



## **Cultural Transformation and the Evolution of Festivals: The Impact of Modernization on the K’Ho Ethnic Minority in Vietnam**

Thuy Nhu Thi Nguyen, Quyet Thi Nguyen

*Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Vietnam*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper investigates the cultural transformations of the K’Ho ethnic minority in Lam Dong Province, Vietnam, with a focus on the impact of modernization and external influences on traditional festivals such as the New Rice Celebration, Buffalo Stabbing, and Gong Festivals. Applying social change theories, including conflict theory, global social change and syncretism, evolutionary theory, and acculturation theory, the study explores how these dynamics shape cultural practices within the K’Ho community. The research employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to collect and analyze data simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic factors driving these cultural shifts. The findings reveal a significant decline in participation in traditional K’Ho festivals, influenced by factors such as urbanization, the transformation of local economic models, and socio-demographic changes. Additionally, the research highlights the critical role of Vietnamese government policies in both the preservation and adaptation of cultural practices. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted policies to support cultural preservation, emphasizing the importance of education, government intervention, and tourism integration to maintain the cultural identity of the K’Ho people in the face of modernization.*

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Ethnic Minority, K’Ho people, social change theory, traditional culture, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The K'Ho ethnic minority, also known as Co Ho or Ko Ho, is one of the oldest indigenous groups in Vietnam's Central Highlands. Primarily concentrated in Lam Dong Province, the K'Ho people are also found in the surrounding areas of Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Dak Lak, and Dong Nai (Dang & Nguyen, 2023; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2024; Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023). With a population of approximately 200,800 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019), the K'Ho are believed to have existed in the region for around 2,500 years, making them among the earliest settlers in the Central Highlands (Nhandan, 2020), though this timeline is not definitively supported by specific study data. The K'Ho ethnic group is divided into several distinct tribes, including the Sre, Cil, Lach, Nop, C'don, and T'ring (Anh, 2023; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2024), each contributing to the rich cultural mosaic of the K'Ho community. The K'Ho people speak a South Bahnaric language, which is part of the Mon-Khmer language family (Olsen, 2015). Recently, efforts have been made to develop a Latin script for their language, reflecting both the preservation of their linguistic heritage and adaptation to modern educational practices.

Traditionally, the K'Ho were polytheistic, worshipping a supreme God known as Nđu (Yàng), who was believed to protect the universe and the people (Le et al., 2020). Rituals and ceremonies were performed to honor various deities, particularly during important events such as weddings, funerals, and agricultural festivals. However, since the early 20th century, Christianity has become increasingly prominent among the K'Ho, with many converting to Catholicism and Protestantism. This shift has brought significant social and cultural changes to the community (Hau, 2024; Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023; Mai & Tran, 2022).

Culturally, the K'Ho have a deep-rooted tradition that emphasizes folklore, music, and festivals, particularly those related to rice cultivation. Their agricultural festivals, such as sowing and harvest ceremonies, are central to their cultural identity, accompanied by unique rituals that honor natural spirits and deities (Anh, 2023). The K'Ho society is matriarchal, with marriage arrangements typically managed by the wife's family, and men traditionally moving to the wife's village after marriage (Dang & Nguyen, 2023; Phan, 2019). Their familial structures are characterized by large and small families living in longhouses built on stilts, which are commonly found in their villages, known as "bon." (Le et al., 2020)

Economically, the K’Ho have historically depended on agriculture as their primary livelihood. The K’Ho subgroups practice diverse farming methods based on their geographic locations; for example, the K’Ho Sre cultivate lowland (wet) rice, while other subgroups engage in shifting cultivation and grow upland (dry) rice, maize, and cassava (Anh, 2023; Phan, 2022). Coffee cultivation, particularly Robusta coffee, has become a significant economic activity, especially in Lam Dong Province (Le et al., 2020). Initially, the K’Ho employed traditional, chemical-free farming methods, but since the 1990s, the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has increased, boosting productivity but also causing environmental concerns. Recently, there has been a growing shift back toward sustainable farming practices, including organic methods (Huynh & Le, 2022), as awareness of the adverse effects of chemical use rises. In addition to agriculture, animal husbandry remains vital for the K’Ho, with livestock such as water buffaloes, cows, pigs, and goats raised mainly for spiritual rituals and increasingly for economic purposes due to market access (Huynh & Le, 2022)

However, like many ethnic minorities in Vietnam, the K’Ho people have undergone significant cultural transformations due to socio-economic developments, urbanization, and increased interaction with broader Vietnamese society (T. Q. Nguyen, 2022). These forces have influenced their traditional practices, leading to both efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and adaptations to accommodate modern influences. The K’Ho community, while maintaining a vibrant cultural identity, continues to navigate the complexities of cultural preservation and modernization.

Sociological approaches to social change often view society as following a cyclical pattern (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020; Tabassum, 2022), where societies are born, evolve, and eventually decline as part of an inevitable life cycle. Within this framework, different perspectives, such as conflict theory and modernization theory, provide insight into the mechanisms of social change. Modernization theory, in particular, seems well-suited to understanding the current trends of social change affecting the K’Ho community. This theory emphasizes the complex interactions between internal and external factors, including the physical environment, technological advancements, population pressures, cultural exchange, and social conflicts, all of which contribute to societal transformation (Pham & Le, 2023).

In the context of the K’Ho people, the application of social change theory to the study of the K’Ho people provides a lens through which we can examine the decline in participation in traditional cultural activities. The shift from an agricultural economy, deeply tied to traditional festivals, to one that

is more urban and market-oriented, exemplifies the unilinear progression from simple to complex societal structures as described by modernization theorists. The decrease in engagement with traditional festivals such as the New Rice Celebration and the Gong Festival can be understood as part of this broader process of cultural evolution, where the forces of modernization exert pressure on traditional ways of life (T. N. T. Nguyen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024).

