

Shrinking Cultural Spaces

Consequences for the Cultural Practices of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands

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In the context of globalization and rapid economic development, the cultural spaces of ethnic minority communities are facing significant challenges. This study focuses on changes in cultural spaces to clarify the contributing factors, including economic development policies and urbanization processes, that have affected the living and cultural environments of ethnic communities. These changes have led to population displacement, forced resettlement, and disruptions in the cultural lives of ethnic minorities. The specific objective of this research is to identify the primary causes of this cultural space shrinkage and to analyze the direct consequences for the cultural and spiritual life of the communities. The study focuses on ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, including the Êđê, Gia Rai, Mnông, and Ba Na peoples. By analyzing specific cases of the disappearance of traditional cultural spaces, the research will clarify the impacts on cultural activities such as gong festivals, spiritual rituals, and various forms of folk art. Additionally, the study will assess the role of cultural conservation policies in protecting and promoting the traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities in the context of modernization. A qualitative research methodology will be employed, with in-depth interviews conducted with cultural experts and local residents. This approach aims to provide a deeper understanding of the ongoing changes and the challenges ethnic minority communities face in maintaining and preserving their traditional culture. The results of the study are intended to provide important foundations for developing appropriate cultural conservation policies, contributing to the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority cultural identity in the context of sustainable economic development in Vietnam.

Keywords: Central Highlands Ethnic Minorities, Cultural Spaces, Cultural Conservation, Traditional Rituals, Urbanization

1. Introduction

The Central Highlands of Vietnam is a region known for its unique geographical position and abundant natural resources. It is home to various

ethnic minority groups such as the Êđê, Gia Rai, Ba Na, Xê Đăng, Mnông, Chu Ru, Mạ, and Cơ Ho, among others. This land is not only renowned for its majestic landscapes but also for its cultural diversity. The culture of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities is a rich tapestry woven from elements of customs, beliefs, festivals, and folk art forms like gong performances, ethnic dances, and epic storytelling. The Central Highlands is also known for its distinctive communal cultural spaces, with iconic symbols such as the *nha rong* (communal house), longhouses, and traditional villages. These cultural spaces play a crucial role in maintaining and preserving the cultural identity of each community. They are not just places where rituals and festivals take place but also where the close relationship between people and nature is expressed. The *nha rong* or longhouse, as the cultural center of the community, hosts collective activities such as water-worship ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and buffalo sacrifice festivals, which honor deities and nature. The cultural space of the Central Highlands is not just a physical space but also a spiritual one, where the connection between humans, nature, and the supernatural is manifested. This space plays a vital role in maintaining social cohesion within the community and helps younger generations understand and inherit traditional cultural values. However, in the context of economic development and urbanization, the cultural spaces of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities are increasingly shrinking. Many traditional living areas of ethnic communities have been transformed due to the expansion of economic, agricultural, service, and infrastructure projects, leading to the gradual encroachment of their cultural spaces. These changes not only affect material life but also erode many traditional cultural values.

After 1986, Vietnam initiated the Doi Moi (Renovation) process, a significant turning point in the country's socio-economic development. Doi Moi brought about many positive changes in the economic sector, promoting industrialization and modernization nationwide, including in the Central Highlands. However, the policies implemented during Doi Moi also led to complex consequences for the cultures of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. During this period, the government enacted policies to exploit natural resources and develop large-scale industrial agriculture, such as the cultivation of rubber, coffee, and other industrial crops. This resulted in land conversion and the forced resettlement of ethnic minority communities. Indicates that land conversion and large-scale agricultural development policies have led to the shrinking of living and cultural spaces for ethnic minorities, fundamentally altering their social and cultural structures. One of the most significant negative impacts of the Doi Moi process is the shrinking of traditional cultural spaces. Sacred forests, where spiritual rituals took place, and water springs, where communities held water-worship ceremonies, have seen a considerable reduction in space, with some areas disappearing entirely. This not only disrupts traditional cultural practices but also results in a spiritual loss for the community. As cultural spaces shrink, cultural and religious practices

gradually fade away, weakening the relationship between people and nature—a core element of Central Highlands culture. Additionally, the rapid development of infrastructure, urbanization, and commercialization has contributed to the loss of traditional communal spaces. Nha rong and longhouses, once central to communal cultural activities, have been replaced by modern-style buildings. This replacement not only erases tangible cultural values but also diminishes the community spirit, which was built around collective rituals and activities.

2. Materials & Research Methods

Materials

Research on the cultural spaces of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, in the context of development and transformation during the Doi Moi period, requires a comprehensive set of materials, including historical records, in-depth studies of local cultures, and official reports on the impacts of urbanization and globalization. These materials are foundational to understanding the formation, development, and transformation of the cultural spaces of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

First, historical and cultural documents on the Central Highlands serve as crucial sources of information, providing insights into both the past and present of the region. Materials from the pre-Doi Moi period will shed light on how traditional cultural spaces were formed and preserved. Studies by Luu (1994), De Hautecloque-Howe (2004), Nguyen (2010), Pham (2011), Pham & Thai (2012), Dang (2015b), and Ly (2017) have demonstrated that the cultural spaces of the Central Highlands' ethnic groups are closely tied to the forest ecosystem and nature, where humans and deities converge through traditional rites and customs. Understanding this relationship is essential for assessing the changes brought about by economic development and land policies after Doi Moi.

In addition, works by prominent researchers such as Dang (2015a) and Nguyen (2023) on ethnic cultures in the Central Highlands provide deep analyses of cultural changes due to external influences. Nguyen (2023) emphasizes that in the process of modernization and globalization, the traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities face generational disconnects, weakening community cohesion and ethnic cultural consciousness.

Furthermore, research by Vo (2006), Le (2014), Dinh (2018), Minh (2021), Le (2021), and Doan (2022) provides critical data on the processes of urbanization, infrastructure development, and the gradual disappearance of communal cultural spaces. These works illustrate how economic development, often accompanied by large-scale projects such as resource extraction and infrastructure construction, has profoundly impacted the traditional living spaces of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities.

The impact of globalization on the culture of the Central Highlands is also

a key focus of this research. Many scholars, such as Le & Le (2004), Nguyen (2010), and Nguyen & Ho (2019), have pointed out that globalization brings not only positive economic changes but also a decline in the cultural autonomy of ethnic minority communities. Analyzing these impacts helps provide a comprehensive view of how cultural spaces have transformed over time.

