

# Destiny of Traditional Folk Arts in Conditions of Recent Society: *The Case of Vietnam*

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## Abstract

The Vietnamese nation consists of fifty-four ethnicities where the folk culture and arts have played an important and dominating role in the life of its people. This paper discusses some of the main issues as follows: First, the folk culture and arts are closely linked with the activities of everyday life. When the society changes, its folk culture, the arts entities have to redefine its values. Elements either disappear or participate in the restructuring of contemporary culture. Then secondly, for the cultural heritages we have to preserve and promote them in their original form if they are quintessential and change those that are changeable. Vietnam inherits both of the above two categories and they provide the basis upon which to compose new ones. The necessary actions should include: restoring the heritages forms and transmitting them to younger people, conducting an inventory, establish a databank, and periodically organize festivals and competitions.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Culture, Traditional Arts, Vietnam, Vietnamese Traditions, Vietnamese Arts, Destiny of Traditions*

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## Background

1. It is common knowledge that Vietnam is a multi-ethnic nation consisting of fifty-four ethnic groups, belonging to some large linguistic families of South-Eastern Asia such as Sino-Tibetan - Myanmar, Mon-Khmer, Viet-Muong, Thai-Kadai, Hmong-Zao, Malayo-Polynesian and others. These ethnic groups do not follow the social development patterns depending upon the historical conditions before the August 1945 revolution.

They can be divided into the following main categories:

- The society existing at the end of the primitive communal regime contains vestiges of an undeveloped democracy. In this culture only the folk culture and arts existed. One can still encounter this societal life style among ethnic groups living in the deep jungles of the North and Central Highlands.
- In the pre-feudal society only folk culture and arts existed.
- It was in the feudal society where both folk and professional culture and arts existed.

Hundreds of small sub-ethnicity local groups are incorporated into these fifty-four ethnicities with different names and dialects. Besides the majority Viet who settled mainly in the plains of the Red River Delta in the North and the Mekong River Delta in the South, there are fifty-three ethnic minorities located mainly in the mountain areas. Although not divided into isolated territories each ethnicity and local group has its own traditional culture and arts. Vietnamese culture consequently, is rich and abundant with diverse nuances.

2. In the past, the professional scholarly culture and arts could only be found among the Viet majority. The cultural and artistic components were popular mainly in the intellectual and aristocratic circles constituting only 2 percent of the Vietnamese population. However, the folk culture was associated with the remaining 98 percent residing in the countryside. *This reflects the eminent and dominating role of the traditional folk heritage of the Vietnamese people.*

3. Generally, the folk culture and arts are organic components of people's everyday life. *The creation of folk culture was originally linked to or motivated by social or religious-spiritual activities in response to people's needs.* This is the environmental and social context where artistic forms and expression were created and developed. They can be differentiated as follows:

### *a. Artistic expressions relating to different stages of human life from birth to death:*

Lullabies, children's games, songs, dances; majority etiquette songs and dance; love duets, (alternating singing between boys and girls); marriage-wedding songs and dances; customary and artistic activities for celebrating a new house; long cycle of songs for shamanistic healing; prayer songs and dances celebrating the birthday of elders at the ages of 60, 70, 80, 90, and 100; archaic epics recitals, and lastly, funeral laments.

*b. Artistic expressions relating to the different stages of cultivating crops:* As a means for “communicating” with nature and supernatural forces these activities take mythical forms. For example, springtime ceremonies with songs, dances, games of villagers worshipping the village’s tutelary deity and their ancestors. This involves praying for prosperity, good crops, abundant rain, and a ceremony for closing the doors of rice-storage structures etc.

Serving those above-mentioned social functions, the folk artistic expressions became inseparable components of village cultural life. For example, in order to lull a baby to sleep, people created a lullaby, thereby it becomes an “organic component” of the culture. The folk people cannot imagine the lulling baby without the lullaby. By the same reason, the people never sing the lullaby outside of the lulling activity. *The lullaby is a dual-functional entity. It is an element of everyday life’s activity (i.e. used in lulling), while at the same time; the lullaby is also an artistic creation.*

A similar case are musical pieces played by the gong ensemble in the Buffalo Sacrifice of the Highlander-Minorities people where the gong pieces are both a religious-customary activity and at the same time it is a musical creation. This gong piece is how the people “dialogue” with deities and supernatural forces through their belief that the gong’s sound is always a miracle language. In the past these musical pieces were not played outside of the Buffalo Sacrificial rite.

4. *Folk culture and arts are social entities that always change parallel to society.*

One example are the values associated with contemporary society where the changes in the fashion of clothes is one example. A second is the affirmation of crystallized values that enrich the traditional national culture. For the latter there are two categories to discuss:

*a. Preserving* the original form of folk artistic expressions and *promoting* them through the activities of people’s everyday life. Preservation is an effective way to protect the values and the fund and memory of our creative history. *Promotion and integration of the values and expressions of heritage contributes to building the contemporary culture of a nation.* That is why nowadays the Vietnamese people continue to practice many forms of traditional folk arts.

*b. Inheriting the values and forms of traditional folk arts’ expressions is the basis for creating and developing new artistic compositions meeting the demands of contemporary life.* Thus, preservation and promotion are the necessary conditions and basis for inheritance and development. In turn, inheritance and development guarantee the continuous existence of heritage and the renovation and development of artistic traditions. As the result, the artistic tradition continues to survive; the national cultural identity will be protected, while enabling new created elements to be adopted.

