

## Acculturation of Traditional Cultural Symbols in Central Highlands

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**Abstract:** Cultural symbols are each race's moral and spiritual values or those of their belief. The symbols always consist of meanings of things or phenomena. Among cultural symbols of ethnic groups in Tay Nguyen (the Central Highlands) are the noun "oi Adai", the Rông house (communal house), gongs, the musical instruments of Torung, Đinh Pã, the drum, gùi (open backpack), the rice ear, gôl column, buffalo lasso, axe blade, patterns of brocatelle, the gourd... The symbols have been acculturated with Catholicism and Protestantism.

**Keywords:** cultural symbols, traditions, Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands), Catholicism, Protestantism.

### 1. Introduction

The Central Highlands today consists of five provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. This is the only region that gathers the presence of nearly all the 54 ethnic groups in the country, of which the Kinh (Viet) people account for 64.71%, other indigenous peoples account for 26.27%, and the ratio of ethnic groups emigrating from other areas of the country is 9.02%. Among the traditional cultures of the ethnic peoples in the Highlands, many cultural symbols have been acculturated to new cultures (Catholicism and Protestantism). Not many scientists have paid attention to researching the acculturation of cultural symbols in the region. This paper focuses on the acculturation of the symbols in the new religions in the Highlands.

### 2. The noun of "Oi Adai" – the God

In Gia Rai language, "Adai" (pronounced as "ah-zye") means heaven; "oi" (pronounced

as "er-ee") means "mister"/"lord". Therefore, "Oi Adai" means "Mister Heaven"/"Lord Heaven". However, that interpretation is somehow oversimple, not highlighting the characteristics of the traditional legendary character as a symbol in the spiritual life of Gia Rai people. "Oi" in Gia Rai language does not merely mean "mister", but also implies senior citizens who are highly respected by the community. In fact, "Adai" is the short form of "oi Du, oi Dai". When Catholicism was introduced into the Central Highlands, these words were absorbed and adjusted to correspond to the word "God". In the Gia Rai traditional culture, "Adai" is the deity who creates and protects life of all people. This is the most powerful deity among the Yang (deities) of the Gia Rai. Meanwhile, the E De people have "Aê Du, Aê Diê" – their deity of creation.

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The highest deity of the Gia Rai was quickly recognized since Catholicism was introduced in the province of Kon Tum (in 1851 in Plei R'hai) by a group of French missionaries. Almost immediately, they linked the God of Catholicism with "Adai" to serve their mission and get attention from the followers (though not in such an accelerated and proactive way, as Protestantism absorbed the "Aê Du, Aê Diê" of the E De people). Obviously, "Adai" is the supreme deity in the traditional beliefs of the Gia Rai. Similarly, the *Holy Trinity* is the savior of all Catholic followers worldwide. The "uniqueness" of the Catholic God and the fact that the "Adai, Aê Du, Aê Diê" are "highest and being the only one" are the similarity that Catholicism and Protestantism took full advantage of and applied thoroughly for the acculturation.

Like "Aê Diê" of the E De, "Adai" of the Gia Rai appeared among the mass not in the way of mythicizing a real person. Instead, the appearance reflected the world outlook of the Gia Rai and E De on the deities existing in their world. The character is seen in stories told orally from generations to generations. Meanwhile, the [Catholic] God is the source of all creatures on earth. He appeared to remove all sins, devoting his life to saving man from dull-wittedness and sufferings.

It appears that no other cultural values of the Gia Rai and E De were so successfully absorbed and transformed as the symbol of the *God –Adai* or the *God –Aê Diê*. They "almost" unified the deep spiritual world of the Catholic Gia Rai or the Protestant E De. The successful combination of the cultural symbol is the origin of all other following acculturations. And, after that, transforming the beliefs from those of polytheism to

those of monotheism, from animism to Catholicism and Protestantism, is only a matter of time. Few Gia Rai and E De people can now remember that the highest deity in their spiritual life is "Adai"/ "Aê Diê". However, they all know that "Adai" is God and God is "Adai", "Aê Diê" is God and God is "Aê Diê". That is a cultural symbol which was successfully transformed.

### 3. The Rông house

The Rông house (communal house) is not only a cultural symbol of the Gia Rai and E De in the Central Highlands, but also a popular and typical one of the whole region. For the people in the Central Highlands in particular and those throughout the country in general, the roof of the house has become the typical symbol of this region of basalt. That typical cultural symbol has been acculturated by Catholicism to better exploit the spiritual life of the Gia Rai to bring them to God.