Methods

Direct interviews with ethnic minority communities are a key technique in the survey process. Residents living in villages in Đắk Lắk, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, or Lâm Đồng will be interviewed to understand how their cultural spaces have changed through various stages of development. The questions will focus on their perceptions and feelings regarding the disappearance of traditional communal spaces such as the *nha rong* (communal house), water springs, and sacred areas used for festivals. Previous studies by Pham & Nguyen (2003) have shown that resettlement and land conversion have forced many communities to move away from their cultural spaces, resulting in the loss of crucial links to their traditions.

Observation of rituals, festivals, and specific cultural practices will complement the interviews. By participating in water-worship ceremonies and gong performances, the research will have the opportunity to observe changes in these practices. Through observation, the study can compare the findings with what the locals report, thus drawing more specific conclusions about the decline of cultural values. Additionally, small group discussions with community leaders and respected elders in the villages will be conducted to gather further insights into current cultural preservation policies and the role of local organizations in protecting cultural spaces.

Document analysis and synthesis also play an important role in this research. Research documents related to economic development and land policies will be collected and thoroughly analyzed to understand how policy decisions have impacted cultural spaces. This helps provide more accurate conclusions about the shrinking of cultural spaces and the negative effects on traditional cultural activities. Cross-referencing information from literature sources with the data collected during the survey will strengthen the reliability of the research. Official documents on state development policies will be compared with the opinions of local people and the results of the observations. This process will help identify shortcomings in policy implementation and propose appropriate solutions for cultural space preservation.

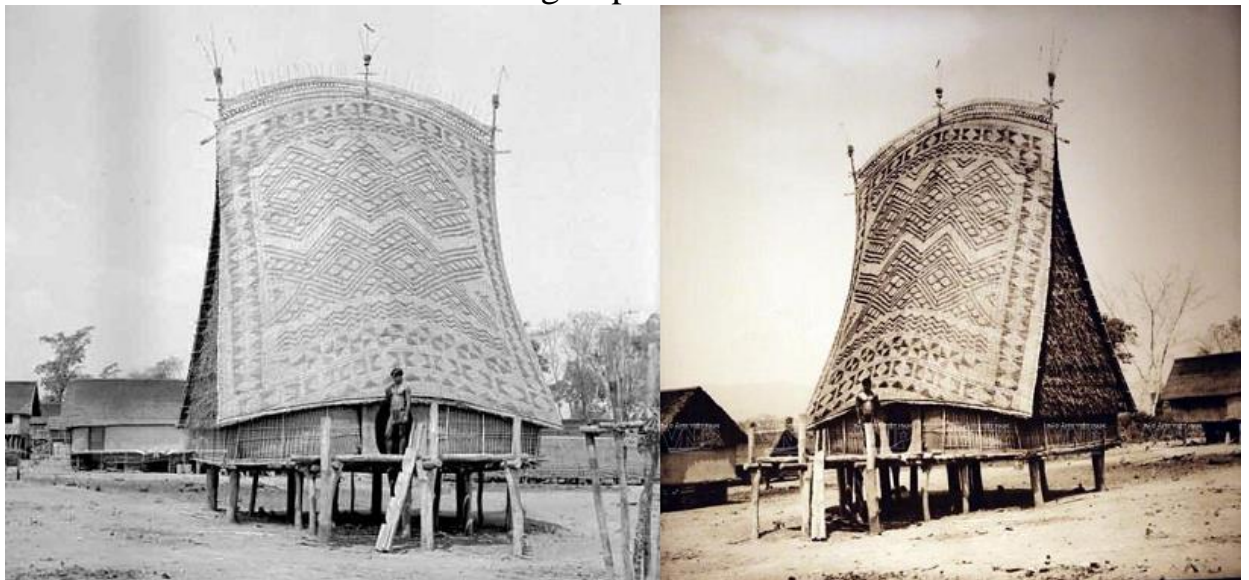
3. Results & Discussion

Results

Components of communal cultural spaces of Central Highlands ethnic minorities

For the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands, each communal structure symbolizes the village. The elements of these structures represent cultural meanings and values, including aspects such as location, scale, form, construction techniques, materials, decorative details, communal living space, and function. All these elements are harmonized with nature, emphasizing authenticity, flexibility/multi-functionality, community spirit, private ownership, symbolic expression, folk traditions, profitability, and hospitality (Ngo, 2009). Examples include the nha rong (communal house), longhouse, grave houses, and the performance space for gong culture.

Figure 1: A traditional nha rong of the Ba Na, Xơ Đăng, Gia Rai, and Ê Đê ethnic groups



Source: Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

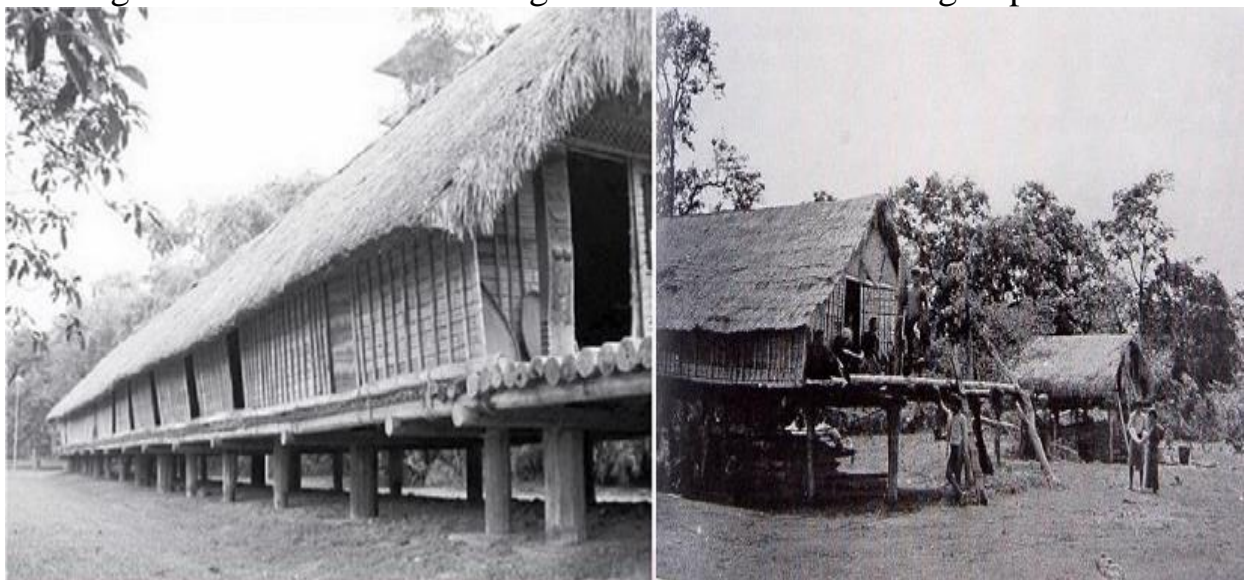
The nha rong (communal house) is described as standing between 12 to 20 meters tall, with its roof rising significantly higher than the body of the house. The roof is triangular, steeply sloped, and pointed at the top, resembling horns reaching towards the sky. The nha rong is built on tall stilts, raising it 1 to 3 meters off the ground to protect against natural disasters and wildlife. The main materials used for construction typically include wood, bamboo, rattan, and other forest plants. The house frame is made from sturdy wood, while the roof is thatched with palm or reed leaves, creating a structure that is both durable and natural-looking. The nha rong is assembled through the skilled

