



**FROM INDIGENOUS MEMORY TO GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE:
ART AND MINORITY COMMUNITIES FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESS, HA NOI

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RECONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS MEMORY THROUGH THE PRESS: ETHNIC MINORITY CUSTOMS IN THE NORTH CENTRAL PROVINCES OF ANNAM ON THANH *NGHỆ TỈNH TÂN VĂN* IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

NGUYỄN THỊ THÙY NHUNG*

Abstract: This paper examines the content of *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* – a representative newspaper in the North Central provinces of Annam in the early twentieth century – which reconstructed the customs of Central Vietnam’s ethnic minorities to trace fragments of indigenous memory within the Vietnamese-language press. By analyzing articles on marriage, funerals, religious practices, and the customs of groups such as the Mường and Thái, the study clarifies the role of the press as both a medium of recording and a channel for disseminating folk culture to the public. However, the press’s reconstruction of memory was not entirely neutral. Under the influence of reformist and modernizing ideas, as well as the social positioning of the authors – often Kinh intellectuals shaped by Western education and reformist thought – ethnic minority customs were perceived as “differences” that required correction or modernization. These memories were frequently reinterpreted; customs were judged from moral, ethical, or civilizational perspectives, revealing the press’s intervention in minority cultures. This study approaches early twentieth-century Vietnamese-language journalism (specifically *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*) as both a space for archiving and a site for constructing indigenous memory. In doing so, it expands understanding of the complex relationship among memory, ethnic minority culture, and forms of mass discourse in the context of colonialism and modernization in Vietnam.

Keywords: *North Central Vietnam; early twentieth century; discourse forms; indigenous memory; ethnic minority customs; Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn.*

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the emergence and development of Vietnamese-language journalism in Central Vietnam (Trung Kỳ) became a vital

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channel for disseminating reformist ideologies and documenting socio-cultural life. Beyond current affairs, numerous periodicals took a profound interest in local customs and traditions, including those of mountainous ethnic minority communities. However, this body of documentation has remained marginalized in both journalism and cultural history, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of indigenous memory preserved through the press.

In this context, *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* (1930–1934) provides a wealth of data regarding marriage rites, funeral ceremonies, religious beliefs, community activities, and the customary laws of the Mường and Thái peoples. Examining these records helps reconstruct highland cultures and identify the Vietnamese-language press as a space for preserving and constructing indigenous memory.

This paper analyzes the content of *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* concerning ethnic minority customs to clarify how the press reflected and archived indigenous memory under the influence of reformist thought and modernization discourse. Through this, the study contributes supplementary data and expands perspectives on the relationship between journalism, cultural memory, and ethnic minority communities within a colonial context.

In this study, “indigenous memory” refers to the traditional knowledge, customs, and cultural practices of ethnic minority communities in North Central Vietnam, transmitted across generations and reconstructed or reinterpreted within journalistic contexts. “Discourse” denotes the system of expression, description, and evaluation used by early twentieth-century Vietnamese-language journalism to represent customs and cultural life, thereby shaping public perceptions of ethnic minority communities. “Ethnic minority customs” encompasses cultural practices such as marriage, funerary rites, beliefs, community activities, and customary laws of highland ethnic groups, including the Mường and Thái. These practices reflect both lived realities and the interpretations of contemporary intellectuals. “*Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*” was a prominent legal Vietnamese-language newspaper in North Central Vietnam from 1930 to 1934. It serves as a primary documentary source and a discursive space in which indigenous memory was recorded, interpreted, and reproduced.

1. Historical and Journalistic Context in the Early Twentieth Century and an Overview of *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the three North Central provinces (Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh) existed within the unique socio-cultural framework of a semi-feudal colonial regime. While this region possessed a storied tradition of scholarship and resilient patriotism, it simultaneously faced dual

oppression from the colonial apparatus and the imperial court. In Central Vietnam, the press operated under a stringent regulatory regime established by the French Protectorate for the protected territory, alongside the Nguyễn Dynasty's direct presence. This dual authority exerted a powerful hold over all facets of social life; consequently, the adoption of Western-style cultural forms – such as modern journalism – occurred more gradually than in the northern and southern regions of the country. Nevertheless, within the cultural and intellectual landscape, the influence of the *Duy Tân* (Modernization) Movement, the *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (Tonkin Free School), and new Western ideological currents provided a reformist impetus, catalyzing the development of the *Quốc ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese script) and the press.

Within this trajectory, although Vietnamese-language journalism in Central Vietnam developed later and faced numerous constraints under a rigorous censorship regime, it firmly established its place in contemporary intellectual life. Following the landmark publication of *Tiếng Dân* (The People's Voice) in 1927, a succession of other Vietnamese periodicals emerged, including *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* (1930).

