

present some features, some noteworthy points when listening to the epics before the performance” [To Ngoc Thanh 2009: 201, 204, 205].

Nguyen Thi Hoa's article “The environment of collecting, researching and teaching the Central Highlands epics in the current context” expresses a slightly different opinion: “Teaching epics is, in my opinion, a difficult problem. It is not easy to teach epics in a modern environment where older artists are becoming rare and young people pay little attention to traditional culture. Teaching on a large scale will be difficult if there is no longer a medium for epic content. Let the epic exist and die according to the laws of natural evolution.” However, the author does suggest: “try to think of a model for preserving the traditional art forms of the Kinh people, such as Huế singing (ca Huế), ceremonial singing (ca trù), traditional operetta (chè), classical drama (tuồng), Quan ho Bac Ninh folk songs <...> We must study the way to preserve them, try to see the epic as a professional art form of the people of the Central Highlands and apply the experience to preserve and disseminate the epic among the ethnic groups of the Central Highlands” [Nguyen Thi Hoa 2009: 246].

In “The process of investigating and collecting the epics of E De and Mo Nong in Dak Lak” Truong Bi made five recommendations to “The Central Highlands Epic Treasure Research, Collection, Preservation, Translation and Publication Project to enter people's lives”: 1) Continue to collect and publish the collected epics for distribution in the villages; 2) Adapt the epics into comics or animated films for wide distribution; 3) Continue to coordinate with local governments to open educational classes; 4) Restore epic cultural activities in the villages; 5) Organize an epic singing competition (as an art festival) [Truong Bi 2009: 154].

The following will summarize and discuss all the epic preservation initiatives undertaken in the two research workshops to determine the most feasible solution for preserving the Central Highlands epic.

### **Discuss epic preservation solutions**

We can summarize already existing suggestions for preserving the epics as follows: 1) Include epics in the secondary school curriculum; 2) Open classes and invite artists to teach epics in the community; 3) Preserve by collecting, documenting (textualizing) and publishing epics; 4) Preserve by transforming epics into contemporary cultural and visual arts; 5) Preserve epics in current Central Highlands folk activities by forming a singing and speaking movement in the community; 6) Summarize the contents of the epics, then publish them as a small bilingual book, popularize them in the community; 7) Apply the experience of preserving the traditional art forms of the Kinh people in the preservation of the epics; 8) Include the performance of epic songs and talks in national cultural festivals.

Apart from recommendations 1, 5, and 7, the remaining suggestions for epic preservation have been put into practice, but, as Professor Tho Ngoc Thanh said, “these efforts have not yielded the desired results”. Perhaps this is the main reason that prompted the scientific seminar “Epic Heritage of the Central Highlands - Preservation and Popularization Solutions” to improve the preservation of Central Highlands epics. To find an effective preservation solution, one must first find the reason for the ineffectiveness of existing solutions.

In our opinion, the main reason lies in the perception of the epic. There are two problems here:

*First*, the Central Highland epics have been viewed primarily from a folkloristic perspective, which emphasizes the literary character of the Central Highland epics. The literary approach and the method of literary analysis of the text make the feature of the epics “passed from mouth to mouth”

neglected or forgotten. Most authors or works have the aim of identifying values from the epics, writing them down and preserving them by the method of “word of mouth”, “text transmission”. Solutions 1, 3, 6 all come from this. Because the method of “text transmission” must go through a multi-step process [Kieu Trung Son 2016: 3-9]; especially the process of translation and editing into standard Vietnamese before the finished product, which transforms oral epic language into text epic language. Owners of epics will have difficulty recognizing their possessions when they receive the finished product. The same is true of epics taught in schools for children of ethnic groups: although the epic is transmitted in the ethnic language, it becomes part of the content of the literature subject. Once the lecture is composed, an epic with “word transfer” will be like a fairy tale, a legend, or a myth. It is difficult for students to imagine what an oral epic is. This explains why local epic preservation solutions based on literary approaches are ineffective.

*Second*, the oral nature of the epic has not been thoroughly studied, nor have the features of Central Highland epic performance been thoroughly examined before declaring preservation measures. Although a performing arts approach has been applied to the Central Highlands epic, it is still limited and has not developed a scientific understanding based on this approach. The preservation of the epic is closely related to its “word-of-mouth” character, to its singing-talking arts; because that is the right object to preserve.