craftsmanship of village carpenters, who use wooden joints and plant-based ropes instead of nails.

Inside, the nha rong has a large, open space without many partitions, creating a communal area used for meetings, festivals, and other village activities. The house is often decorated with carvings and motifs related to the beliefs, customs, and daily life of the Central Highlands people, depicting animals, humans, and religious symbols (Luu, 1986). A distinctive feature of the nha rong of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities is its construction on a large open space at the village center, serving as a community gathering place rather than a residence. It hosts village meetings, festivals, traditional rituals such as offerings to deities, harvest celebrations, and the reception of important guests.

The nha rong symbolizes the unity, pride, and communal spirit of the ethnic group. It also reflects the people's deep connection with nature and their reverence for the deities worshiped in the Central Highlands (Luu, 1994).

Figure 2: The traditional Longhouse of the Ê Đê ethnic group



Source: Đắk Lắk Provincial Museum

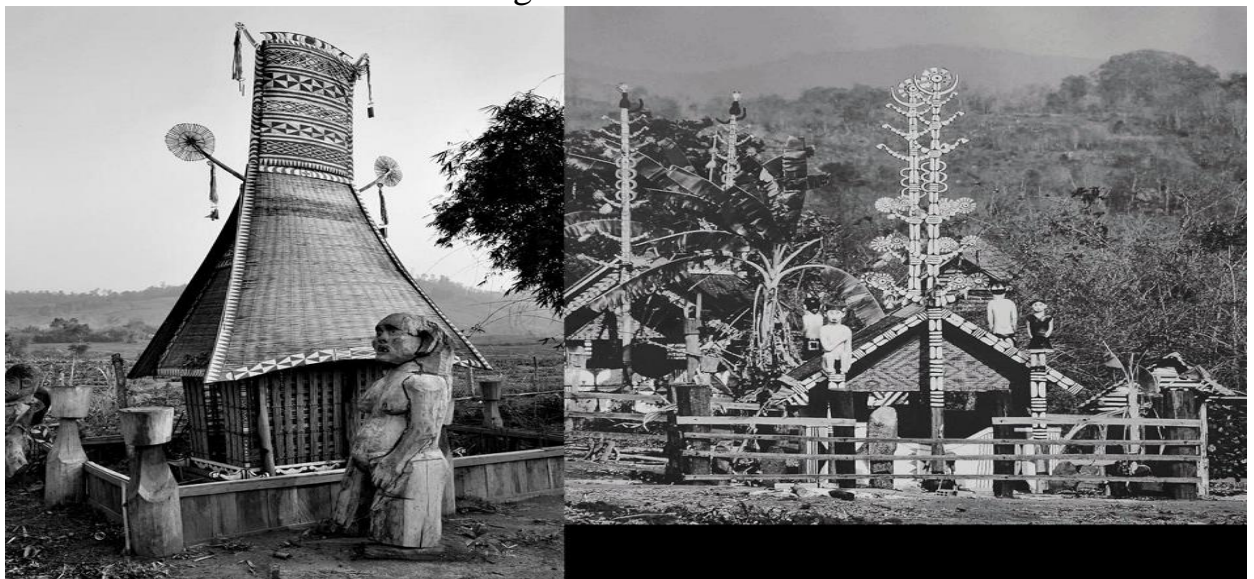
The traditional longhouse of the Ê Đê people in the Central Highlands is one of the cultural symbols unique to this community. It is a stilt house, constructed from wood, bamboo, and rattan, elevated on tall stilts to protect against wild animals and flooding. Ê Đê longhouses can range from 30 to 100 meters in length, depending on the size of the family. The longer the house, the more it symbolizes the growth of the lineage, as an extension is added each time a daughter marries. The longhouse has a rectangular shape and is supported by multiple sturdy wooden pillars. Its steeply sloped roof is thatched with leaves, bamboo, or straw. The house is built primarily from natural materials such as wood, bamboo, rattan, leaves, and vines. The pillars are made from durable,

precious woods, enabling the house to withstand harsh weather conditions.

The longhouse is typically divided into two main sections: the front area for receiving guests and hosting communal activities, and the back area for the family's living space. Inside, there are several rooms, corresponding to the number of family members. The longhouse symbolizes the matriarchal system of the Ê Đê people, where the ownership of the house usually belongs to the women. The youngest daughter inherits the house after the mother's death. The front of the house is often decorated with distinctive patterns and motifs of the Ê Đê, such as images of the sun, animals, or symbols of nature. These details reflect the community's beliefs and its close relationship with nature.

The longhouse is not only a residence but also the center of cultural activities and traditional rituals, such as ancestor worship, weddings, or community ceremonies (Chu, 1979). It symbolizes the unity and development of the lineage, serving as a space for communal living, festivals, and other collective activities. It is a place that connects family members and the clan, preserving traditional cultural values through generations (Nguyen, 2018).

Figure 3: The distinctive Grave House of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands



Source: Lâm Đồng Provincial Museum

The Nhà Mồ (grave house) is an iconic architectural structure in the culture of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, such as the Gia Rai, Ba Na, Mạ, Cơ Ho, and Ê Đê. It is not only the resting place for the deceased but also a symbol of respect for ancestors, reflecting deeply rooted beliefs about death and the spiritual world. The Nhà Mồ is built for the burial and commemoration of the deceased within the community. It serves as a place where the soul of the departed is honored and worshiped. The people of the Central Highlands believe that after death, the soul continues to exist in another

world. The Nhà Mồ acts as a bridge between the living and the dead, providing a residence for the soul (Nguyen, 2009a).