This study, therefore, situates the cultural transformations of the K’Ho within the broader context of social change theory, exploring how modernization and external influences have reshaped their cultural landscape. By analyzing the specific changes in the K’Ho’s traditional festivals, this research not only contributes to the understanding of cultural evolution among ethnic minorities in Vietnam but also offers a case study on the broader implications of social change in preserving or altering cultural identities.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The cultural and festival norms of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, including the K’Ho people, are undergoing significant transformations due to various socio-economic and cultural pressures. This section reviews the existing literature on how these changes are occurring within Vietnam and in other countries, with a particular focus on the evolutionary perspective of cultural change, the application of social change theory, and the identification of research gaps and specific objectives for this study.

#### **Cultural and Festival Norms in Transition**

Cultural practices and festivals are integral to the identity of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, serving as a medium for the transmission of traditions, beliefs, and social values across generations. However, the rapid modernization and urbanization of Vietnamese society have led to a shift in these practices. The literature highlights that the traditional festivals of various ethnic groups, including the K’Ho, are increasingly influenced by external factors such as economic development, technological advancement, and cultural integration (Anh, 2023; Dang & Nguyen, 2023; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019).

Studies on the K’Ho people, such as those by Phan (2022) and the Phung (2021), provide a foundational understanding of the traditional cultural practices of this community. However, these studies also suggest that the K’Ho’s cultural practices are not immune to the broader forces of modernization. The gradual decline in the participation of traditional festivals like the New Rice Celebration and the Gong Festival is a reflection of the community’s adaptation to changing socio-economic conditions, such as the

shift from wet rice cultivation to cash crop production (Anh, 2023; T. N. T. Nguyen, 2022).

Similar patterns of cultural transformation have been observed in other countries with indigenous populations. For instance, studies on the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands in Thailand and Laos have documented similar declines in traditional festival practices as these communities integrate more with national and global economies (Thai, 2018; Truong & Dérioz, 2020). These changes are often framed within the context of acculturation and the erosion of traditional practices in favor of modern economic activities, which parallel the experiences of the K'Ho people in Vietnam.

### **Evolutionary Perspective on Cultural Change**

The evolutionary perspective on social change, rooted in the works of scholars like Auguste Comte (2010) and Émile Durkheim (2020), posits that societies naturally progress from simple to more complex forms of organization. This perspective is crucial for understanding the evolution of festivals among the K'Ho people. As their society transitions from an agrarian-based economy to a more diversified and market-oriented one, the function and significance of traditional festivals have also evolved.

Traditional festivals that once held central importance in the social and religious life of the K'Ho, such as the New Rice Celebration, are now less relevant in a community that is increasingly engaged in cash crop production and other modern economic activities. The evolutionary perspective suggests that this shift is part of a broader pattern of social evolution, where cultural practices are modified or abandoned as societies adapt to new conditions (Berk & Galvan, 2009).

Furthermore, the decline of these festivals can be seen as part of a cultural adaptation process, where the K'Ho community selectively incorporates elements of modern culture while preserving certain aspects of their traditional identity. This process is reflective of a syncretic evolution, where old and new cultural elements merge to form a new cultural synthesis (Buzan, 2010).

### **Ethnographic Perspectives and Additional Studies**

Ethnographic studies, such as those by Bui (2020) and Hoang (2013) have provided comprehensive analyses of the natural environment, population, historical origins, economic life, social organization, material culture, and spiritual culture of ethnic groups like the M'ngong and K'Ho. These studies contribute to overcoming the limitations of previous research by offering a deeper understanding of the K'Ho ethnic group in Lam Dong

from an ethnographic perspective. They aim to create a complete and diverse picture of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

From a cultural studies perspective, Nguyen (2013) examined cultural changes within agricultural and rural communities as industrial parks developed. Using an interdisciplinary approach, he outlined changes in community rituals and cultural participation in daily life, as well as the development of cultural models. Similarly, Vo (2016) analyzed the economic, cultural, social, and religious characteristics and changes in marriage and family of the Chu Ru people in Lam Dong province. His work introduced the characteristics, traditional rituals, and general changes in the rituals of the K'Ho Sre.

To further investigate the components and structure of spiritual life, various studies have explored marriage customs, ritual changes, and marriage age patterns among several ethnic minorities in Vietnam, including the K'Ho ethnic group (Dinh, 2021). The K'Ho, including subgroups such as the Sre, Cil, Lach, Nop, C'don, and T'ring (Anh, 2023; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2024), form a significant portion of the population in Lam Dong province. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2020), the K'Ho ethnic group, with 175,531 people, is the largest among the 42 ethnic minorities in Lam Dong, accounting for 13.53% of the province's total population. The K'Ho people have preserved many unique traditional cultural identities, contributing to the rich cultural diversity of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. However, the impact of innovation and integration has led to drastic changes in K'Ho traditional culture, posing both opportunities and challenges that require careful analysis and explanation (Nguyen & Phung, 2021).

Despite the wealth of literature on the cultural practices of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, there is a noticeable gap in the understanding of how these practices are evolving in response to modernization. Most existing studies focus on documenting traditional practices without adequately addressing how these practices are changing in the face of socio-economic transformation. Moreover, while the application of social change theory is evident in some studies, the specific evolutionary processes driving the decline of traditional festivals among the K'Ho people remain underexplored.

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Analyze the socio-economic factors contributing to the decline in participation in traditional festivals among the K'Ho people.

- Apply social change theory, particularly the evolutionary perspective, to explain the transformation of these cultural practices.
- Explore the extent to which modernization and external cultural influences are reshaping the cultural identity of the K’Ho community.

By addressing these objectives, this study aims to fill the existing research gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of the cultural evolution taking place within the K’Ho community. This will contribute to a broader understanding of how modernization impacts ethnic minorities in Vietnam and other similar contexts.