According to the “*Kính cáo độc giả*” (Notice to Readers) published in *Hà Tĩnh Tân Văn* and *Hoan Châu Tân Báo*, the cessation of these two titles marked the inception of a unified periodical for the three provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh, titled *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*. The initial plan was to launch the inaugural issue on July 14, 1930, coinciding with Bastille Day, with a frequency of three issues per month published on the 10th, 20th, and 30th (*Hà Tĩnh Tân Văn*, 1930, p. 1; Guilleminet, 1930, p. 1). While some studies suggest a July 1 start date, the aforementioned “Notice” points to July 14, 1930, as the official milestone. However, based on Issue No. 2 of *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* (August 1, 1930), which was published weekly on Fridays, it is highly probable that the first issue actually appeared on July 25, 1930. This timeline is consistent with the fact that the final issues of *Hà Tĩnh Tân Văn* and *Hoan Châu Tân Báo* were published in July 1930. The newspaper continued its operations until Issue No. 210 (July 27, 1934)¹. Its closure was attributed to the dissolution of the Franco-Vietnamese Literary Association of North-Central Vietnam (Hội Pháp Việt Văn Học phía Bắc Trung Kỳ), which led to the suspension of the publication (“Cùng các quý độc giả,” 1934, p. 1).

Compared to its contemporaries in Central Vietnam, *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* featured a modern layout (multi-column formatting, formal mastheads, and illustrations) and maintained a consistent weekly publication schedule.

¹ Following *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* was a weekly journal of politics, literature, economics, and medicine titled *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh*, which launched its first issue on August 3, 1934.

Regarding content, true to its name, the periodical reflected the socio-cultural and political life of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh provinces. Politically, the paper tended to criticize communist movements while advocating social reformism, seeking moderate, non-radical national modernization. Editorials frequently addressed pivotal issues in politics, economics, education, and culture relevant to Central Vietnam and the nation at large. The content centered on the customs reform, the critique of “superstition,” the promotion of education and literacy, monetary issues, and contemporary socio-political shifts.

Beyond the prominent front-page editorials, the paper featured recurring sections such as “*Văn uyển*” (Literary Garden), “*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*” (Tales from the Forest Highlands), “*Chuyện vui*” (Anecdotes), “*Tin sau cùng*” (Latest News), “*Tiểu thuyết*” (Serials/Novels), and “*Tin Nam Bắc trong tuần lễ vừa qua*” (Weekly News from the North and South). Overall, the periodical presented a multifaceted portrait of society: from current affairs, politics, economics, to regional customs and culture. Notably, sections like “*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*” and “*Phong tục trên Mường*” (Customs of the Mường) contained numerous articles on the traditions of ethnic minorities in North Central Vietnam. Thus, *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* not only captured the pulse of contemporary life but also created a specialized “journalistic space” to reconstruct indigenous memory as Vietnam’s cultural modernization unfolded. Based on this foundation, an examination of ethnic minority customs in this newspaper reveals how the early twentieth-century public press helped modernize Vietnamese culture by reconstructing communal memory.

2. Ethnic Minority Customs in North Central Vietnam through *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* in the Early Twentieth Century

In the pages of *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*, the customs of ethnic minorities in North Central Vietnam were reflected with significant diversity, encompassing traditional practices related to nuptial and funerary rites, festivals, spiritual beliefs, and communal life. Consequently, the periodical not only introduced the distinct cultural characteristics of the highlands but also manifested the perspectives of contemporary intellectuals regarding the preservation and transformation of customs in alignment with the emerging cultural trajectory. Among these, marriage customs and family life were documented early and vividly, reflecting the concepts of marriage, kinship, and social relations among the highland populations in North Central Vietnam during the early twentieth century.

2.1. Nuptial Customs and Family Life

Records regarding marriage and family in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* serve as valuable archival sources that provide insights into the cultural life of highland

communities while reflecting the contemporary intelligentsia's approach to indigenous culture. The articles vividly describe matrimonial customs, ranging from rituals and gift exchange to perceptions of gender roles and communal relations, thereby highlighting the distinct social dynamics of the North Central mountainous regions.

Among these records, the article "*Việc cưới xin ở trên rừng*" (Matrimony in the Highlands), published serially in issues No. 9 and 10, is a rare text documenting the marriage customs of the Mường people in Lang Chánh (Thanh Hoa), particularly within the Lang Đạo (hereditary noble) class. The author details rituals such as the pre-betrothal visit (*dạm vợ*), the formal proposal (*đi hỏi*), the "voice celebration" (*mừng tiếng*), the son-in-law's debut (*ra mặt rể*), the wedding ceremony, the bridal procession, and the "red thread" meal (*cơm tơ hồng*) with a descriptive and observational tone. Through this, the newspaper introduces local traditions while revealing a sense of curiosity and surprise at the cultural "Otherness" compared to Kinh (lowland) culture. During the pre-betrothal visit, marriage is perceived as a collective affair of the entire lineage and the *mường* (village), encapsulated in the principle: "As a child, one belongs to the parents; grown up, one belongs to the kin and the community" ("*Việc cưới xin ở trên rừng*," 1930a, p. 1). This reflects the profound communal nature of Mường society. Customs also distinguish between the eldest and younger daughters, signifying familial hierarchy, while the scrutiny of the groom's character underscores the value of personal virtue over material wealth. Subsequently, the formal proposal is conducted, with ritual offerings presented by the "*Bõ*," a community representative, ensuring both transparency and solemnity. This is followed by the "voice celebration," an occasion where the groom's family expresses gratitude and is hosted by the bride's family, marking their formal consent to the marriage. The son-in-law's debut is regarded as the official wedding ceremony: the groom's family must prepare elaborate offerings, and a festive atmosphere prevails, featuring traditional games such as root-vegetable throwing and various trials for the groom. A highlight is the communal feast, which provides a space where young men and women interact freely while maintain a refined decorum. This profound sense of community, the emphasis on personal character, and the relative openness in gender relations constitute the most distinctive features of highland matrimonial life.