The Nhà Mồ is typically a small wooden structure with either a vaulted or sloped roof. Its size depends on the importance of the deceased within the community. Constructed from wood, bamboo, rattan, and leaves—natural materials readily available in the Central Highlands—the roof is often thatched with palm or reed leaves. The Nhà Mồ is frequently adorned with wooden statues and traditional carvings. These wooden figures depict humans, animals, or other spiritual symbols, representing the views on life and death held by the Central Highlands' ethnic groups.

A unique feature of the Nhà Mồ in the Central Highlands is the placement of wooden statues around the grave. These hand-carved statues depict scenes of daily life, such as men and women holding tools or weapons, or moments from ordinary life. This artistic expression is deeply meaningful and spiritually significant in Nhà Mồ culture. The wooden statues are often large, with rough, primitive carvings that reflect the cultural identity and carving artistry of the Central Highlands' ethnic groups.

After a period of burial in the Nhà Mồ, the people of the Central Highlands hold a major ceremony called the Lễ bỏ mả (Grave Abandonment Ceremony), in which the soul is sent off to the world of the ancestors. This important ritual is performed once all duties to the deceased have been fulfilled. The ceremony usually includes singing, offerings, and the sacrifice of buffalo or cattle as a tribute to the ancestors. The Lễ bỏ mả not only honors the deceased but also serves as a time for the community to gather, strengthen bonds, and perform traditional rituals. After this ceremony, the Nhà Mồ is left to nature, as it is believed that the soul of the deceased has found peace in the other world (Nguyen, 2009b).

Figure 4: Gong Performance Space of the Central Highlands



Source: Đắk Lắk Provincial Museum

The Nhà Mồ symbolizes the intimate connection between humans and nature, between the living world and the world of the dead. It reflects beliefs about the universe, the existence of the soul after death, and the respect the living have for the deceased. The Nhà Mồ also exemplifies the rich spiritual culture and carving artistry of the people of the Central Highlands, especially through the unique and symbolic wooden statues.

The cultural space for the gong performances in the Central Highlands is an essential part of the spiritual life of the ethnic minorities in this region, such as the Ê Đê, Gia Rai, Ba Na, M'ông, Xơ Đăng, and many others. The gong ritual in the Central Highlands is not only a musical symbol but also reflects the spiritual world, beliefs about life, death, and the connection with nature within these communities (Nguyen & Ho, 2019). The gong ceremonies usually take place in spacious areas, such as the central courtyard of the village or within the grounds of the *nha rong* (the communal house of the village). These are central spaces where the social and spiritual activities of the village occur. The *nha rong* or longhouses serve not only as communal areas but also as sacred places that symbolize community unity.

Many gong ceremonies are also held outdoors, in locations such as fields, forest edges, or riversides. These spaces are closely tied to the life of the Central Highlands people, where they believe deities, spirits, and ancestors dwell and listen to the sounds of the gongs. Gong ceremonies are usually performed during major festivals such as the New Rice Festival, the Lễ bỏ mả (Grave Abandonment Ceremony), the Buffalo Sacrifice Festival, or other significant village events like weddings, funerals, or offerings to the deities. The rituals can last from several days to an entire week, depending on the scale and significance of the ceremony.

The sound of the gongs resonating at night is when the ceremony becomes most sacred. During the evening, the flickering of the campfire and the dim glow of torches create a mysterious and spiritual atmosphere (Nguyen, 2005). A distinctive element of the gong ceremony space is the circle formed by villagers around the large fire. The fire symbolizes the connection between humans and deities, representing the origin of strength and life. In this space, community members dance, sing, and play the gongs together. The gongs are arranged in a specific order, with the players—mainly men—standing or sitting around the fire, arranged from the largest gong to the smallest. The position of each gong and the way the players stand or move carry symbolic meaning and follow the cultural traditions of each community.

The ritual space is often adorned with offerings such as rice, wine, buffalo meat, and flowers. Wooden posts or roughly carved statues may be erected as symbols for the deities and ancestors. Large drums are also placed near the gongs to accompany the music during the ceremony. Everyone in the village, from elders to children, can participate in the gong festival. It is not just a

performance but also a time for the people to express their reverence to the deities and ancestors, and to pray for peace and a bountiful harvest (Nguyen, 2018).

Besides playing the gongs, the community also performs the xoang dance, a collective dance with rhythmic hand movements in time with the gongs. The dancers, usually women in traditional attire, move around the fire in a lively yet solemn atmosphere. The gong festival space is filled with sound, with the deep, resonant tones of the large gongs blending with the smaller ones, creating a sacred and powerful harmony. The sound of the gongs is not merely for entertainment but serves as a means of communication with the gods, expressing the desires and prayers of the people.

The ritual space is illuminated by campfires and oil lamps, and the flickering flames add to the sacred, mystical atmosphere, enhancing the solemnity of the ceremony. Each space where the gong festival takes place is imbued with sacredness, deeply connected to the spiritual life of the Central Highlands people. It is where humans connect with the unseen world, ancestors, and deities through sound and ritual. Every action in this space holds symbolic significance and strictly adheres to cultural rules (Ngo, 2007).

The gong festival space is typically set amidst nature, in the vast landscape of the mountains and forests, where the people of the Central Highlands believe their deities reside. The gongs are a way to show reverence and gratitude to nature, while also seeking protection and blessings. The cultural space of the gong festival in the Central Highlands is not only a place for rituals but also a symbol of the harmony between humans and nature, between the community and the supernatural. It is an open, diverse, and rich space, where all members of the community can participate and share their religious and cultural beliefs.

Cultural Practices of Central Highlands Ethnic Minorities in the Context of Shrinking Space

Currently, the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands mainly conduct cultural rituals in state-constructed facilities made of reinforced concrete, such as nha rong, longhouses, cultural centers, and spaces for gong performances in tourist areas. The transition from traditional structures to modern buildings has altered the cultural spaces that were once closely tied to nature and community life. While rituals are still practiced, the new, modern-material spaces may diminish the sacredness and connection to indigenous culture, changing the experience of participants. According to Vu & Nguyen (2023), by 2022, Đắk Lắk province alone had 1,723 out of 1,917 villages with community cultural houses, mostly built with modern, uniform architecture, and located according to planned areas. The nha rong, a distinctive architectural and cultural symbol of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities, holds profound spiritual values of

community, tradition, and ethnic identity. However, as these structures shrink or are incorporated into commercial tourist areas, their cultural significance gradually diminishes or changes, significantly affecting the spiritual life of the local communities.