Why did they refer to the Long house of the E De, the Rông house of the Gia Rai, or the Rông house of the Ba Na, to build their churches? Religions select one or more cultural symbols of the indigenous peoples to soften the absorbance of new religions. Acculturation of cultural symbols of different ethnic groups will bring the best results to the missionary work.

It is easy to make the Rông house, or Long house in the case of E De people, churches, in terms of the usage, but it is very difficult to transform the [local] spiritual cultural values to suit the presence of the Catholic God. The Rông is to house sacred items of the community and is the place that witnesses important meetings of the locals. The sacredness is assured by taboos such as the bans against people bringing filthy things into the Rông house,

or against women entering, etc. Missionaries spent a lot of time and efforts, first, on converging supreme deities of the Gia Rai and the E De - Adai, Aê Diê (as mentioned above) with their God, and then, on absorbing and “displaying” the local traditional cultural symbols in the very Catholic churches. They arranged and combined in the most suitable way to ensure no separation exists between “the traditional space” and “the God’s space”. This combination contributes to transforming the spiritual life of the Gia Rai and E De from the traditional one to the God in a natural and flexible way.

#### **4. Gongs, musical instruments of Torung, Đinh Pă, the drum**

Gongs in the Central Highlands are a symbol of the traditional culture in the community activities. In the early days after absorbing Catholicism/Protestantism, the Gia Rai and E De abandoned their gongs to join the new religion with the belief of leaving behind what does not belong to the God. However, the clergymen, priests, and pastors realized that, deep in the hearts and minds of the Gia Rai and E De are the hidden wishes to return to the typical cultural values of their ancestors, a spiritual flow that cannot be interrupted by new and exotic religious factors. It was the clergymen, the priests, who were proactive in encouraging the followers to preserve, gather, and promote the traditional cultural values, aiming to honor the God and the Trinity in their best possible capacities.

Departing from the traditional belief in animism, the locals of the Central Highlands came to God. And the God’s servants were subtle to encourage them to preserve the gongs, their ancestors’ traditional cultural symbols. The items are encouraged to be preserved and brought to

offer to God. In the church of Plei Chuet 2, Thang Loi ward, Pleiku city, Gia Lai province, which was built resembling a Rông house of the Gia Rai, and many other churches throughout the Central Highlands, sets of gongs are neatly and respectably placed, and every week, their sounds are heard, being beaten by the best players in the community. This makes the Gia Rai and E De feel that the churches are like their traditional Rông or Long houses. Some other musical instruments (such as Torung, Đinh Pă, drum, etc.) are also present in the church and regularly used for rehearsals and singing of hymns on Sundays or during rituals, etc. Such spiritual heritage and cultural values have been acquired and preserved carefully by Catholic people. In Plei Chuet 2 church, a Torung is placed to the left of the entrance, and a Đinh Pă is next to it.

The drum is a traditional musical instrument of the Gia Rai. In a Catholic church there, the drum replaces the bell. The Plei Chuet 2 church has a bell tower, but the bell is replaced by a traditional drum of the Gia Rai. Possibly, the brass bell with its pitch and echo does not quite match the sound style of the Gia Rai who are loyal to the low and warm tone of the drum which is made of wood and leather by the deft hands of local artisans.

Today, the melodies of gongs, the Torung, the Đinh Pă... are harmoniously blended with those of other musical instruments, such as the piano, the organ, and the guitar..., to make chords which suit the space and atmosphere of the church rituals. Moreover, new repertoires are also interested in and played to meet new trends. New songs to honor God are sophisticatedly combined with the traditional tunes of the Gia Rai and E De. These help make the performance space more fanciful and attractive.

### 5. *Gùi* (open backpack), the rice ear, *gol* column.

*Gùi* is a means to carry and transport things on one's back, which is used widely by many ethnic minority people in the Central Highlands and various places nationwide. The backpack is chosen for its convenience in all production activities. It is used both to store and transport goods and to be a symbol of cultural values of ethnic groups. Depending on the cultural, social, age, and gender characteristics, each ethnic group makes different variants of the multi-functional *gùi*. There are *gùi* which are simple and rough for carrying things, but many other ones bear cultural values with their unique styles.