The wedding ceremony and the bridal procession become an event involving the entire village community, characterized by a rigorous and substantial system of ritual offerings, ranging from silver, livestock, and fermented fish to cakes, wine, betel, utensils, gold, and various monetary tributes for each group of participants. Procedures such as "opening the gate" (*mở cổng*) or "guarding the bridal chamber"

(*canh buồng*) are both solemn and performative challenges. A lavish dowry affirms the social standing of the bride's family, while rituals such as foot-washing and blessings carry purificatory significance, marking the inception of a new life. The "red thread" meal in the bridal chamber, witnessed by members of both lineages, along with customs such as the "Lang official's tribute" or regulations on distributing wedding items to temples, *Pao...* ("Việc cưới xin ở trên rừng," 1930b, p. 1) demonstrate that marriage is both a communal affair and subject to the dictates of social hierarchy and spiritual beliefs.

The wedding is thus not merely the union of a couple but a social mechanism in which the community, lineage, and power structures participate and exert influence. Consequently, the article possesses significant archival value, contributing to the reconstruction of Mường cultural life in the early twentieth century. The tone, simultaneously objective-descriptive and tinged with the surprise of a Kinh intellectual, creates a dual discourse: on one hand, it vividly depicts the festive atmosphere, trials, and communal relations; on the other, it meticulously catalogs types of offerings, currency, and procedures as a form of prescriptive customary law. This combination imbues the writing with ethnographic depth while reflecting social value systems, illustrating that the wedding is both a communal cultural activity and a strict regulatory mechanism regarding material obligations and status. Through this, it is evident that the public press in North Central Vietnam did not merely report socio-political news but also preserved indigenous memory, contributing to the modernization of Vietnamese cultural life.

In addition, the column "*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*" also recorded other unique forms of marriage, such as the custom of "suing for the wife" (*đi lấy vợ*), "New Year bride-taking" (*Tết lấy vợ*), or "bride-catching" (*đi bắt vợ*), reflecting the diversity and complexity of highland matrimonial relations. The custom of "suing for the wife" arises when a young man favors a girl but has not yet received her consent or that of her family. On an auspicious day, he accompanies the best man to the girl's house to prostrate before her parents and siblings to seek their acceptance. If rejected, the man must remain patient, sometimes even lying in the courtyard during cold winter nights, and assisting the girl's family with chores early the next morning. Once accepted, the man brings offerings to worship the ancestors and provides agricultural labor – a stage known as "following the groom" (*đi theo rể*). Traditional proverbs such as "if one does not visit the wife's house in the fifth month, he loses the wife; if one does not work in the sixth month, he loses the bride" (T.H., 1931a, p. 1) demonstrate the spirit of responsibility and commitment within the marital bond.

Another documented form of marriage is the “New Year bride-taking” custom, common among the Thái and Mường communities. During the Lunar New Year, a young man may ask a female acquaintance to lead a girl to his home, where he provides a feast, performs ancestral worship, and conducts the “red thread” meal ritual – symbolized by the joining of the girl’s and the man’s tunics. He then informs the girl, seeks her consent to marriage, performs the nuptial consummation ritual (*hiệp cẩn*), and subsequently presents “atonement” offerings to her family before the official wedding takes place (T.H., 1931c, p. 1). Despite lingering elements of coercion, this custom is socially regulated through the “atonement” rite and achieves communal recognition. The article records this custom with a folkloric observational tone, expressing curiosity and a sense of cultural discovery about highland traditions, yet it also carries a subtle undertone of critique toward the coercive nature of the marriage.

Notably, the custom of “bride-catching” – reflected in issue No. 37 of *Chuyện trên núi rừng* – reveals a distinctly coercive form of marriage among the highland people of Thường Xuân (Thanh Hóa). This practice originated from cases where a man wished to marry but feared rejection by the girl’s family; consequently, he would enlist the support of several men to ambush and intercept the girl when she went out. Despite a prior “notification” intended to legitimize the act, the behaviors of dragging, struggling, and even physical altercations between the two parties underscore a clear element of coercion: “After speaking, [he] seizes her hand and drags her to his house; if the girl refuses to go, some must pull and others must push, amidst loud crying and commotion” (T.H., 1931d, p. 1). However, once the girl was brought to the groom’s house, the marriage was tacitly recognized, though the groom’s family was still required to offer apologies and pay wedding fees to formalize the union. This custom exposes the tension between individual agency and the dominance of tradition, while demonstrating that highland marriage was both a communal affair and one containing latent elements of violence. The article’s discourse serves both to describe the custom for an urban audience and to offer a subtle critique, reflecting the manner in which the contemporary press approached and commented on highland culture.

In comparison with the marriage customs of the Kinh (lowland) people during the same period, the nuptial traditions of the Mường and other highland communities exhibit many distinctive characteristics. While Kinh weddings were heavily influenced by Confucianism – emphasizing social hierarchy, formal attire, and orthodox rituals, and becoming increasingly simplified in the early twentieth century – highland marriage remained deeply communal, characterized by substantial ritual offerings, multi-day ceremonies, and the participation of the entire

village (*mường*). Practices such as the “son-in-law’s debut”, the “red thread” meal, or festive trials for the groom reveal a blend of the sacred and the carnivalesque – distinctly contrasting with the solemnity and rigid order of Kinh matrimonial rites. In particular, customs like “suing for the wife”, “New Year bride-taking”, and “bride-catching” reflect profound communal elements and coercive dynamics, whereas Kinh marriage was primarily governed by lineage interests and ethical codes.