Figure 5: The modern-day nha rong of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands



Source: Đắk Lắk Provincial Museum

First and foremost, the Nhà Rông is the communal center of each village, where activities such as meetings, festivals, and important religious rituals take place. It is not only the residence of village elders but also a space for preserving and passing down traditional cultural values. When the Nhà Rông is reduced in size or no longer used for communal purposes as it once was, these activities gradually disappear or change in nature (Nguyen & Ho, 2019). The communal space, where villagers could meet, share, and preserve their culture, becomes more limited and is increasingly replaced by modern spaces. This leads to the decline of traditional rituals, weakens community bonds, and results in the loss of a significant part of spiritual life.

When the Nhà Rông is incorporated into tourist areas, its sacred meaning and communal essence become commercialized. In a tourism context, the Nhà Rông no longer serves as a gathering place for villagers but becomes a tourist attraction, primarily serving economic purposes. In this process, many of the deep cultural values of the Nhà Rông risk being diluted or distorted to cater to tourists' preferences. Festivals and traditional rituals held at the Nhà Rông within a tourism setting often take on a more performative nature, lacking the sincerity and sacredness they once had. Local people may participate in these activities, but no longer as cultural agents, rather as "actors" performing their own culture.

The reduction or commercialization of the Nhà Rông also diminishes its role in preserving and passing down culture to younger generations. Instead of experiencing firsthand the traditional values of their ancestors at the Nhà Rông, ethnic minority children and youth are exposed to a transformed or less sacred version of it (National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, 2002). This can reduce their pride in their ethnic identity, causing younger generations to become more distanced from their cultural roots. Without a proper Nhà Rông, the transmission of knowledge and cultural values between generations becomes disrupted, and the risk of cultural erosion becomes more imminent.

Moreover, the loss of the Nhà Rông in traditional cultural spaces also signifies the loss of a symbol connecting people with the natural environment of the Central Highlands. The Nhà Rông is not merely an architectural structure but also represents the connection between people, the land, the forests, and the surrounding natural elements. When the Nhà Rông no longer exists within its native cultural context, the bond between the people of the Central Highlands and their natural environment fades as well. Rather than reflecting a lifestyle in harmony with nature, the Nhà Rông becomes a commercial symbol in the context of modern tourism, detached from its original meaning. The shrinking and commercialization of the Nhà Rông not only diminishes its communal cultural value but also alters and diminishes the spiritual and ethnic identity of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities (H'xiu, 2023). What was once a symbol of community unity now becomes a distant memory, disconnected from the living reality of the indigenous people.

Figure 6: The modern-day longhouse of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands



Source: Đắk Lắk Provincial Museum

Similarly to the Nhà Rông, the Nhà Dài (longhouse), a distinctive architectural symbol of many ethnic groups in the Central Highlands such as the

Ê Đê and Gia Rai, is not only a residence but also holds profound cultural significance regarding community life and ethnic identity. As its name suggests, the longhouse has an extended structure, traditionally housing multiple generations and symbolizing the close relationship between family members. However, as cultural spaces are gradually reduced and the longhouse is incorporated into tourist areas, its traditional meaning and role in the lives of local people begin to diminish.

First and foremost, the longhouse (nhà dài) is not merely a space for daily living but also a sacred place where traditional rituals and important festivals for the family and community are held. Within the longhouse, each family member has a specific position and role, fostering a sense of connection and shared responsibility within the small community. When the longhouse is misplaced from its original context, the communal life and the intergenerational solidarity within the family are gradually replaced by a modern lifestyle that promotes separation between nuclear families (Niê, 2023). This weakens the communal values that have long been a strength of the Central Highlands people, and it negatively affects the preservation of traditional cultural features.

When the longhouse becomes part of tourist attractions, its original cultural meaning is increasingly commercialized (Ksor, 2023). In the tourism context, the longhouse is no longer a home for extended families or communities but becomes a cultural exhibit for tourists. In this process, the spiritual, religious, and core cultural values of the longhouse can easily fade or be altered to meet market demands. Rituals and customs, if performed in a tourist setting, often become more performative than authentic, lacking the sacredness and heartfelt commitment of the indigenous people. The change in the function and purpose of the longhouse also diminishes its role in educating younger generations about traditional culture (Bùi, 2023). The longhouse was once a place where family members shared experiences, knowledge, and cultural values across generations. When the longhouse is no longer used for its original purpose, younger generations have fewer opportunities to experience and deeply understand these cultural values. Instead, they see the longhouse only through the lens of tourism, lacking the emotional and traditional connection.

Meanwhile, the Nhà Mồ (grave house) is a unique spiritual architectural structure for the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands, such as the Ba Na, Gia Rai, and Ê Đê. It is not only the final resting place for the deceased but also a sacred cultural symbol representing the relationship between the living and the dead, as well as beliefs about the afterlife. However, when the space of the Nhà Mồ is reduced or it is turned into a display item in tourist areas, its profound cultural and spiritual significance gradually diminishes.

Figure 7: The modern-day Nhà Mồ of the Central Highlands ethnic minorities



Source: Taken by the author during fieldwork in Lâm Đồng Province

First and foremost, the Nhà Mồ (grave house) is not simply an architectural structure but also the site for funeral rituals, especially the Lễ bỏ mả (Grave Abandonment Ceremony)—a crucial ritual that signifies the farewell of the deceased to the ancestral world. This is a time for the Central Highlands people to show respect to the deceased and an opportunity for the community to demonstrate unity through festival activities, singing, dancing, and offerings. When the space for the Nhà Mồ is reduced, the area available for these rituals is also limited, diminishing the sacredness and solemnity of the event (K'Twi, 2023). This not only lessens the significance of the Lễ bỏ mả but also weakens the connection between the living and the dead, a core element of the spiritual life of the Central Highlands people.

When the Nhà Mồ is incorporated into tourist areas, many of its cultural values are altered to cater to the preferences of visitors. Instead of being a sacred resting place, the Nhà Mồ becomes a tourist attraction, a cultural product for display. Traditional artistic elements, such as the wooden statues of the Nhà Mồ—which depict images of the deceased or symbols related to the afterlife—are at risk of being removed from their original cultural context and commercialized (Phan, 2023). The display of the Nhà Mồ in a tourism setting is often superficial, lacking the connection to its inherent spiritual values, leading to misunderstandings about the culture of the indigenous people.