### **Conceptual Linkage**

Social change is an ongoing process, a change in behavioral patterns, relationships, social designs, and stratification systems over time (Pham & Le, 2023). Although society may appear stable on the surface, it is constantly evolving internally. Every society, regardless of its conservative or traditional nature, undergoes transformation, with these changes becoming increasingly precise and rapid in the modern era.

In examining the cultural changes within the K’Ho ethnic community, it is crucial to link these transformations to relevant sociological theories that can best explain the observed phenomena. Among the various theories of social change, the most relevant to this research are conflict theory, global social change theory, and evolutionary theory, each of which offers valuable insights into the processes driving cultural shifts among the K’Ho people.

### **Conflict Theory and Cultural Change**

Conflict theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx, posits that societal evolution is driven by the struggles and competition among different groups within society. For the K’Ho community, this perspective is particularly relevant in understanding how external pressures, such as economic development and cultural integration, create conflicts that lead to changes in traditional practices. The K’Ho people’s adaptation to new socio-economic conditions, such as the shift from wet rice cultivation to cash crop production, can be seen as a response to these societal contradictions (Turner, 1975). This theory emphasizes that the cultural changes in the K’Ho community are not merely the result of individual choices but are deeply influenced by broader social conflicts and contradictions.

### **Global Social Change and Syncretism**

In the context of global social change, the K’Ho community’s cultural transformations can also be understood through the lens of syncretism. This perspective highlights how cultural exchange and globalization lead to the blending of traditional and modern practices. The K’Ho people’s incorporation of new cultural elements while maintaining aspects of their traditional identity reflects a process of creative syncretism, where diverse influences merge to form a new cultural synthesis (Berk & Galvan, 2009). This theory is particularly relevant in analyzing how globalization and economic integration are reshaping the cultural landscape of the K’Ho community, contributing to a more complex and integrated understanding of social change.

### **Evolutionary Theory and Cultural Progression**

Evolutionary theory, as applied to social change by scholars like Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim, suggests that societies progress from simpler to more complex forms of organization. This perspective is crucial in analyzing the K’Ho community’s transition from an agrarian-based economy to a more diversified and market-oriented society. The decline in traditional festivals, such as the New Rice Celebration, can be viewed as part of this broader pattern of cultural evolution, where older practices are modified or abandoned as the community adapts to new socio-economic realities (Joas & Pettenkofer, 2020).

### **Acculturation and Cultural Adaptation**

Acculturation theory, which focuses on the adoption of beliefs and behaviors from another cultural group, is also pertinent to understanding the changes within the K’Ho community. As the K’Ho people interact more with the broader Vietnamese society and global culture, their traditional practices are increasingly influenced by external cultural elements. The degree to which the K’Ho people adopt or resist these new influences can be analyzed using acculturation scales, such as the Cultural Beliefs and Behaviors Adaption Profile (CBBAP) and the General Ethnicity Questionnaire – abridged (GEQ-a).

Overall, conflict theory, global social change theory, evolutionary theory, and acculturation theory all provide relevant frameworks for analyzing the cultural changes observed within the K’Ho ethnic community. These theories help to explain the underlying forces driving the transformation of traditional rituals and festivals among the K’Ho people, offering a comprehensive understanding of how external pressures, global influences, and internal conflicts contribute to the ongoing evolution of their



cultural identity. By applying these theories to the specific context of the K'Ho community, this study aims to achieve its research objectives of analyzing the socio-economic factors influencing cultural change and exploring the extent to which modernization and external cultural influences are reshaping the K'Ho's cultural identity.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Our study adopts a sociological framework, employing a mixed-methods research design that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This design includes in-depth interviews, household surveys, and secondary data analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic factors influencing cultural changes among the K'Ho ethnic minority. By integrating these methods, the study is able to capture detailed narrative insights while also quantifying broader trends, offering a well-rounded analysis of the cultural transformations taking place:

### **Primary Data Collection**

Data was primarily collected through surveys designed to explore life-cycle rituals. This involved deploying detailed questionnaires to gather firsthand information from participants, emphasizing the direct engagement with subjects for authentic data collection.

*Field Research.* The study was executed in Lam Dong Province, utilizing in-depth interviews with 26 participants and analyzing 477 household surveys collected from December 2016 to February 2017. The dual-questionnaire approach covered general personal information and specific cultural festivals, incorporating a mix of open and closed questions, was essential for systematically gathering quantitative and qualitative data. This method allowed the study to capture a wide range of information, from general personal details to specific insights into cultural festivals, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of how socio-economic factors, modernization, and external influences are driving cultural changes and impacting traditional practices within the K'Ho community.

*Study Participants and Demographics.* The research focused on the Cil and Lach local groups within the K'Ho ethnic community. The sample size of 477 households was selected based on a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different localities and demographics within the K'Ho community. The stratification was done by location (Lac Duong town and Ta Nung commune) and by key demographic characteristics, such as gender and religious affiliation. This approach allowed for a balanced representation of the diverse segments within the K'Ho community, ensuring that the findings would be generalizable to the broader population.

Of the 477 surveyed households, 253 were from Lac Duong town and 224 from Ta Nung commune. The gender distribution of the sample was 43% male and 57% female, reflecting the gender composition of the population in these areas. Within the K'Ho ethnic breakdown, the Cil, Lach, and Sre groups were represented at 56.8%, 38.4%, and 4.8%, respectively. In terms of religious affiliation, the sample included 41.3% Catholics and 58.7% Protestants, providing a comprehensive overview of the religious diversity within the K'Ho community.

*Research Locations.* The study areas were Ta Nung commune in Dalat city and Lac Duong town in Lac Duong district (Figure 1), chosen for their significant cultural traditions and demographic composition predominantly of the K'Ho ethnic group. Both locations offer unique insights into the cultural and socio-economic dynamics within Lam Dong province.