From a discursive perspective, articles such as “*Việc cưới xin ở trên rừng*,” “*Đi lay vợ*,” “*Tết lấy vợ*,” and “*Đi bắt vợ*” possess proto-ethnographic value; they simultaneously preserve cultural memory and manifest the Kinh intelligentsia’s perspective on regional differences. The tone – a mixture of observation, description, and commentary – demonstrates that *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* served not only as a socio-political forum but also as a space for the “modernization of customs”, contributing to the shaping of new perceptions regarding highland culture and people during the early twentieth-century integration process.

2.2. Funeral Rites and Spiritual Beliefs

While marriage marks the inaugural event of a new family, associated with communal joy and cohesion, funerary rites represent the ceremony that closes the human life cycle, reflecting profound conceptions of life and death and the nexus between the living and the deceased. In the lives of the highland populations in North Central Vietnam during the early twentieth century, a funeral was not merely a form of farewell; it was an occasion for the community to demonstrate reverence for ancestors, consolidate kinship and village ties, and entrust their faith in the spiritual realm. The records in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* indicate that through these funerary rites and their associated beliefs, one can more clearly identify the social structure, moral codes, and distinctive cultural identity of highland residents during this period.

The content regarding the funerary rites and spiritual beliefs of the Mường people is recorded in considerable detail in the article “*Tục chôn cất người chết ở trên Mường*” (Burial Customs in the Mường Regions), published in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* issues No. 11 and 12. These accounts reveal that Mường funeral customs constitute a rich ritual system, deeply intertwined with conceptions of the soul, the afterlife, and communal relationships.

The funerary process commences with the ritual of shrouding and encasement (*lễ khâm liệm*). This rite vividly demonstrates the Mường people’s conceptions of death and the journey to the underworld. Upon a person’s passing, the deceased is first ritually cleansed with pomelo-leaf water, dressed in new garments, and formally head-bound before being placed into the casket. The body is wrapped in cloth or

silk, neatly secured, and accompanied by “spirit money” (seven pieces for a male and nine for a female) as travel provisions. Furthermore, the coffin is filled with clothing and textiles – partly contributed by kin – reflecting the belief that the deceased continues to require material goods in the afterlife. Once the lid is sealed, the family performs the “*com tất nghi*” ceremony, offering betel, wine, sticky rice, and eggs to initiate the transition to the other realm. Certain details, such as covering the casket with five-colored paper or erecting a spirit carriage (*nhà linh xa*), reflect the richness of spiritual beliefs and social stratification: while wealthy families conduct elaborate funerary rites, the poor follow a simpler procedure (Ngọc Sơn, 1930a, p. 2). Thus, the shrouding ritual is not merely a burial procedure but a spiritual rite that simultaneously expresses filial piety, strengthens communal bonds, and entrusts faith in the continuity of life after death.

Following the shrouding ritual is the funerary organization process, which deeply embodies the communal nature of Mường society. The duration of the funeral depends on the family’s circumstances and the community’s support: for commoners, it typically lasts one to three days, whereas for the Lang Đạo, it may extend from four to ten days. Throughout the funeral, relatives and neighbors contribute rice, wine, money, and livestock, resulting in a large-scale event, that sometimes involves hundreds of participants, as in the case of the Lang nobility. Many attendees do not merely offer condolences but remain until the entire process is concluded, manifesting a strong sense of communal cohesion. However, the complexity of these rites also imposes an economic burden, particularly when the corpse is kept for several days to arrange ritual offerings or await relatives, leading to high costs and hygiene concerns. In the early twentieth century, under the influence of the administration and shifting perceptions, these customs were gradually simplified, reflecting the tension between preserving tradition and adapting to a new context. In these funerary rites, the Mo shaman (*thầy Mo*) plays a central role, serving as both the master of ceremonies and a mediator with the spirit world. Primarily originating from the commoner class and trained through folk traditions, they perform soul-calling and requiem rituals day and night, with remuneration varying according to social status: “the Lang Đạo must pay 30 *quan*, the village headmen 12 or 18 *quan*, while commoners pay only 3 *quan*” (Ngọc Sơn, 1930a, p. 2). This indicates that funerary rites are not only strictly tied to indigenous beliefs but also reflect social relations and class stratification within the community.

Mourning attire within the funeral rites is strictly regulated, reflecting distinctions in social roles, gender, and lineage. The sons wear loose-fitting white garments with unhemmed edges, cinched with straw ropes; they wear fiber hats (*mũ rế*) and carry walking sticks (bamboo for a father’s mourning, and *vông* wood for a

mother's). Sons-in-law and grandsons-in-law wear fitted white tunics and triangular hats, but do not carry sticks; women wear white robes and *mắm* hats. Although the mourning regalia is simple, it carries profound symbolic weight: white symbolizes grief and loss, while the stick represents spiritual support. Thus, mourning rituals do not merely express filial piety; they also reflect conceptions of status, gender roles, social stratification, and communal cohesion.