Additionally, the reduction or commercialization of the Nhà Mồ impacts the preservation of traditional cultural values for future generations. The Nhà Mồ is not only a place of remembrance for the deceased but also a space for cultural education for the youth, where they can learn and absorb spiritual values and folk art. When the Nhà Mồ loses its true meaning and is "transformed," younger generations have fewer opportunities to understand and

appreciate this cultural heritage (K'Yi, 2023).

The gong performance space, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, is a cultural symbol of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, such as the Ê Đê, Ba Na, Gia Rai, and M'Nông. Gongs are not just musical instruments but also a means of connecting humans with the spiritual world, reflecting profound spiritual values and strengthening community bonds. However, as the space for gong performances shrinks or is transformed into a product for tourism, its cultural significance gradually loses its sacred and communal meaning.

Figure 8: The modern-day gong performance space of the Central Highlands ethnic minorities



Source: Đắk Lắk Provincial Museum

In traditional cultural spaces, the gongs (cồng chiêng) play an indispensable role in religious rituals, festivals, and important village events. The sound of the gongs resonates during festivals such as the buffalo sacrifice ceremony, the new rice festival, or funerals, conveying a connection between the people and the deities, allowing them to seek protection and harmony with nature. This is not merely a musical space but also a place where the community shares, bonds, and passes on cultural values from one generation to the next (Dang, 2023). As the space for gong performances shrinks, the gongs no longer sound as frequently in the community's daily life, and many traditional rituals are shortened or replaced by modern activities. This diminishes the sacredness of the gongs, gradually turning them into an entertainment element rather than a symbol of spiritual culture.

When gongs are introduced into tourist areas, their performance spaces lose their communal and religious significance. Instead of serving as a symbol of connection between humans and deities, the gongs become a cultural product

for display to attract tourists. Gong performances in the context of tourism are often commercially driven, stripping away the depth and solemnity inherent in traditional rituals (Truong, 2023). The gong players no longer act as intermediaries between the deities and the community but become "actors" performing their culture. The sound of the gongs loses its authenticity and soul in this new context, making it difficult for tourists to truly appreciate the spiritual significance of the gong performance space.

The shrinking of the gong performance space also greatly affects the teaching and preservation of this heritage for younger generations. Without the appropriate space and environment to practice and maintain the tradition, it becomes difficult for young people to fully understand the value of the gongs. As gong performances become more performative, younger generations lose the opportunity to directly participate in the communal rituals where gongs play a central role.

Additionally, other constructions in the Central Highlands, such as the Pốk A District Community House, Buôn Kdoh Community House, and Buôn Đôn District Festival Center, though built to imitate the traditional architecture of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, largely fail to provide real value to the community.

Figure 9: Several community activity buildings of the Central Highlands ethnic minorities, constructed with socialized funding



Source: Đắk Lắk and Lâm Đồng Provincial Museums

With modern materials such as concrete, bricks, and tiled roofs, these structures lack deep cultural interaction and fail to meet the needs of the local people. Many buildings, like the Pốk A village community house and Nam Tiến village community house, have been abandoned because they do not align with the customs and needs of the local population. Although they are labeled as

cultural preservation efforts, these structures often prioritize tourism rather than creating sustainable value for the community's cultural life.

Discussion

Causes of the shrinking cultural spaces

Cultural spaces play a vital role in maintaining the identity and cultural practices of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. However, in the context of economic development and globalization, these spaces are increasingly shrinking. One of the main reasons for the reduction of cultural spaces for the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands is urbanization and economic development. Since the introduction of the Đổi Mới (Renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnam has vigorously promoted industrialization and urbanization to develop the national economy. The Central Highlands, with its rich natural resources such as forests and minerals, has become a target for many resource extraction and infrastructure development projects. Resource exploitation is one of the leading causes of the loss of cultural living spaces for ethnic minority communities (Đỗ & Nguyễn, 2013). Many primary forests, which serve as sacred cultural and spiritual spaces for the people, have been exploited for timber or converted into areas for industrial crops such as rubber and coffee. According to Phạm & Nguyễn (2003), deforestation and land conversion not only result in the loss of spaces for spiritual rituals but also disrupt the sustainable relationship between people and nature in cultural life.

Hydropower projects have also had significant impacts on the cultural spaces of ethnic minorities. The construction of dams and reservoirs has forced many communities to relocate from their traditional villages, causing the destruction of long-standing cultural spaces. Lê & Lê (2004) note that these projects often fail to adequately consider the cultural impacts on indigenous communities, leading to the disappearance of important cultural spaces, such as sacred forests where rituals to honor forest and water deities are performed. Infrastructure development, such as roads, bridges, and industrial zones, has also altered the landscape of many ethnic minority living areas. Research by Đinh (2018) shows that the construction of major roads has cut through traditional lands, depriving people of the space to organize community festivals like water-worship ceremonies and buffalo sacrifices. Furthermore, the presence of industrial zones and factories in ethnic minority areas has accelerated migration from major cities, creating pressure on land and cultural resources.

In addition to economic development, government land management and resettlement policies are also critical factors leading to the shrinking of cultural spaces for the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. For many years, land allocation policies for agricultural and industrial development projects have altered the land structure of indigenous communities. According to Bùi (2023), forced resettlement policies have disrupted important cultural living spaces,

especially sacred areas such as forbidden forests and water sources. These places hold deep spiritual significance for the communities, where they perform rituals to deities and organize traditional festivals. The loss of these spaces has resulted in the decline of rituals and festivals, leading to cultural erosion. Resettlement is an inevitable consequence of large-scale economic development projects, such as hydropower and mineral extraction. People are forced to leave their traditional villages, where they have lived for centuries, and relocate to resettlement areas that are incompatible with their cultural and economic traditions. Hà (2024) notes that many resettlement areas fail to provide adequate conditions for people to continue their traditional agricultural activities, forcing them to adapt to urban lifestyles, thus eroding their cultural identity. The policy of allocating land for industrial crop projects, such as rubber and coffee, has also contributed to the reduction of cultural spaces for ethnic minorities. Đặng (2015) points out that many traditional farming lands have been converted into industrial crop areas, handed over to large companies by the government. This not only deprives indigenous communities of their land but also disrupts the traditional economic-cultural model, which is closely linked to nature and seasonal cycles.