When acculturating this cultural symbol, Catholicism and Protestantism ranked *gùi* equal to the Bible. This is seen not only in daily life, but also at the most sacred places inside the chancel, where is the image of Jesus Christ crucified to a cross. This symbolizes the view that *gùi* of the highlanders in general and that of the Gia Rai and E De in particular is the means to carry goods to meet people's material needs, and the Bible is the means to carry cultural values that nurture their spiritual life.

Catholicism refers, combines, and makes use of the similarities as the means to move or carry material or spiritual values for the human lives. The two means are considered to be of great use, being the two vital instruments in preaching *Good News* to the followers. At the most sacred place in Plei Chuet 2 church, the image of Jesus Christ crucified on the cross is in the middle, to the right is the symbol of the Bible, and to the other side is the very familiar traditional image of the *gùi* of the Gia Rai. If the acculturation of Catholicism and the

traditional Gia Rai culture is divided into levels, the acculturation of the open backpack is at a relatively high level, as it has acculturated spiritual cultural values and transformed the people's awareness when they came to God.

The image of the rice ear also appears in many places in Catholic churches. According to the Gia Rai belief, rice does not only provide food to people but also contains in it a system of deities and ceremonies relating to rice cultivation. There are many ceremonies related to rice cultivation such as clearing up the land and burning the old plants on the fields for new crop cultivation, rituals for good rice and to chase away the ghosts that could cause bad harvests, rituals to celebrate the new rice/new crop... The cognition of rice and their farm fields has become a cultural value of not only the Gia Rai highlanders, but also all the people who cultivate rice in mountainous farm fields throughout Vietnam. The rice ear is seen to symbolize prosperity.

Catholicism has acculturated the image of the rice ear and put it on planks and windows around churches, which brings about positive effects in the views of the locals. Going to church, they feel not only protected by God, but also well-to-do, seeing the image of the rice ear, part of their agricultural culture.

Another cultural symbol, the *Gol* (pronounced as "gurl") column, appears in most of the community activities of the Gia Rai in particular and the indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands in general. It has naturally become a cultural symbol in the mind of each individual and is considered the symbol of the Highlands' culture by people throughout the country.

*Gol* column is erected every time the villagers hold a communal activity such as the buffalo eating festival or the New Year celebration... In the buffalo eating festival, the *gol* column, well decorated with various traditional colored patterns, is the focal point, that the buffalo is tied to.

The cross is a Catholic symbol which consists of not only the spiritual value of the religion, but also an image of God. God is present where the cross is. The combination of the two cultural symbols – the *gol* column and the Catholic cross - in reality seems to be hardly possible due to differences in the spiritual values of the beliefs. However, talented and flexible missionaries managed to find a suitable way to acculturate the local cultural symbol, satisfying both the traditional belief and the new religion. The *gol* column was replaced by a very tall cross decorated with traditional features maintained intact, and circled by low wooden columns. The traditional red, black, white, and green colored patterns are still primary colors on the structure placed on the patio of the church. Accordingly, the people can feel dear to their hearts, thanks to the colors, blocks, compositions... that are present, and easily accept a cross which replaces the *gol* column in the central position.

#### **6. The buffalo lasso and the axe blade**

In the main hall, the most sacred place in the church, this image is repeated but at a higher level with the presence of a traditional buffalo lasso. Of course, there is not a buffalo there, - one end of the rope is fixed to the *gol* column and the other end is tied to one leg of the God altar. The symbols of *gol* column, buffalo lasso, and God altar are physically closest to one another. And, what is even more significant is the meaning of this symbol. In the past,

in the local's buffalo eating festival, the buffalo is the very sacrifice to the deities, to constitute a prayer for peaceful and stable life. Meanwhile, the act of tying the rope to the God altar means that God devoted his life to saving the mankind and enlightening people. God took all sufferings of the people. The buffalo is used as a sacrifice to bring peacefulness and stability in life to the community via the forgiveness of deities. Obviously, this is a suitable reference and combination of two cultural symbols. The axe blade, like other agricultural tools mentioned above, is also a cultural symbol. For the local people, it is an important item that shows man's power in conquering the nature. It is an indispensable agricultural tool of the Gia Rai. Listing this image as a cultural symbol is acceptable. The cultural symbol appears in many places in the church (on the wall, wattles, pillars, etc.) both as a decorative pattern and a cultural imprint in the house of God. The image of the axe blade, which is mainly carved on doors and walls that are suitable for decorations, is noticeable and easy to see in churches.