The Mường people also maintain the ritual of erecting a funeral banner (*phướn*) outside the window where the coffin is laid. The height of the banner indicates the hierarchical rank of the descendants; the tassels or ribbons (strips) sewn onto the banner record the number of wives and children of the deceased. This serves as both a symbol of family prestige and a public declaration of familial ties, allowing the community to recognize the deceased's social standing. The custom of cutting hair as a sign of mourning is a crucial rite. Before the coffin, the descendants listen to the Mo shaman recount the merits of the parents' upbringing, before simultaneously cutting their hair. This act is both sacred – serving as a vow of filial duty – and communal, as each individual performs it according to their hierarchical rank. This practice shares similarities with the mourning, wailing, and prostrating customs of the Kinh people, yet retains a distinct character through the act of “hair offering” and the symbolic repayment with copper coins.

Prohibitions and taboos also contribute to maintaining solemnity and expressing filial piety: descendants eat their meals at the foot of the coffin, with food placed on a winnowing basket lined with leaves; they abstain from betel, tobacco, and alcohol to maintain spiritual purity; on the final night, they must lie beside the coffin, never leaving the deceased. This demonstrates the enduring bond between the living and the dead while emphasizing grief and deep respect.

The burial rites clearly reflect both sacred and communal dimensions. Before the procession, the Mo shaman acts as a mediator for the final farewell. The ritual where descendants lie prostrate on the ground for the coffin to pass over them multiple times symbolizes both filial obedience and the pain of separation. Stopping at designated “resting places” for offerings, and carrying spirit banners (*minh tinh*) and funerary objects (*minh khí*), reflects the belief that the deceased requires provisions for their journey to the afterlife. Near the grave site, descendants remove their mourning attire; after the interment, they must pass through a circle of Amomum (*sa nhân*) to dispel impurities, symbolizing purification and warding off misfortune.

Furthermore, the custom of building a temporary shelter near the grave for 100 days, the “sealing of the grave” ceremony (*lấp cửa mả*), or the practice of not holding annual death anniversaries but only performing offerings at the end of the

mourning period are distinctive traits. These show that the Mường prioritize the farewell phase, fulfilling their filial duties entirely during the mourning period, after which the rites are concluded so the deceased may rest and the living may return to normalcy: “In the Mường regions, once the mourning period ends, it is finished; no further anniversary rites are held. However, on the day the mourning concludes, buffaloes, cows, and pigs must be slaughtered for a feast, and everyone who previously offered condolences or assistance is invited to attend” (Ngọc Sơn, 1930b, p. 1). This represents a harmony between filial piety, clan cohesion, and communal life.

Compared to the contemporary funerals of the Kinh people, Mường funerary rites exhibit both commonalities and distinct nuances. In both communities, the funeral serves as an occasion to gather family, relatives, and neighbors, manifesting filial piety and a belief in the afterlife, while involving various forms of mutual aid, offerings, and communal feasting. However, while Kinh funerals tended to be more concise – showing a gradual simplification under the influence of custom reform movements – Mường funerals lasted for many days, were large in scale, and drew extensive community participation. Regarding ritual content, Kinh funerals were deeply influenced by Confucianism, emphasizing hierarchy, formal regalia, and mourning protocols; in contrast, Mường funerals were closely tied to folk beliefs, particularly the central role of the Mo shaman. Specific details such as the “soul chariot” (*linh xa*), “five-colored paper” (*giấy ngũ sắc*), or the “soul-calling” (*gọi vía*) ritual reflect animistic beliefs in the soul and the persistent connection between the living and the dead. In comparison, while the Kinh had already adopted a trend of “simplified funerals and reburial” (*giản tang, cải táng*), the Mường retained many traditional elements, contributing to the rich diversity of Vietnamese funerary customs.

The article “*Tục chôn cất người chết ở trên Mường*” (Burial Customs in the Mường Highlands) stands as a precious ethnographic resource, meticulously recording Mường funerary traditions through a structured framework: enshrouding, funeral rites, mourning regulations, taboos, and burial. The tone of the writing combines objective narration with the nuances of reportage and travelogue – reconstructing customs while simultaneously expressing a critical viewpoint that regarded many traditions as “costly and unhygienic.” This reflects the reformist mindset and the “civilizing” spirit of that era. Thus, the text not only preserves the collective memory of Mường beliefs but also illustrates the tension between tradition and modernity within the Vietnamese cultural space of the early twentieth century.

2.3. Festivals and Communal Life

In addition to marriage and funeral customs, the cultural life of North Central Vietnam’s inhabitants in the early twentieth century was vividly reflected through

festivals and communal activities. These were not only occasions for people to express their religious beliefs, commemorate ancestors, and pray for bountiful harvests, but also environments for communal cohesion and the reinforcement of village solidarity. Records in the *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* newspaper preserved many distinctive features of festival life and communal practices, contributing to a comprehensive portrayal of the rich cultural landscape of highland residents.