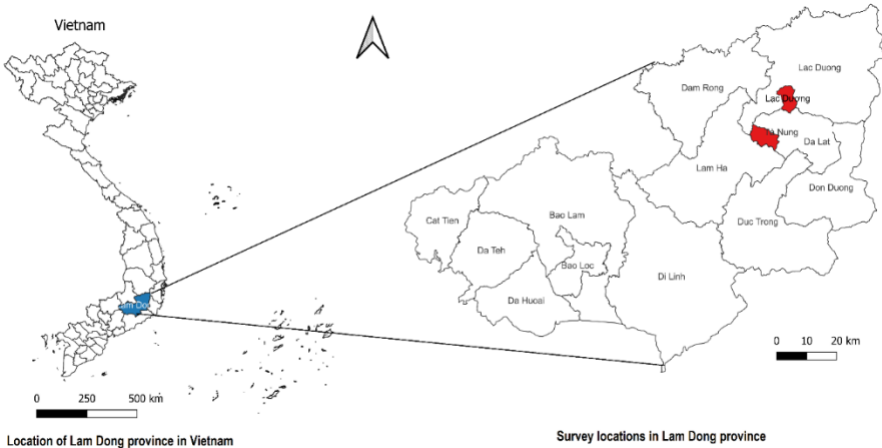
*Key Informant Interviews (KII).* To complement the survey data, Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with individuals who hold significant knowledge and authority regarding the K'Ho community's cultural practices. One of the key informants was Mr. Bon Yo Soan, Deputy Head of the Ethnic Committee of Lam Dong province. He was selected for his extensive experience and leadership role in overseeing ethnic affairs in the province. The insights gained from his interview were crucial in understanding the socio-cultural dynamics and policy impacts affecting the K'Ho people.

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*Data Analysis.* The data analysis for this study involved a multifaceted approach to ensure comprehensive and reliable findings. The quantitative analysis of survey data was conducted using statistical software, applying both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the patterns of participation in life-cycle rituals. Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests for independence and logistic regression

analysis, were employed to examine the relationships between socio-economic factors and changes in cultural practices among the K’Ho people.

**Figure 1**  
*Research Locations*



*Note.* Created by the authors.

Sampling was conducted using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that the sample accurately represented the diverse segments of the K’Ho community. The population was stratified based on key demographic variables, including geographic location (Lac Duong town and Ta Nung commune), gender, and religious affiliation. Within each stratum, households were randomly selected, resulting in a final sample of 477 households.

Field setting techniques were meticulously planned to account for the cultural context and logistical considerations. Data collection took place in familiar environments for the participants, such as their homes and community centers, to minimize bias and ensure authentic responses. Structured interviews were conducted alongside observations, providing rich contextual data that complemented the quantitative findings.

In addition to the primary survey data, secondary document analysis was performed, including a thorough review of relevant literature, digital sources, and local economic-cultural reports. This dual approach allowed for a holistic understanding of the impact of urbanization on the life-cycle rituals among the K’Ho people, integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights to provide a nuanced analysis of the socio-cultural transformations within the community.

## **Secondary Document Analysis**

To complement the primary data, secondary document analysis was performed. This involved a thorough review of academic literature, grey literature, digital sources, and local economic-cultural reports. This dual approach provided a holistic understanding of the impact of urbanization on the K'Ho community's life-cycle rituals, integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights to produce a nuanced analysis of the socio-cultural transformations within the community.

## **Ethical Considerations in Human Subject Research**

Our study adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the respectful treatment of all participants, including local residents and government officials (i.e. the Deputy Head of the Ethnic Committee of Lam Dong Province), were fully informed about the study's objectives and the measures in place to protect their personal information confidentially. Formal ethical approval was obtained from local authorities, covering all research activities, including interviews on life-cycle rituals. Interviews were conducted in private settings within participants' homes, with participants given the option to include family members for comfort. Informed consent was transparently obtained, ensuring participants were fully aware of their rights, including the ability to withdraw at any time. Data confidentiality was rigorously maintained, with all information securely stored in password-protected systems. Although institutional ethical approval was not required for this survey research, all participants were thoroughly informed about the study's objectives and the measures taken to protect their personal information. Verbal consent was documented via a recording pen, and we are prepared to provide additional documentation, such as interview questions and recordings, to further demonstrate our commitment to ethical research practices.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **New rice celebration (K'Ho New Year) and buffalo stabbing festivals**

The New Rice Celebration, also known as the K'Ho New Year, and the buffalo stabbing festivals are traditional cultural events that have historically been significant in the K'Ho community. According to ethnographic research by Linh Nga Niêk Dam and other scholars, these ceremonies played a crucial role in the agricultural and spiritual lives of the K'Ho people. Before the K'Ho harvested rice and corn, a rice-worshipping ceremony would be conducted. This rite involved offerings such as a pot of wine and a chicken at each sowing lot, where multiple types of rice were cultivated on a large field. The preparation for this ceremony was a communal

effort, with the entire village (bon) participating in cleaning their homes, the village surroundings, and the water wharf, as well as sharpening rice-cutting tools in anticipation of the harvest (Oriental Development Research Institute, 2016).

The *kach* ceremony is held after all rice is exhausted and stored in the warehouse (*đăm*) upstairs in the kitchen. Only rice seeds should be kept in the basket below and not put together in the warehouse. People also put a few baskets to eat daily. However, before pouring new rice into a pot, people must take all old rice and corn out to make wine. The *kach* ceremony is held when the wine is drinkable, the *kach* ceremony will be held. In November and December, when preparing for the “drinking straw” ceremony to open the newly grown rice (eating new rice) or *nhô rhe*, the whole village will go together to fish and into the forest to hunt animals to make the meal more abundant. This is also the community’s New Year celebration (Figure 2). If harvest is abundant, buffaloes are sacrificed to thank the gods. This ceremony, also known as *nhô lêr boong*, hoặc *Nhô Lir Bông* (A. D. Nguyen, 2022).