### Aims and necessary actions

In the context of integration and globalization, as a developing country, the society of Vietnam experiences accelerating changes toward industrialization, modernization and urbanization. This new societal structure has gradually broken the structure of the former agricultural society, including the structure and functions of folk arts. *Nowadays, all the folk artistic expressions have lost their original traditional functions in life and their social environments.*

For example, the rowing songs are no longer a unifying component when boats are powered by a motor. The same applies to the destiny of the hand-pounding rice songs and dances due to milling machines.

Moreover, during the past thirty years of resisting two wars the Vietnamese people have not had the conditions of peace to cultivate their traditional cultural and artistic activities. Two new generations are growing up without the experience of practicing traditional artistic activities. During the same time, the old traditional masters of folk arts who could transmit the cultural heritage are being lost to old age.

So, released from the longtime wars, among other things, the Vietnamese are faced with the real danger of the disappearance of all valuable activities, expressions and forms of their traditional culture.

*In order to avoid such big losses, Vietnam created a national program entitled “Safeguarding our traditional cultural and artistic properties”.* It began in the 1980s and continues researching and archiving the traditional culture and arts from the period of 1956-1979 in the North and from 1976-1979 in the South. In order to meet the objectives of this program, they developed a working plan with the following phrases:

#### 1. Inventory

Vietnam has to revise and assess the real situation of our folk arts' fund. Thus, they have appointed the Provincial Department for Culture (Ministry of Culture) in collaboration with the Provincial Branch of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists (AVF) to conduct research via questionnaire to investigate the condition of traditional folk arts.

#### 2. Action plan

From the result of this inventory, Vietnam now has a quantitative assessment of the state of its folklore's fund. From this inventory, the quantified views are as follows:

- Extinct traditions, which absolutely cannot to be revitalized: 20 percent
- Traditions still existing in people's memory, but in real danger of disappearance due to long-term neglect: 80 percent

As mentioned above, *our recent society is changing fundamentally and rapidly.* Before, the folk arts *were a unified-organic component of cultural life.* This was the life of farmers who cultivated rice either on the plain's rice-field or on the burn cleared land in the mountains. They lived in rural communes where the

individual existed only as a communal member. Now, in conditions of the contemporary society, with the farmer being recognized as an individual, *the entity of traditional culture is de-structuralized*.

As a result, the components of former traditional culture, may disappear forever (the custom of blackening the teeth, for example) or it may continue to exist as a single separate artistic expression with its own artistic values. In response to the real conditions of traditional folk artistic expressions Vietnam took some necessary measures as follows:

- Vietnam has restored traditional cultural-artistic forms and expressions from the masters who are still alive and capable of transmitting knowledge and skills of any specific genre.

This restoration is always welcomed by the public, because the villagers recognize that the revitalized cultural artistic form are creations of their ancestors and their unique cultural quintessences.

So the young villagers are eager to learn what the old masters impart. As a result, these villages are populated by four different age groups involved in the learning of traditional culture.

Three age groups (20-30, 30-50, and 50-60+) have two tasks; *performing* the folk arts forms and *training* those aged from 8-20.

In this form of restored cultural activities, the art forms can be revitalized and survive in their inherent cultural environments and contexts. Thus, their social, religious and artistic functions and values will be preserved.

For a wider dissemination in implementing the revitalizing of the cultural activities Vietnam organized the recording of them by modern audio-visual equipment to produce free DVDs.

- Promoting the artistic values of the traditional artistic forms Vietnam also presents them on stage at regional, national, and even in some cases, at international festivals. However, in order to respond to the demands of the performance stage, the traditional artistic forms had to undergo some changes such as performers needing make up, and the performer donning attractive, multicolor attire. Also either the song or the dance is obliged to be accompanied by the music of a live orchestra.

Of course, this does not always entirely preserve the authenticity of the item.

- Vietnam classified, computerized and arranged the collected materials in different systems according to their social function and artistic features. From the year 2000 till now Vietnam is in process of creating an archival databank of these materials.

- Vietnam organizes a bi-annual festival for the performance of certain genres of folk arts such as the National Festival of Lullaby. Fifty-four ethnicities that include their local sub-ethnicity groups participate. Additional activities are the Festival of the Gong Ensembles of the Highlanders, a festival of competitions of folk dances and the festival of love duets. There are also exhibitions for the folk arts of graphic painting, ceramics, porcelains, decorated costumes of minorities and other different handicrafts.
- Since 2000, in order to honor and encourage the merits of the masters of traditional folk arts, the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists rewards them with the honorific title “National Masters of Folklore.” To date Vietnam has rewarded one hundred and eighty-two masters among the fifty-four ethnicities.

### Conclusion

Thanks to the above-mentioned measures, Vietnam has preserved, promoted and revitalized many ethnic forms and expressions of traditional folk arts through which it gradually encourages the younger generation to turn their interest to the values of tradition. In summary, I would like to emphasize the most important facts:

The traditional folk culture and folk arts cannot exist as a social-historical entity as in the past. In the climate of contemporary society it has to undergo a process of destructuralization. But it does not disappear as a whole, even though a number of its components risk to be lost forever. Its central elements and remaining components will survive in a different form, as described above. *The people of Vietnam can report that they are participating effectively in a new process of culture restructuring, as they themselves become organic-unified components of the culture of contemporary society. Is this the new destiny of traditional folk arts?*