#### **7. The pattern of brocatelle**

The pattern of brocatelle is another cultural symbol of the Gia Rai and E De in the Central Highlands. It does not only show the color patterns or blocks on a certain fabric frame, but also contains typical aspects of the ethnic groups over thousands of years. The pattern of brocatelle conveys cultural messages of ethnic groups, showing differences in cultures from this ethnic group to another, and helping us recognize the origin of an ethnic group and its esthetic values talent. Pattern of brocatelle of the Gia Rai was also acculturated by Catholicism, which uses it as a tool to convey messages to effectively

gather more followers. Traditional patterns (such as those in the shapes of square, oval, sun, and zigzag... on traditional brocatelle found in many churches) have seen changes - from being used for decorations on fabric to on wooden panels inside churches.

Meanwhile, pieces of brocatelle of different sizes have been used as the tools to create the space blended between traditionalism and modernity. A big item of brocatelle is used to differentiate the area for worshipping and that for community activities. Rectangular wooden pieces which are used to put the Bible on during the preaches are carefully covered with small pieces of brocatelle. The God altar is also decorated with brocatelle made by the subtle hands of Gia Rai, E De, and Ba Na women. Many traditional cultural values of the indigenous ethnic groups in the Central Highlands have been acculturated by Catholicism and Protestantism. These religions only set limitations when the acculturation violates their principles and tenets.

### **8. The alcohol jar and the gourd**

Alcohol jars (of wine drunk out of a jar through pipes) have been found in many places in Plei Chuet 2 church, such as under the staircase and near the Jesus Christ altar... Is there a contradiction between Catholicism and drinking alcohol from that traditional *ghè*? Basically, these are two different beliefs. Catholicism bans its followers from drinking alcohol, but the model of the alcohol jar is found in churches. In fact, the flexibility of Catholicism when it was introduced to the Gia Rai, E De, Ba Na, and Xo Dang ethnic groups can serve as the reasonable explanation for this. The Gia Rai and E De “drink alcohol since they were born” as a tradition, and drinking alcohol with pipes is

not only a practice but also becomes their cultural value. The *ghè* is not only for containing alcohol, it has become a gastronomic symbol of the Highlanders in general. Introduction of this cultural symbol to the church helps increase attractiveness for the followers, without creating any contradiction or resistance. Finally, getting more followers is done through making use of their own traditional cultural values. Combining the traditional cultural value and the belief is the fundamental objective that Catholicism aims to in its course of development.

The gourd is a water container used by the Highlanders at work on the field or while conducting other daily activities. It is so familiar to them that it has become indispensable in each family. The Highlanders feel that drinking water from a gourd makes the water tastier, sweeter and cooler. Artisan Rah Lan Ruh compared drinking water from a gourd with sucking milk from the mother’s breasts, and the shape of a gourd with a drop of dew or milk. In the Highlanders’ mind, the image of the gourd is familiar and has a relatively high spiritual value. In this case, the missionaries found reasonability in the usage and generalized it to a higher level which is closer to the universal values of the new religion.

Upon arriving at churches, the people would normally need to wash their faces before walking over the threshold to enter the God’s space, or they put their hands into a sink just outside the entrance, and make the sign of the cross, which is also a deed to purify themselves and show their respect to God. Inside the church, the sink is replaced by familiar gourds of the local people. The holy water is contained in a specific cultural value, and braced by a traditional cultural

value of the Highlanders. The gourd has now two functions - containing the holy water and creating a familiar image for followers when they come to God.

### 9. Conclusion

Cultural symbols are the high-level generalization of cultural values of ethnic groups. Each symbol truly represents a set of cultural values. Through cultural symbols, one can recognize the typical messages and characteristics in the images that each ethnic group want to convey. When new religions were introduced to the Central Highlands, the missionaries absorbed and acculturated the locals' traditional cultural symbols, sophisticatedly combining and transforming those values to enrich and soften the religious acceptance of the people. Material symbols, such as *gùi*, ear rice, *gol* column, axe blade, alcohol jars, etc. and other spiritual symbols of the Gia Rai ("Adai"), E De (Aê Du, Aê Diê") have been acculturated in a sophisticated and suiting manner. The appropriate usage of traditional appliances and musical instruments in churches also helps preserve the cultural values under new circumstances.

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