However, recent socio-economic developments have significantly impacted these traditional practices. As agricultural production became more industrialized, the K’Ho people in Lam Dong Province shifted from traditional wet rice farming to cultivating coffee and other cash crops, reflecting a broader transition from self-sufficiency to a market-oriented economy (Anh, 2023). For example, the K’Ho Sre subgroup, known for cultivating wet rice in valley fields, and other K’Ho groups, who practiced shifting cultivation in mountainous areas, have seen a decline in these traditional farming methods. In addition to agriculture, occupations such as hunting, fishing, and handicrafts like weaving and blacksmithing remain, though some traditional practices like pottery (crafted without wheels) have become less common (Huynh & Le, 2022).

The financial burden of organizing traditional festivals has also contributed to their decline. As a local cultural officer from Lac Duong town explained, “*Actually, buffalo stabbing and new rice celebrations are rarely organized because they require a large budget. In the past, there were many buffaloes and cows, and each family contributed a bit to purchase a buffalo. Nowadays, such practices are rare, partly due to economic changes and the decline of rice cultivation in the region over the past decade*” (Male, 46 years old, Gong Maker, Lac Duong town). An elderly K’Ho interviewee further confirmed this shift: “*People have stopped growing rice and have shifted to cultivating vegetables and berries. Compared to wet rice farming, these crops provide a higher income and allow for multiple harvests per year. As a result,*

*traditional festivals like the new rice celebration are no longer practiced”* (Male, 64 years old, Lac Duong Town).

**Figure 2**

*New Rice Celebration Festival (Nhô Lir Bông) of Di Linh district, Lam Dong province*



*Note.* From Vu, 2022

This shift from traditional agricultural practices to cash crop production and the broader trend of integrating into a market economy has resulted in significant cultural changes within the K’Ho community. Traditional festivals, such as the New Rice Celebration and buffalo stabbing, are increasingly becoming rare events. According to recent survey data, participation in these festivals has dramatically decreased, with many respondents reporting that they “never” or “seldom” participate in such cultural activities (see Table 1).

To explain the changes in the mentioned cultural festivals, the authors interviewed people in the research area; the results showed that “*in this area, ethnic minorities are all Lach ethnic people. In the past, it was different from now because of the economy. In the past, people used to cultivate in the form of nomadic wet rice farming.*”

**Table 1***Level of participation in traditional cultural festivals of the K’Ho people*

Measures		Lac Duong town		Ta Nung commune		General	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Buffalo stabbing festival	Never	198	78.3	141	62.9	339	71.1
	Seldom	27	10.7	49	21.9	76	15.9
	Sometimes	22	8.7	27	12.1	49	10.3
	Frequent	6	2.4	7	3.1	13	2.7
New rice celebration (New Year)	Never	235	92.9	179	79.9	414	86.8
	Seldom	14	5.5	21	9.4	35	7.3
	Sometimes	1	0.4	17	7.6	18	3.8
	Frequent	3	1.2	7	3.1	10	2.1

*Note.* Data Source: Survey data (2017), *f* = frequency.

*They could only produce one crop a year, with low productivity. They grew corn and flowers to supplement their food. Through the exchange of production techniques, they have gradually improved their farming techniques and economic productivity has improved. Regarding cultural life, in the past, when they worked on wet rice, they only got one harvest a year, and then they harvested in November-December. Furthermore, when they had material wealth, they held a New Rice celebration ceremony. This ceremony was often held at the end of the year, close to Christmas. Wet rice has only recently changed, nearly ten years ago, there was a celebration of new rice. When we abandon new rice to grow crops, new rice is no longer celebrated. The festival of buffalo stabbing and celebrating new rice is gradually fading away because of today’s lifestyle. They followed a self-sufficient lifestyle in the past, but now they follow the service lifestyle. Everyone aims to develop a market economy, so there are no more plowing buffaloes’ (male, 35 years old, Cultural Officer of Lac Duong town).*

The diminishing role of traditional festivals can be attributed to several factors, including economic transformation, intensive farming, and changes in natural conditions. As the K’Ho people increasingly adopt a market-oriented lifestyle, the cultural significance of these festivals diminishes. Instead, there has been a rise in other forms of celebration, such as Christmas, Tet holidays (Kinh ethnicity’s new year), and modern cultural events like art competitions and sports, reflecting new societal values and religious beliefs (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023).

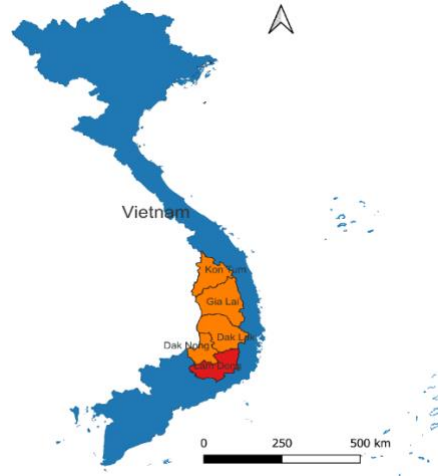
These changes highlight the complex interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of modernization, economic

development, and external influences. The shift from a self-sufficient lifestyle to a market-oriented economy has led to the gradual decline of some traditional practices while fostering new cultural expressions that align with contemporary societal dynamics.

### Gong Cultural Festival

According to Mr. Bon Yo Soan, Deputy Head of the Ethnic Committee of Lam Dong province, said *“As a province inhabited by many ethnic groups, Lam Dong province’s culture is formed from the long-standing cultural identity of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands region (Figure 3). Origin and culture of residents from regions throughout the country who come to work, live and settle. That blending together has created Lam Dong a unique, rich, diverse and unique folk cultural treasure”*.