One of the quintessential customs documented was the tradition of “reciprocal labor assistance” (known in Thái as “*pày-àu-hầu*” and in Mường as “*ti-lẻ-pua*”) in Lang Chánh District, Thanh Hóa Province. This is a form of communal labor based on mutual aid, in which households took turns assisting one another with plowing, transplanting, harvesting, and house construction. A notable feature was its emphasis on thriftiness, with minimal pressure on formal feasting; however, among the Lang Đạo class, these events were often associated with lavish banquets, reflecting social stratification. Specifically, the custom of house building required contributions of specific materials such as thatch, giant bamboo (*luồng*), and timber, demonstrating high levels of community integration. The text provides both detailed quantitative descriptions of materials (“120 sheets of thatch”, “12 bamboo poles”) and the evaluative remark: “a very fine custom” (“*Phong tục trên Mường*,” 1930, p. 1). This indicates that *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* did not merely document customs but also appraised and honored communal cultural values.

Another distinctive practice is the “date reckoning” custom of the Mường people in Cẩm Thủy, recorded in the article “*Tục Mường kể ngày*” (Mường Custom of Counting Days). The Mường “recount one day behind” (for example, the second is called the first, the third is called the second, etc), creating a unique temporal system compared to that of the Kinh people. This custom is explained through the “*Con Rồng – Cháu Tiên*” (Children of the Dragon and Fairy) cosmogonic myth: fifty children followed their father to the sea and fifty followed their mother to the mountains; because the “Dragon was born a day before, the Fairy a day after,” the highlanders “yielded one day” (“*Tục Mường kể ngày*,” 1930, p. 2). Although some consider this practice as “not very practical,” it is regarded as a valuable resource for archaeology and ethnography. It helps identify the layers of traditional culture and the preserved consciousness of ethnic origins.

The house-building customs of the Mường also carry a profound communal character. When a family builds or repairs a house, they must notify the village through the *hóa-phe* (communal announcement/registration). Afterward, every household contributes materials and labor. Each house provides timber, bamboo, rattan thatch, and bamboo lashing, among others according to assigned duties,

ensuring sufficient materials for construction (“Tục làm nhà trên châu Mường,” 1930, p. 4). Upon completion, the homeowner organizes a feast to offer thanks and strengthen communal solidarity. For Lang Đạo houses, the ritual is larger, uses finer materials, and features multiple banquets, reflecting elite status. The writing uses enumerative language and indigenous terms, merging narration and commentary in a style grounded in folk literature – sequential, vivid, and detailed – highlighting mutual affection and communal cooperation.

Within the sphere of religious life, the custom of “exploring caves” (*chơi hang*) at Ré Cave is a unique feature, recounted in the column “*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*” in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* No. 42. Visiting the cave on the fourth day of the first lunar month served both as a ritual to worship the deities of the cave and the mountain to pray for peace, and as an occasion for young men and women to socialize and strengthen communal bonds. The article vividly describes the limestone cave, its pathways, the dark interior spaces, and the recreational activities (T.H., 1931e, p. 1); combining an intimate, humorous, and playful tone, it allows readers to clearly visualize communal life while revealing an appreciative attitude toward folk culture.

Similarly, the “target shooting” custom (*bắn bia*) in Đồng Lạc Village (Lang Chánh) during the Khai Hạ festival (the eighth day of the first lunar month) served both as a ritual to worship the village and mountain deities and as a folk game, that attracted local youth. The article “*Một buổi đi xem bắn bia*” (An Afternoon Watching Target Shooting) recounts how villagers brought offerings to the fields and used Mường rifles to shoot at targets; the shattering of a target was considered a bad omen, reflecting folk superstitions: “The local people hold a superstition that if someone hits the target and breaks the plate in any given year, the community will face instability and hardship in their livelihoods... in years where no one hits the target, everyone looks joyful” (T.H., 1931f, p. 2). The text meticulously describes the scenery and the invocations to the deities, with the event lasting from noon until late afternoon, clearly demonstrating the intertwined nature of ritual and entertainment while reflecting the folk beliefs and competitive spirit of the highland people.

Furthermore, “cockfighting” (*chọi gà*) was a popular cultural activity, especially at year’s end and in early spring. In *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* No. 65, the article “*Chuyện chọi gà trên rừng*” (Tales of Cockfighting in the Forest) describes the cockfighting customs of the Thái and Mường people in the highland districts. Locals raised forest-adapted chickens and taught them specific fighting techniques. Birds wore protective rings when competing with wild jungle fowl. This activity was primarily for unmarried young men, serving as both a folk game and an opportunity

for socializing and courtship. Thus, there is a popular folk verse in the forest regions: “Waiting for the days of the third lunar month/He goes cockfighting, she cards the cotton/Perhaps we shall become husband and wife” (T.H., 1931g, p. 1). Written in a vivid and rustic narrative style, combined with informative and gentle observations, the article reflects the intricate customs and communal spirit, as well as the bravery and affinity for nature of the highland people.

The communal lifestyle of the Mường is clearly portrayed in the article “*Tính tình người Mường*” (The Character of the Mường). The author generalizes the character of the Mường in Thanh Hóa as honest, thrifty, harmonious, and respectful of elders, exemplified by the proverb: “*Cơm đồ, nhà gác, nước vác, lợn thui*” (Steamed rice, stilt houses, carried water, straw-singed pork). This proverb is intrinsically linked to their lifestyle characteristics: eating steamed sticky rice, living in stilt houses, fetching water in bamboo tubes, and slaughtering pigs by singeing them with straw. The article also emphasizes the communal spirit; in rituals of joy or sorrow (*hiếu hỷ*), in farming, or in house construction, the villagers assist one another without self-interest. In emergencies, the entire village responds to the drum signal, regardless of gender (Ngọc Sơn, 1930c, p. 1). Through this, the text not only reconstructs elements of material culture but also extols the spiritual values and traditional ethics of the Mường people.