Globalization is also a major factor contributing to the shrinking of cultural spaces and changes in the cultural life of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. This process brings many positive aspects, such as economic development, infrastructure improvements, and better living standards. However, it also leads to the strong infiltration of foreign cultures, which erodes traditional cultural values. Nguyễn (2023) argues that the spread of Western culture through media and popular cultural products has created a cultural divide between generations within ethnic minority communities. The younger generation, attracted by Western cultural values, gradually distances themselves from their traditional cultural practices. This weakens the traditional cultural spaces, where values and beliefs have been passed down through generations. The Westernization of lifestyles, clothing, and consumption patterns also gradually reduces the cultural distinctiveness of ethnic minority communities. According to Phạm & Thái (2012), urbanized areas in the Central Highlands are increasingly transforming into spaces resembling Western cities, with shopping centers, restaurants, and modern entertainment zones. Community cultural spaces, such as the *nhà rông* (communal house) and water sources, are gradually being replaced by these urban spaces, leading to the decline of traditional festivals and rituals. Moreover, consumer culture and the spread of market values have gradually replaced the traditional values of ethnic minority communities. K'Yi (2023) points out that as Western cultural elements strongly penetrate people's lives, traditional cultural products such as gongs, ethnic costumes, and festivals lose their appeal, especially to the younger generation. This results in the loss not only of physical spaces but also of spiritual spaces, where traditional cultural values are transmitted and maintained.

Consequences for Cultural Practices

The shrinking of cultural spaces has caused serious consequences for the cultural practices of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. These impacts are not limited to changes in the physical structure of communal spaces but also deeply affect cultural values, rituals, traditions, and ethnic identity. The consequences include the decline of traditional rituals, the disruption of cultural transmission between generations, the weakening of community spirit, and the degradation of folk arts.

Rituals and festivals are integral to the cultural life of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, representing their reverence for nature and the deities. However, the reduction of cultural spaces has caused many rituals and festivals to gradually disappear. Important ceremonies such as water-worship rituals, buffalo sacrifice festivals, and forest deity offerings, which are central to the lives of the Êđê, Gia Rai, and Ba Na peoples, are increasingly fading away. According to Phạm & Nguyễn (2003), many rituals are no longer held or are performed on a smaller scale due to the lack of suitable spaces. The absence of appropriate spaces for these ceremonies not only diminishes their importance but also strips them of their sacredness (K'De, 2023). One of the primary reasons for this decline is the disappearance of the *nhà rông* (communal house) and water sources—key locations for holding collective rituals. Đặng (2015) points out that the *nhà rông*, a symbol of community and a place for village gatherings, is gradually being replaced by modern structures or left abandoned as people move to resettlement areas. The loss of these spaces has meant that rituals, which are based on a connection with nature and the community, are no longer performed with the same fullness and solemnity.

Furthermore, K'Tam (2023), Nguyễn (2023), and Ksor (2023) emphasize that the intervention of modern factors and changes in economic models have reduced the role of rituals in people's lives. As ethnic communities transition from subsistence agriculture to commercial production models, traditional rituals related to harvests and nature are no longer maintained. This has led to the loss of an important part of cultural heritage, and younger generations are increasingly unaware of or uninterested in their ethnic rituals.

Another significant consequence of the shrinking of cultural spaces is the disruption in cultural transmission between generations. In the past, cultural spaces served as the connection between generations, where elders passed down cultural values, customs, and life experiences to the youth. However, as these spaces shrink, the process of transmitting traditional culture is interrupted. Nguyễn (2003) argues that generational conflicts over maintaining and practicing traditional culture result from younger generations being increasingly influenced by modern cultural values and distancing themselves from tradition. While the older generation continues to uphold cultural practices such as epic storytelling, gong performances, and community rituals, the younger generation

tends to be drawn to urbanized entertainment and lifestyles. This leads to a conflict in the perception of the value of rituals and traditional activities, causing many cultural traditions to be forgotten. Lê et al. (2012) and Nguyễn (2014) also highlight that the absence of communal spaces such as the *nhà rông* or traditional villages has deprived the younger generation of an environment to learn and absorb cultural values from elders. Without collective activities or community festivals, the interaction between generations has diminished, and the transmission of cultural stories and spiritual values is becoming incomplete, leading to cultural loss over time.

One of the most evident consequences of shrinking cultural spaces is the decline of community spirit and the ethnic identity of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities. Previously, cultural spaces played a crucial role in fostering and reinforcing community solidarity. Traditional villages, with their *nhà rông* and communal spaces, were where community activities—from festivals to meetings—were held, strengthening social bonds among members. However, according to Ngô & Lê (2019), as these spaces shrink, the connections among community members become more superficial. Collective activities are becoming less frequent, replaced by social fragmentation, as many families move to new urban or resettlement areas. The lack of shared spaces for communal activities has reduced opportunities for bonding, weakening the solidarity that is a vital element of ethnic minority culture. This decline in community spirit also affects the cultural identity of the ethnic minorities. Đoàn (2022) points out that ethnic identity is not only built through rituals and customs but also through interaction and connection within the community. As these elements disappear, the cultural identity of ethnic minorities becomes increasingly blurred. Instead, many ethnic minority communities are becoming heavily influenced by urban and Western cultural values, leading to the loss of their unique cultural characteristics.

Finally, the shrinking of cultural spaces has led to the decline of folk arts, particularly forms such as gong performances, ethnic dances, and epic storytelling. The Central Highlands is renowned for its gong culture, an intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO, but today, many villages no longer organize gong festivals or hold them on a much smaller scale. According to Đinh (2018), one of the main reasons for this decline is the lack of space for artists and villagers to practice and teach folk arts. Without the *nhà rông* or open spaces to perform gong music, these activities are gradually forgotten. Furthermore, the absence of previous communal gatherings has caused the younger generation to lose interest in these art forms, leading to their gradual extinction over time. Nguyễn (2023) also notes that folk art is not only in decline due to the lack of space but also due to a lack of interest from younger generations. As Western culture increasingly infiltrates through media and modern entertainment, many young people no longer feel connected to

gong music, ethnic dances, or epic storytelling. This has led to the gradual disappearance of many forms of folk art, as artists struggle to find successors to whom they can pass on their skills.