**Figure 3**  
*Central Highlands region*



*Note.* Created by the authors.

This blending of cultures has created a rich and diverse folk cultural heritage unique to Lam Dong province. However, urbanization and integration have significantly impacted this cultural heritage, particularly the gong culture, which is integral to the spiritual and daily lives of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands (Phan, 2022).

Trinh Quang Phu notes that the Central Highlands Gong Festival is losing its appeal and is now primarily seen at official state-sponsored events, rather than as a vibrant community tradition (Oriental Development Research Institute, 2016). This decline is echoed by Nguyen Thi Kim Van, who points out the rapid reduction in the number of gong sets in the region. For example, Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces had tens of thousands of gong sets in the 1980s, but by 2004, Gia Lai had only 5,117 sets, and Lam Dong had 3,113 sets. Similarly, in Dak Lak province, the number of gong sets decreased significantly between 1982 and 2003 (Oriental Development Research Institute, 2016, p. 38). This decline, often referred to as “bleeding from gongs,” signifies not just a loss of musical instruments but also a decrease in the communal and familial activities associated with them (Oriental



Development Research Institute, 2016). For the K'Ho ethnic group in Lam Dong Province, Gong culture is also in this flow. The gradual loss of the unique cultural features of the Central Highlands in the spiritual lives of ethnic minority communities is clearly expressed. *“During the subsidy period and economic difficulties, gongs were lost a lot; Because of difficult conditions, people catch buffaloes and cows to sell, gongs are also sold, gongs are boiled to separate the copper; In the past, when I was on a business trip, I even saw people using gongs to make pig troughs. When the economy is difficult, no one is qualified to sell gongs, and the value of gongs almost loses its true meaning; people only buy them to get copper. Therefore, gongs are gradually disappearing, and their numbers are decreasing. However, a few households also earnestly love the value of gongs, so even in difficult and poor conditions, they still keep them. The quantity is still minimal, so sometimes people who want to have a pair of gongs to play have to buy them elsewhere, but this ratio is not much, if not to say there is no more”* (Male, 55 years old, resident in Lac Duong Governor). The decline of gong culture is particularly evident among the K'Ho ethnic group in Lam Dong Province. The economic hardships of the subsidy period led to the sale of many gongs. They were often sold or even boiled down for copper, leading to a drastic reduction in their numbers. While some households retained their gongs due to a deep respect for their cultural value, the overall number has decreased significantly. Some authors even go further by stating that the gradual loss of gong cultural space is due to “the inevitable impact of the integration process and also the negative side of the market economy” (Oriental Development Research Institute, 2016, p. 323)

Despite these challenges, efforts to maintain and preserve gong culture are ongoing. Lam Dong, home to many ethnic minority groups, including the K'Ho, has launched several initiatives to preserve this cultural heritage. After 1975, immigration to Lam Dong for new economic development projects diversified the province’s cultural landscape. However, core cultural values, particularly those related to the gong culture of the Central Highlands, continue to be preserved and promoted as part of economic, cultural, and social development initiatives (Phan, 2022).

The Lam Dong Provincial Government has implemented projects such as the *“Project on the Conservation and Promotion of Gong Culture in the Central Highlands of Lam Dong Province for the 2009-2015 Period with a Vision to 2020”* and the ongoing *“Project on the Conservation and Promotion of Gong Culture for the 2023-2026 Period with a Vision to 2035.”* These initiatives aim to prevent the loss of gong culture by organizing gong classes, establishing gong teams, and integrating these traditions into local

tourism activities (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023).

Survey results support these findings, showing a decline in participation in gong cultural festivals. More than ten years ago, 77.8% of respondents noted the existence of these festivals, but today that number has dropped to 66.5%. The level of participation in this festival was relatively low and there were significant differences between the two study areas (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Level of participation in the Gong Festival of the K’Ho ethnic group*

Measures	Lac Duong town		Ta Nung commune		General	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Never	127	50.2	102	45.5	229	48.0
Seldom	47	18.6	51	22.8	98	20.5
Sometimes	44	17.4	56	25.0	100	21.0
Frequent	35	13.8	15	6.7	50	10.5

*Note.* Data Source: Survey data (2017), *f* = frequency.

Despite the decline in traditional practices, gong cultural festivals continue to be an integral part of the K’Ho people’s spiritual lives. These festivals have adapted to contemporary economic and cultural contexts, maintaining their relevance by aligning with modern economic activities such as tourism. As noted, “*the longevity celebration has become a way of life for the K’Ho people, organized with buffaloes and cows, and some households prepare pigs and organize gong beatings*” (Male, 34 years old, cultural officer of Lac Duong town). While the number of active gong groups has decreased from 10-11 to 9-10, these groups remain vital for cultural exchange and are still utilized during family events, such as funerals and engagements, as well as public performances that attract tourists. This shift has expanded the use of gongs beyond familial settings, integrating them into tourist activities and helping to generate income for local households (Hau, 2024; Huynh & Le, 2022; Phan, 2022).

Survey data supports this evolution, showing that, over a decade ago, gong cultural festivals were held during K’Ho ethnic celebrations (52.2%), weddings (53.5%), and buffalo stabbing ceremonies (26.2%). Recently, however, there has been a marked increase in the integration of gong culture with tourism, with festivals often organized for sports and tourism activities (80.1%), and cultural festivals of ethnic groups (64.3%) also seeing a significant rise. This shift has allowed for the preservation of gong culture

while adapting to new economic contexts, indicating a trend towards using traditional practices as a tool for cultural preservation and economic development (Anh, 2023).