The oral nature of the epics is not the same as teaching, as suggested above in Number 2. The proposal shows that teaching is an activity in which the teacher and the student participate. Both subjects, the teacher (the artist) and the student, are aware of their role in the learning process. However, the way epics are “transmitted by word of mouth” is very different from teaching; in the sense that the communicator *unconsciously teaches*, and the listener is *not aware that he or she is learning*. The listener's attention is conditioned by the attractiveness of the narrative and the singer's manner of singing.

Narrative singing, also known as chanting, is an oral way of performing epics. Its main characteristic is the art of melodic improvisation. The narration is different every time, as mentioned above about the peculiarities of spoken language; the melody of the song is also not the same every time. The narrator uses musical melodies to convey the epic narrative. Depending on the common words or rhymes and depending on the character as well as the context of the epic narrative, the artist randomly changes the tone accordingly. Such is the epic singing-talking arts of the Central Highlands.

The listener can never memorize all the words of the epic, only the plot is memorized, the character is memorized because the epic is long, and because the narrator himself does not memorize everything. Artists do not memorize epic tales the way people memorize the story of *Kieu* and then recite *Kieu*, they memorize only the plot. Since the artist does not memorize epics and always improvises the melody, he sings differently each time<sup>3</sup>, as long as the story and characters remain the same. Among the many people who listen to an epic repeatedly until they memorize the plot, details of the story and characters, only a few have the ability to sing and the desire to sing as artists, to become an epic singer. An epic that is transmitted in this way we call “natural transmission.” [Kieu Trung Son 2017: 17-45]; it can also be considered “*unconscious transmission*”. It gradually penetrates the subconscious mind of the one to whom it is transmitted. At a certain point, the one who

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<sup>3</sup>We proved this feature through experiments in the project “The Real Epic of Ede: Artist and the Transmission of Song-Talk.” Hanoi: Social Science Publishers, 2018.

has been transmitted, “imbued with the epic”, will naturally have a need to expose the epic. At a certain time, new storytelling artists will emerge.

So, if you listen to epic chant-talk to memorize the words, to be able to sing properly as an artist, with the goal of becoming a new narrative artist just as much as memorizing Kieu tales, it is impossible. The decision to open classes and invite artists to teach (solution 2 above) is ineffective.

Given the peculiarities of the above-mentioned epic performing arts, the implementation of solution 7 (to use the experience of the preservation of traditional art forms of Kinh people in the preservation of the epic) and solution 8 (to bring epic performing arts to ethnic cultural festivals) is not possible. The peculiarity of epic performing arts is that music is used depending on the content of words, while the characteristic feature of folk singing is that words (verses) are used in accordance with the musical structure. The two art forms are contrasting in their practical characteristics, so it is difficult to apply the same approach to preservation (decision 7). On the other hand, an epic story is long or very long, when we present it at a national cultural festival, it has to be shortened or very shortened, in which case it is no longer epic. Moreover, if we put it on stage, the epic is a performance without a real audience. Everyone, including the judges (if any), would probably listen only out of courtesy and because they have to listen, most people in the audience do not understand and are not interested because they do not know the language of the performers (decision 8). This analysis shows that solutions 7 and 8 are also ineffective.

Thus, only solution 5 (preservation of the epic in the current folk activities of the Central Highlanders, formation of a song-and-song movement in the community) can be effective. However, this solution is not given the attention it deserves. Not a single project to return the epic to folk activities in the community has been put into practice.

### Awareness of the preservation of the epic

At present, in our opinion, the Central Highlands epic exists in two forms: the living epic (or oral epic) and the textual epic. In this case, the issue of preservation concerns only the living epic because the textual epic is essentially a method of museification of the oral epic, which is often referred to as “static preservation” [Ngo Duc Thinh 2009: 31-45].

*Preservation*, in simple terms, is the protection of an essence that exists as it is from the influences that cause it to degenerate or disappear, and helps it adapt to the inevitable change of context. Here, when the living epic is performed and manifested in life, it is represented as an existing entity. Where does the living epic exist before it manifests itself into an existing entity? We can answer at once: in the consciousness of the artist. We consider the epic in the mind of the artist to be an epic in a state of *latency*. When the artist performs the epic before the public, it means that the epic exists in a *living* state.

Thus, oral epic exists in two states: *Hidden epic and living epic* [Kieu Trung Son 2016: 3-9]. Living epic is full of elements that constitute the art of performance<sup>4</sup>, it can be fully considered a kind of performing art. The peculiarity of this kind of performing art, as mentioned above, is the art of improvising melodies in accordance with the narrative, the characters and the details of the story. It is the kind of art that uses musical melodies as a tool for storytelling, so that the long story is

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<sup>4</sup>See: Elements of the Ede epic (2018), in: Kieu Trung Son, ed. *The present Ede epic: the artist and the transmission of the singing-talking arts*. P. 208-221.