Compared to the festivals and communal life of the Kinh people, the festivities of the Mường and Thái communities exhibit both commonalities and unique nuances. Much like the village festivals of the Kinh, these are occasions for honoring deities, praying for a bountiful harvest and strengthening village solidarity. However, communal activities in the highlands are more diverse in form: ranging from “reciprocal labor assistance,” “the custom of date reckoning,” and “house-building traditions” to “cave exploration,” “target shooting,” and “cockfighting.” These activities are directly linked to productive labor, folk beliefs, and collective recreation, reflecting a harmony with nature and a spirit of mutual aid, distinct from the highly ritualized, structured nature of lowland village festivals.

Regarding discursive significance, the articles in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* primarily employ a detailed narrative tone interspersed with subjective commentary – at times expressing surprise, at others, criticism. This reflects the perspective of Kinh intellectuals toward the highlands: a blend of curiosity and respect, coupled with a desire to “reform” these customs in the spirit of the “civilizing mission.” Consequently, the public press of that era did not merely preserve folk memories; it actively participated in orienting and modernizing cultural life. Highland festivals, therefore, emerge not only as expressions of local identity but also as evidence of the

diversity and dynamism within the process of Vietnamese cultural acculturation during the early twentieth century.

2.4. Customs and Customary Laws in Social Organization

Beyond marriage, funerals, and festivals, *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* also documented customary laws, revealing how communities maintained social order and regulated relationships. These articles show that customary law functioned not only through deterrence and sanctions, but also as an expression of the humanistic values and communal cohesion found among highland residents.

In the column “Phong tục trên xứ rừng” (Customs of the Forest Region), issue No. 25, the section regarding pregnancy out of wedlock (*chửa hoang*) explicitly details the sanctions imposed on unmarried women who become pregnant. If the pregnancy involves the son of another Lang (local lord), both are fined. The Thổ ty (hereditary chieftain) family could owe up to five silver bars and four buffaloes, plus rice wine and food for the villagers. Thổ mục (local officials) were fined three to four silver bars, depending on the district’s population. Paternal relatives could impose an extra fine of one silver bar and one buffalo or cow (T.H., 1931b, p. 1). These heavy penalties illustrate how the community prioritized collective honor and reflect a multi-layered sanctioning mechanism (involving the Lang nobility, the lineage, and the community), thereby maintaining moral standards and protecting the foundation of the family.

Another aspect of customary law is reflected in the section “*Nghĩa vụ của các Lang, Đạo trên châu Lang Chánh*” (Obligations of the Lang and Đạo in Lang Chánh District) within the same issue. Here, the Lang is not merely a leader but is also regarded as the “parent” of the people. Customary law stipulates that the Lang must act fairly and humanely, without exploiting the populace: “there must be no favoritism or disdain; everyone must be treated equally.” If poor villagers lack buffalo or oxen for plowing, the Lang is required to lend them; in years of crop failure, the Lang must provide paddy loans to help the people overcome hardships (T.H., 1931b, p. 1). Consequently, the role of the Lang, Đạo is defined not only by authority but also by the responsibility to care for the material and spiritual well-being of the subjects, particularly the impoverished.

These records show that customary laws in the North Central highlands featured strict sanctions and a strong emphasis on community and ethics. From penalizing out-of-wedlock pregnancy to outlining the obligations of the Lang and Đạo, the community upheld order not only through punishment but also through norms inspired by a humanistic spirit, highlighting the reciprocal ties between leadership and the people.

Compared to the customary laws of the lowland Kinh people, the customary laws of the North Central highlands exhibit both significant commonalities and marked differences. They are similar in that they prioritize maintaining social order, protecting family and communal honor, and emphasizing the responsibilities of leadership. However, while Kinh customary law was often deeply influenced by Confucianism – placing weight on formal rituals and patrilineal clan relations – highland customary law was directly tied to the village community, communal relations, and a system of self-governance. In this system, the Lang, Đạo served as both the ruling authority and the “parents of the people,” bearing the moral obligation to protect their subjects’ livelihoods.

The journalistic discourse in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* reveals two prominent nuances. On one hand, the press provided detailed accounts of social norms, obligations, and penal sanctions in the highlands, treating them as valuable “ethnographic data.” On the other hand, some passages express critical or surprised viewpoints, suggesting that certain punishments were too harsh or inconsistent with the contemporary spirit of the “civilizing mission.” This indicates that the press played a dual role. It acted as a repository for indigenous customary memory while also participating in the discourse of reform. Thus, it positioned highland customary law within the broader trajectory of Vietnamese cultural and legal evolution in the early twentieth century.