However, the commercialization of gong culture has led to changes in how these festivals are perceived and practiced. *“It is all tourists, which means there are many cases where people come up to order rice and watch the gongs... The amount for a tray of rice is about more than one million (Vietnamese) dong, eating while watching gongs”* (Male, Kinh ethnicity, 35 years old, police officer of Lac Duong Town). Despite these changes, the gong remains a significant cultural symbol. It serves as a communication tool and a means of expressing community identity, pride, and continuity. *“For communication, in addition to being a pure musical tool, gongs also have a voice, that is, the sound of gongs. For example, when people welcome guests, they have their rhythm of welcoming guests”* (male, 64 years old, retired, teaching K’Ho language, Lac Duong town).

In the past, occasions for playing gongs were quite diverse, but today, the trend of fading away has been shown quite clearly. *“As far as I know, in the past, when I first came back, [...] there was no orchestra. If there is no sound at a wedding, take out the gong to play, or if they receive guests, that is, guests entering their house, then also play the gong to welcome relatives. Nevertheless, now there is an orchestra, so the gongs are removed. However, in my view, it is not about religion, religion is about banning anything, but about gongs, no one can ban it, but nowadays it is not like in the past”* (Male, Middle-aged, Protestant Deacon Board of Ta Nung commune).

In addition, the gong festival is considered a “communication tool between humans and gods.” Today, 45.0% of opinions think that this meaning still exists in the K’Ho community (see Table 3). As a typical cultural feature of the Central Highlands, gong culture is a mark expressing the unique identity of the Central Highlands ethnic groups, and 81.7% of opinions said that it means “preserving folk culture.” Furthermore, 36.3% of the respondents said that gong culture festivals also exist as entertainment, and 39.7% said that gong culture is to “educate ethnic pride for children and grand children.” This issue concerns people’s views.

While traditional occasions for gong performances are decreasing, there is a growing effort to sustain these cultural practices through education and community engagement. Gong playing classes are being established, welcoming both male and female students to ensure that the younger generation learns and maintains this cultural heritage. *“Teaching others to play is also a way to preserve and protect. Third, playing gongs is also a form of business because not only performing in the village, on the street, in any*

place, if anyone needs it, they will hire a gong team to perform, thereby bringing a small source of income for the family” (male, 30 years old, gong maker, Lac Duong town). This demonstrates a dynamic adaptation where traditional cultural elements are preserved and promoted in ways that align with the current socio-economic realities.

**Table 3**  
*The meaning of the gong cultural festival in the K’Ho life*

Measures	Lac Duong town		Ta Nung commune		General	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Communication tools between humans and Gods	87	43.9	88	46.3	175	45.1
Means of information for the K’Ho community	70	35.4	84	44.2	154	39.7
Preserving ethnic culture	151	76.3	166	87.4	317	81.7
Promoting of tourism and culture	157	79.3	124	65.3	281	72.4
For entertainment and amusement	76	38.4	78	41.1	154	39.7
Others	62	31.1	79	41.6	141	36.3

*Note.* Data Source: Survey data (2017), *f* = frequency.

The survey data indicates that 81.7% of respondents believe they are preserving their ethnic culture, including traditional festivals. However, this perception of preservation does not imply that cultural practices remain unchanged. On the contrary, the ways in which these festivals are practiced have undergone significant transformations.

For instance, while the Gong Cultural Festival was traditionally rooted in spiritual and communal life, it has increasingly become associated with tourism and entertainment. This shift reflects a broader cultural adaptation process where traditional practices are maintained in form but are repurposed or recontextualized to align with contemporary socio-economic realities.

Traditionally, the Gong Cultural Festival was deeply rooted in spiritual and communal life, serving as a vital part of significant occasions like the New Rice Festival. However, over time, its association with tourism and entertainment has grown. This shift is indicative of a broader cultural adaptation process, where traditional practices are maintained in form but are

repurposed or recontextualized to align with contemporary socio-economic realities (Anh, 2023; Phan, 2022).

In recent years, the Gong Cultural Festival has also become a significant driver of local tourism (Hau, 2024; Huynh & Le, 2022; Phan, 2022; Thai, 2018; Truong & Dérioz, 2020). About 72.4% of respondents indicated that the festival promotes tourism and culture. This evolution is supported by qualitative insights from interviews, where one respondent noted, *“The atmosphere and meaning of the Gong Cultural Festival is different than in the past. Previously, it was closely tied to significant occasions like the New Rice Festival. Now, it is associated with tourism services and includes a mix of old and new activities”* (Male, 64 years old, retired, teaching K’Ho language, Lac Duong town).

This transformation has not only altered the festival’s role within the K’Ho community but has also resulted in the establishment of 11 gong groups in Lac Duong town to cater to the growing demand from tourists (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023; Phan, 2022). These groups play a dual role: preserving and promoting cultural heritage while simultaneously supporting the socio-economic development of the area by creating jobs and income for the K’Ho people. The activities of these gong groups are carefully managed to ensure political security, social order, and safety, as reported by the People’s Committee of Lam Dong province (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023).

As an intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO, the Gong cultural space has achieved international recognition and extends beyond a mere village cultural model; it is a source of pride for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands (Anh, 2023; Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023). Consequently, efforts to maintain and preserve its cultural values have been actively integrated into the community’s daily life. For example, in 2021, the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Lam Dong province collaborated with the local Heritage Management Department to organize gong teaching classes, resulting in certificates awarded to 30 students from eight different villages (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023). Additionally, there are ongoing informal gong-playing classes conducted by elderly artisans to ensure the transmission of this cultural knowledge, although this remains a provisional measure (Hau, 2024; Huynh & Le, 2022).

As Vietnam continues to develop, there is a growing interest in cultural and international relations, attracting both international and domestic tourists eager to experience the rich national culture. To preserve and promote Gong culture in the Central Highlands, it is essential to establish more

teaching classes and build museums dedicated to this cultural heritage. However, challenges remain, such as the commercialization of gongs, potential loss of cultural value, and risks of commercial exploitation. Moreover, limited physical space for Gong culture, scarce musical instruments, and a general lack of awareness about the importance of conservation also threaten this cultural practice (Lam Dong Provincial Human Rights Steering Committee, 2023).