“performed” in a way that is most appealing to listeners. When an epic story is “performed” in front of an audience, it becomes *a living epic*.

After the above analysis, it is evident that in order to preserve the Central Highland epic (oral epic) it is necessary to pay attention to both states of its existence: *the Hidden Epic* and the *Living Epic*. These two states are in close dialectical relationship. If there is a hidden epic, then there is also a living epic, and vice versa, if there is a living epic, then the hidden epic will form and develop. In order for there to be sung and spoken art, there must be artists, and artists must perform in order to create artists of a new generation (as we analyzed oral transmission above). That is, in order to preserve the oral epic, attention must be paid to two factors: the artists and the organization of the artists' performances in the community. Saying “I care” is easy, but exercising this “care” is not easy at all. You have to understand artists, their circumstances, their mentality, their aspirations, their abilities, their health... We find them not only when we need to record epic works. Since the epic is hidden in the subconscious of the artist, they always have a need to express, a need to perform the epic. This need is not for collectors, not for cultural officials, not for a particular performance, but for their village communities. They rejoice when everyone in the village invites them to sing, they are saddened when no one is interested. The second factor lies in “concern”: the organization of today's epic performance is an even more difficult issue. When the need to hear and sing epic tales in the community is no longer the same as it was half a century ago, organizing an epic performance in the community is really difficult, it depends on a lot of facts (material technology, people, context, plan, route, etc.). Therefore, the organization of narrative singing in the community can be seen as the key to the preservation of oral epics.

There is another cognitive question that needs to be addressed, and that is that the preservation of the epic is a process in which many participants are involved. Is it necessary to determine who is involved in this process? In our opinion, there are three people: the researcher, the manager and the owner (owner of the epic). Is it also necessary to clearly define the roles of each person and who plays a decisive role in this process? We believe that the “owner” plays a crucial role.

Once there is a living epic, the owner of the heritage is the community that has the epic archive and the performer. And once it comes to preserving the epic heritage, its true owner must not be forgotten. They should have a say in the process as “owners”. Whether or not the living epic is restored and preserved in the community depends on whether or not the “owner” wants it. If the managers and researchers are determined to preserve the epic, but the “master” does not like, want, or see the need for it, there will be no results; if they try to do so, it will only be expensive and pointless.

In the work of preserving epic heritage, the cultural staff where the epic is located plays a key role. For local managers and researchers, if there is only enthusiasm and determination, it is not enough, scientific knowledge about heritage and preservation is needed. Therefore, there is a great need for projects and programs to train local researchers, managers, and local ethnic people into experts, so that these three individuals can be united and highly effective in preserving the epic. With the existing ethnic cultural background and some training, also equipped with knowledge and scientific methods, Party and State cultural policies, local epic experts will be the main factor most effective in preserving the intangible cultural heritage: the Central Highland Epic.

## Conclusion

For more than 20 years, we have analyzed the opinions of scholars and managers about decisions to preserve the epic as part of scholarly seminars on the Central Highlands epic. In fact, the effect of preservation has fallen short of expectations, and we have cited two main reasons. *First*, because the Central Highlands epic is perceived as a literary work, the direction of preservation mainly revolves around collecting, documenting, and using textual materials to turn the epic into a literary work. *Secondly*, due to the lack of awareness of the actual existence of the epic in the lives of Central Highlanders, it is difficult to come up with a suitable method of preserving the epic. Thus, the problem stems from an inadequate approach and a lack of awareness of the Central Highlands epic.

The desire of all of us who are interested in ethnic culture in the current context of deep international integration is how to keep the epic alive in the ethnic community in the Central Highlands. This is important for the preservation of ethnic cultural identity. Unlike an epic that has entered literary works, a living epic always selects, receives and transforms the information of the era in which it exists. Because the person performing the epic is a person born in that epoch, using the language of that epoch, transforming the details in the style of that epoch, transforming the things and events of the time he lives, what he experienced, into the epic. Thus, in a living epic there is always an actual connection to the ethnic cultural past/history.

Imagine, in the twelfth century, if the epic representation of the Central Highlands remains as it is still alive today, the image of today's Central Highlands, modern people, with the mentality, desires and reflection of modern life, will be known to our next generations. This is very different from what we know about the epic in a book (e.g., *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), as our previous generation learned about these epics, hundreds of years later, our descendants still only know about the epic in exactly the same way.

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