Solutions for Preserving Cultural Spaces and Practices

Given the shrinking cultural spaces and the risk of traditional cultural practices of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands disappearing, finding solutions for preserving these spaces and practices is urgent. These solutions need not only rely on cultural preservation measures but must also integrate economic and social development factors to ensure sustainable progress. Below are four key groups of proposed solutions:

i) Cultural Space Preservation Policies:

Preserving cultural spaces is one of the most crucial solutions for protecting and restoring the cultural environments of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. According to Phạm & Nguyễn (2003), preserving cultural spaces requires support from government agencies and the active involvement of local communities. The government should enact specific policies to protect important cultural areas such as nhà rông (communal houses), longhouses, water sources, and sacred forests. This can be achieved by recognizing these areas as cultural heritage sites and implementing legal measures to prevent encroachment on cultural spaces. Rchom (2023) suggests that for cultural space preservation policies to be effective, they must be integrated with local economic development plans. For example, when executing economic development projects like infrastructure construction or resource extraction, the government should require strict adherence to regulations that protect cultural spaces. Projects such as hydropower, agriculture, or industry in the Central Highlands should be carefully controlled to ensure that the cultural spaces of the communities are not invaded or destroyed.

Additionally, Liêng (2023) and Trần (2023) propose financial measures to support local people in preserving and restoring their cultural spaces. Government and non-governmental organizations can provide loans or grants to help communities restore and protect cultural structures like nhà rông and other cultural spaces. These measures not only aid in cultural space preservation but also encourage local communities to participate in the preservation process, fostering sustainable development. Ka (2023) emphasizes that preservation policies should be accompanied by legal measures to prevent external encroachment, especially from urban and industrial development projects. The planning of cultural spaces should be done systematically, involving cultural experts, researchers, and local communities to ensure that cultural spaces are protected and used appropriately.

ii) Traditional Cultural Education:

Traditional cultural education plays a vital role in preserving and spreading the cultural values of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. As cultural spaces shrink, the transmission and preservation of traditional culture must be conducted through the education system and community activities. According to Phạm (2023), education is a crucial tool for maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic groups. Incorporating traditional cultural content into school curricula will help younger generations better understand their ethnic cultural values.

Phan (2023) also emphasizes that promoting traditional culture should not be limited to schools but should also be extended through community activities. Workshops and cultural forums can be organized to provide opportunities for local people to share and learn from each other. Furthermore, restoring and maintaining traditional festivals, gong performances, ethnic dances, and epic storytelling are essential means of preserving culture. Another important factor is the role of elders in teaching traditional culture to the younger generation. Liêng (2023) points out that elders play a crucial role as custodians of cultural knowledge. Providing opportunities for them to pass on their knowledge of customs, rituals, and cultural values to the younger generation is an effective way to preserve culture in the context of modernization. These activities help maintain intergenerational connections and prevent the erosion of traditional customs and rituals.

iii) Sustainable Cultural Tourism Development:

Sustainable cultural tourism is an important solution that both develops the local economy and preserves traditional cultural values. Nguyễn (2010) highlights that the Central Highlands has great potential for developing cultural tourism due to the diversity and uniqueness of the rituals, festivals, and folk arts of the ethnic minorities. Developing sustainable cultural tourism models not only helps preserve culture but also generates income for local communities, motivating them to maintain traditional cultural practices.

However, cultural tourism development must be done sustainably, ensuring that tourism activities do not harm the cultural spaces and lives of local people. This means creating eco-tourism models where visitors are encouraged to participate in traditional cultural activities such as making gongs, learning ethnic dances, and attending water-worship ceremonies or buffalo sacrifice festivals. These experiences not only help preserve culture but also promote it to the world. Hà (2024) also suggests that sustainable cultural tourism development requires the participation of local communities in tourism planning and management. Ethnic minority communities should be encouraged to take part in organizing cultural tours, from folk art performances to providing information about their rituals and customs. This ensures that cultural tourism is

not just a business but also a tool for sustainable cultural preservation and development.

Additionally, Búi (2023) points out that ensuring the sustainability of cultural tourism requires collaboration between government organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. This cooperation helps build responsible tourism models where visitors are educated about the importance of preserving cultural spaces and respecting the cultural values of local people.

iv) Application of Technology in Cultural Preservation:

The application of technology in cultural preservation is one of the most modern and effective solutions to address the shrinking cultural spaces and the erosion of traditional values. Digital technology, especially tools such as the internet, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR), can be used to store, document, and disseminate the cultural values of ethnic minorities. Ngô & Lê (2019) suggest that using digital technology to record rituals, festivals, and traditional cultural practices is an effective method of preserving culture in the context of modernization. These technologies can help create digital archives, documentaries, and digitized materials on traditional rituals, cultural festivals, and folk art forms such as gong music, ethnic dances, and epic storytelling.

According to Ngô & Lê (2019), digitizing cultural materials not only helps preserve cultural heritage but also allows many generations and the international community to access, learn about, and better understand the cultural values of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities. Through digitization, rituals and festivals can be preserved in video, image, and audio formats, ensuring that these cultural values are not lost in the future. Hà (2022) also emphasizes that virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to recreate cultural spaces and traditional rituals. With VR, users can directly experience traditional rituals and participate in cultural festivals even without being physically present. This not only promotes ethnic minority culture but also attracts tourists and young people to explore cultural heritage.

Moreover, Trương (2023) highlights the role of digital platforms in preserving languages and folklore. Many languages and legends of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities are at risk of disappearing due to the declining number of native speakers and the dominance of mainstream languages. By using digital platforms such as mobile applications and language-learning websites, people can learn and use their ethnic language, contributing to the preservation and transmission of culture across generations.

4. Conclusion

The shrinking of cultural spaces for the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands is primarily driven by urbanization, economic development, and globalization. Policies on resource exploitation, infrastructure development, and forced resettlement have directly led to the disappearance of many traditional cultural spaces, negatively impacting the cultural life of these communities. Additionally, the influence of Western culture and modern lifestyles has created a generational gap in maintaining and preserving cultural traditions. As a result, traditional rituals, community spirit, and folk arts are gradually being eroded, and many sacred cultural spaces, such as nhà rông, longhouses, and gong performances, no longer hold their former significance.

This reality highlights the importance of preserving cultural spaces to maintain the cultural identity and traditional values of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Cultural spaces are not only places for rituals and community activities but also serve as a medium for passing on cultural values from one generation to the next. Without appropriate preservation and promotion measures, this rich and unique cultural heritage risks being lost forever.

Therefore, comprehensive cultural preservation policies, traditional cultural education, and the development of sustainable cultural tourism are necessary to ensure that the culture of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands is preserved and passed on to future generations.

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