2.5. Summary

Records on ethnic minority customs in North Central Vietnam, as documented in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*, indicate that contemporary intellectuals demonstrated significant interest in highland cultural life. These articles provide detailed accounts of customs related to marriage, funerals, festivals, beliefs, and customary laws, and illustrate the interaction between ethnicity and modernity within journalistic discourse. From the Kinh perspective, the lives of highland ethnic groups were examined through both objective ethnographic inquiry and systematic documentation, while simultaneously reflecting a reformist consciousness oriented toward a more “civilized” society. The materials demonstrate that *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* played a significant role in introducing, preserving, and interpreting a distinct cultural stratum of North Central Vietnam during the early twentieth century. By reconstructing these customs, the newspaper enriched the region’s multi-ethnic social landscape and reflected the cultural mindset of the transitional intelligentsia, characterized by respect for ethnic identity, aspirations for modernization, and efforts to balance tradition with modernity.

3. Conclusion

An examination of records on ethnic minority customs in North Central Vietnam, as presented in *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn*, reveals that the early twentieth-century Romanized Vietnamese press served as a crucial documentary channel for representing highland cultural life. Articles addressing marriage, funerals, beliefs, festivals, customary laws, and communal activities not only reconstructed cultural practices in vivid detail but also illuminated the ways in which contemporary intelligentsia approached and interpreted cultural differences within the colonial context.

Public newspapers such as *Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh Tân Văn* functioned as an “archive of memory,” documenting highland customs in considerable detail through columns like “*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*” and “*Phong tục trên xứ rừng*,” as well as numerous accounts of marriage, funerals, beliefs, festivals, and communal activities, including “house-building traditions,” “reciprocal labor assistance,” “cave exploration,” and “target shooting.” These materials exhibit characteristics of early ethnographic records, contributing to the preservation of the cultural traits of the Thái and Mường communities in North Central Vietnam. For instance, the article “*Tục làm nhà trên châu Mường*” (House-building Customs in the Mường Districts) provides a detailed record: “When commoners wish to build a house, they bring a dozen betel quids and a bottle of rice wine to the house of the *hóa-phe*... then rely on the *hàng phe* (communal association) to carry out the reconstruction” (“*Tục làm nhà trên châu Mường*,” 1930, p. 4). This narrative style functions as an ethnographic record, demonstrating that the communal way of life and the customs of highland inhabitants were preserved intact within the press. This represents a positive dimension, as the press not only introduced highland cultural identity to the urban public but also affirmed cultural diversity within the national space. Simultaneously, the publication of highland customs in the public press reflected the intersection between folk memory and modern discourse, contributing to the positioning of indigenous culture within the process of national cultural modernization.

However, it is important to critically acknowledge the dual nature of contemporary journalistic discourse. Descriptions frequently originated from an external perspective, primarily that of Kinh intellectuals, which often resulted in unavoidable biases, such as perceiving highland life as backward or in need of “civilization.” Additionally, many articles adopted a parodic tone or emphasized “exoticism” to attract urban readers, inadvertently reshaping indigenous memories to fit journalistic frameworks. For example, in the article “*Chuyện trên xứ rừng*” (Tales from the Forest Region), which discusses the custom of “wife-taking during Tet,” the author begins: “In the Mường regions, the Thái and Mường people often have a

custom of taking a wife during Tet. For example, if a young man from a certain house wants convenience or fears that his proposal will be rejected, he must find an occasion to take [the bride] during Tet, and it will be settled” (T.H., 1931c, p. 1). The phrase “in the Mường regions,” combined with a curious narrative tone, contributed to constructing the highlands as a “distinct” space for urban consumption. This choice of lexicon, narrative style, and peripheral perspective resulted in folk memory being reconstructed not entirely in its original form but rather shaped by a process of “cultural translation” within the colonial context.

In reconstructing indigenous memory, the early twentieth-century press fulfilled a dual role: it served as a repository for preserving and disseminating culture, while also participating in the construction and shaping of the highlands’ image through a peripheral perspective. This duality suggests that the press not only reflected reality but also contributed to the formation of national identity, highlighting the process of acculturation between highland folk culture and urban journalistic discourse during Vietnamese cultural modernization.

When compared with the Vietnamese ethnographic tradition, particularly in-depth studies of the Thái and Mường in the Northwest, such as *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc* (The Thái in the Northwest) by Cầm Trọng or *Người Mường ở Hòa Bình* (The Mường in Hòa Bình) by Trần Từ, this perspective highlights differences in observational methodology and depth of immersion. Ethnography prioritizes deep fieldwork, focusing on social structures, kinship, and customary law, whereas contemporary journalism offers only snapshots of life, often filtered through a Kinh cultural lens and tending toward superficial description. This comparison further clarifies the documentary value of the press: it does not provide primary, unmediated description but rather constitutes a layer of reconstructed memory shaped by the socio-political and cultural context of the early twentieth century.

The significance of this study lies not only in reconstructing a documentary layer concerning the cultural life of ethnic minorities in North Central Vietnam but also in elucidating the complex relationship among the press, memory, and identity within the modernization process. Cross-referencing journalistic records with ethnographic documents on the Thái and Mường in the Northwest enables an effective interdisciplinary approach, positioning the press as an intermediary between folk memory and modern discourse. This approach contributes valuable data to the study of ethnic cultures and suggests potential applications for the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority cultural heritage today.

This work was supported by Hue University under the Science and Technology Project: “Vietnamese-language Journalism in the North Central Provinces (1927-1935): Process, Characteristics and Values”; Project No. DHH2026-01-243.

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