Given these challenges, research and education on traditional cultural values are critical for preserving and promoting Gong heritage, especially in the face of increasing threats. Despite these obstacles, the community's commitment to preserving their culture remains strong, even as the festival's role evolves under external pressures. This dynamic process of cultural preservation and transformation underscores the ongoing need for research and education to ensure that the Gong Cultural Festival maintains its significance in the modern world (Hau, 2024; Huynh & Le, 2022; Phan, 2022).

The analysis above highlights a clear trend of gradually decreasing and even disappearing cultural festivals within the K'Ho ethnic community. Festivals such as the buffalo stabbing festival and the new rice celebration have become increasingly rare and are almost no longer practiced in the cultural lives of the K'Ho people. This decline can be attributed to several interconnected factors, including the influence of urbanization, which accelerates migration and the expansion of urban lifestyles. The transformation of local economic models has further contributed to this shift, as traditional agrarian-based rituals lose relevance in a rapidly changing socio-economic context. Additionally, Vietnamese government policies and various socio-demographic factors, such as religion and ethnicity, have played significant roles in these changes.

These shifts are best understood through several sociological theories discussed in the Conceptual Linkage section. Conflict Theory explains how social contradictions and conflicts, driven by economic and cultural pressures, result in the abandonment of traditional practices like the buffalo stabbing festival. Global Social Change and Syncretism theory suggests that as globalization influences local cultures, traditional festivals adapt by incorporating new elements or are gradually replaced by activities that align more closely with contemporary values. Evolutionary Theory offers insight into how societies naturally progress from simpler to more complex forms of organization, leading to the decline of practices like the new rice celebration as the K'Ho community moves towards more diversified economic activities. Finally, Acculturation Theory highlights the process through which the K'Ho

community selectively integrates new cultural elements while retaining aspects of their traditional identity.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors that have led to the transformation and, in some cases, the decline of traditional cultural festivals within the K'Ho ethnic community.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study aimed to analyze the socio-economic factors contributing to the decline in participation in traditional festivals among the K'Ho people, apply social change theories to explain these cultural transformations, and explore the impact of modernization and external influences on the cultural identity of the K'Ho community. Through this research, a comprehensive understanding has been developed of how broader socio-economic developments are reshaping the cultural landscape of this ethnic group. The findings indicate a significant decline in traditional cultural festivals such as the New Rice Celebration and the Buffalo Stabbing Festival, which are becoming increasingly rare in the K'Ho community. However, the research reveals that these cultural practices are not merely fading away but are undergoing significant transformations. For example, while some festivals are disappearing, others, like the Gong Cultural Festival, are evolving by incorporating elements of tourism and modern entertainment. This evolution represents a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where traditional practices are maintained in form but are recontextualized to align with contemporary socio-economic realities.

Several key factors influence these cultural changes, including urbanization, which accelerates migration and the expansion of urban lifestyles, and the transformation of local economic models from agrarian-based to market-oriented systems. These shifts are further intensified by Vietnamese government policies and socio-demographic factors such as religion and ethnicity. The research underscores how these forces contribute not only to the decline of traditional festivals but also to the adaptation of cultural practices within the K'Ho community.

The decline and transformation of K'Ho cultural festivals can be understood through various sociological theories. Conflict Theory explains how economic and cultural pressures create contradictions that result in the abandonment of traditional practices. Global Social Change and Syncretism Theory suggests that globalization fosters the blending of traditional and modern cultural elements, leading to the adaptation or replacement of festivals. Evolutionary Theory offers insight into how the K'Ho community's

shift towards a more diversified economy contributes to the decline of agrarian-based rituals. Meanwhile, Acculturation Theory highlights the selective integration of new cultural elements while retaining aspects of traditional identity, explaining the evolution of festivals like the Gong Cultural Festival.

In order to address the challenges of cultural identity and preservation, this study recommends several critical actions. First, it is essential to implement educational programs that emphasize the importance of traditional festivals and cultural practices among younger generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. Additionally, advocating for Vietnamese government policies that support the preservation of these traditional festivals through dedicated funding and cultural programs is crucial to protecting these practices from being overshadowed by modernization. Furthermore, the integration of traditional festivals with tourism should be encouraged in a way that preserves their cultural significance while also promoting economic benefits for the community. Finally, continuous documentation of traditional practices and ongoing research are vital to monitoring the impact of modernization on cultural identity, allowing for informed interventions that support the preservation of the K'Ho community's rich cultural heritage. By addressing these recommendations, the challenges of cultural identity loss can be mitigated, ensuring that the rich cultural heritage of the K'Ho community is preserved even as they navigate the complexities of modernity.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors are grateful to the four anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback, which helped improve the manuscript. They also wish to thank the editorial members of *Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress* for their support.

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**THUY NHU THI NGUYEN**, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Political Science and Law, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education (HCMUTE), Vietnam. Her major research interests lie in the area of sociology, education, cultural studies, and religious studies. Email: [ntnthuy@hcmute.edu.vn](mailto:ntnthuy@hcmute.edu.vn)

**QUYET THI NGUYEN**, Ph.D., currently serves as an Associate Professor at Faculty of Political Science and Law, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Vietnam. Her research focuses on cultural studies, education, philosophy, political science, and religious studies. She also contributes as an editorial board member and peer reviewer for some reputable journals.

\*Corresponding author email: [quyetnt@hcmute.edu.vn](mailto:quyetnt@hcmute.edu.vn)

Manuscript submitted: **March 31, 2024**

Manuscript revised: **September 4, 2024**

Accepted for publication: **October 15, 2024**