

Original Paper

“Living” Epics in Central Highland-Vietnam

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Abstract

This article is about *h'mon*, an epic genre of Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Typical of this epic type is *H'mon Dam Giong* (or *The Dam Giong epics*). The contents of this article include space and mode of performance of *h'mon*; characteristics of the “living epic” of *h'mon* (It is the ability to refresh the content of *h'mon* by adding new details); characteristics of the character system (including the central character and the re-appearing characters).

Keywords

Central Highlands, Vietnam, *h'mon*, epic genre, “living epic”, epic cycle, Bahnar, mode of performance, re-appearing character, *The Dam Giong epics*, non-native

1. Introduction

In Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces in Central Highlands-Vietnam there is a special type of folklore, which is *h'mon*, an epic of Bahnar ethnic. In Bahnar, *h'mon* means an epic genre or epic (ex: “*h'mon Dam Giong*” meaning “epic Dam Giong”). *H'mon* also means “*h'mon* performance” or “epic performance”, for example, “he sings *h'mon*” meaning “he performs epic”. *H'mon* performed most in the Central Highlands-Vietnam is *h'mon Dam Giong*. This is an epic group including hundreds of linked epics together told about Dam Giong, an outstanding hero of the Bahnar ethnic. Therefore the *h'mon* called *The Dam Giong epics*. According to *Project on surveying, collecting, preserving, translating and publishing the Central Highland treasure* (2001-2007), there are about 120 works by *h'mon* genre (Thin, 2008), among them translation and published 30 publications (Son, 2013).

Today, *h'mon Dam Giong* (*The Dam Giong epics*) are still being performed in the villages. *H'mon* is a special genre of folklore. It was performed epic in the ancient way of the Bahnar ethnic. In particular, it can add new details or non-native cultural elements while preserving the genre and style of the traditional performance. Therefore, *h'mon* is called “living epic”. To understand the “living epic” feature of *h'mon*, this article will cover the following aspects by exploring *The Dam Giong epics*.

2. Content

2.1 Performance Space and Performance Mode of *H'mon*

H'mon is a type of folklore from the ancient times of the Bahnar ethnic. Along with it there are other folk compositions such as folk tales, folk songs, rhyming phrase, locution, folk quizzes, folk games, forms of religious practice, etc. The uniqueness of *h'mon* is expressed in performance space and performance mode. Performance space of *h'mon* is special space. *H'mon* performances usually take place in the village during festivals in House Rong (Note 1), tombs (Note 2) or in the house. Epic performances usually take place at night, from 7-8 pm to midnight, when villagers have finished eating dinner after a day of hard work. In addition to the functions of religious practice, *h'mon* is considered a form of recreation because of the ancient society very little recreational activity. In warm space, the villagers started gathering around the fire to take part in the *h'mon* performance. *H'mon* performer (folk artist) can sit or lie to show depending on his health and inspiration or the content of the story in *h'mon*.

When participating in *h'mon* performances, villagers (audiences) not only satisfy the need of entertaining through the story with unique plot, fascinating characters and thrilling episodes but also integrate into the sacred space of religious beliefs. The audiences not only enjoy the content, the art of the work or the talent of the performers (ex: voices, narratives, acting, etc.) but also put all their soul into the *h'mon* as they are participating in a religious rite. Performance space of *h'mon* is not the space for a regular singing or folk game because the audiences participate *h'mon* with all religious beliefs conveyed from their ancestors. They believe that the story in *h'mon* is real in their ethnic history. The stories that happen in *h'mon* are very familiar with their lives such as doing field work, hunting, fighting enemy, organizing festivals, exchanging with other villages, finding wives, etc. The audiences believe that the characters in *h'mon* such as Set, Dam Giong, Dam Gio are their ancestors because the names of the characters are very familiar to people through the story, the worship of the gods in the traditional belief of Bahnar ethnic. They also believe that events in *h'mon* have also occurred in their village life in the past. They believe that name of villages, name of mountains, name of rivers in *h'mon* are also associated with their village name or in a place they know or hear. The Bahnar think *h'mon* as their chronicle.

Performance space and mode of performance are a unique characteristic of *h'mon*. *H'mon* only exists in the specific space of performances and the specific mode of performance. Separating *h'mon* from space and mode of performance, *h'mon* is just a corpse without soul.

2.2 *H'mon* Is "Living Epics"

The content of the *h'mon* is often the story on the theme of building and developing community in the history of development of the Bahnar ethnic. It is the process of labor production to build life, the wars to protect the community and expand the territory, etc. However, the contents of *h'mon* not only tell the story in the past but also add details, content, new events to match the current time. We can find details of modern life such as "cement", "ceramic brick", "binoculars", "gold chain", "golden ring" (Note 3),

etc. (Vietnam Academy of Social Science, 2001-2007).

In particular, there are Christian elements in the *h'mon*. The elements appear many times in *The Dam Giong epics* collected in Kon Tum province. In 26 works (single epic) in *The Dam Giong epics* surveyed, there are 23 works containing the Christian element (Dung, 2014). The Christian elements come naturally to *h'mon* and they are easily accepted by the audiences because *The Dam Giong epics'* performing area is full Christian. Surveying 61 villages in Kon Tum city (Note 4), where Dam Giong performed, most of the villagers were Christians (Note 5). In addition, Mr. A Luu, who performs more than 100 epic Dam Giong, is both a Christian and a Christian catechist. A Luu's great-grandfather was a Christian priest (named A Chau). In these villages, the villagers have participated in traditional cultural activities and participated in Christian religious activities. Therefore, the elements of Christianity have entered into the content of *The Dam Giong epics* very easily.

The above problem shows that new details and non-native cultural elements come naturally into the content of *The Dam Giong epics*. The addition and updating of events, new circumstances have the role of content innovation according to the needs of enjoyment of the audience. However, *The Dam Giong epics* still retain the character of the genre. This makes the performer and the audience do not feel the folk art form of the ancestors lost. Even the old people in the village still see the epic despite the new content but the form remains unchanged. It's still like the old days they used to hear when they were young. This is a special feature of the "living epic" of *h'mon*.

2.3 Structure of *H'mon* Is Epic Cycle

The other uniqueness of *h'mon* is an *epic cycle*. Unlike other epics in the Central Highlands-Vietnam (such as *Dam San* epic of the Ede ethnic), each epic is a story depicted in a single epic. In it, events, characters, and episodes are fully embodied in a work. In contrast, *The Dam Giong epics* is an *epic cycle*, including many single epics linked by complex relationships such as themes, character systems and motifs. *The Dam Giong epics* collected in Gia Lai province and Kon Tum province from 2001 to present (2018), contains more than 100 epics about the hero named Dam Giong. The stories in the epics are always about the farming activities, the fights to protect the village and the territory or events of life of the ancient Bahnar, such as getting married, collecting debts, hunting, hunger relief, festivals, etc. The story of hero Dam Giong in *h'mon* (epic) is shown through a series of epics. Each single epic tells a small story in Dam Giong life. These stories do not seem to end. Therefore *The Dam Giong epics* has a capacity of thousands of pages (Note 6).

The single epics in *The Dam Giong epics* link together in a concentric structure. The structure is constructed from the main narrative of Dam Giong hero's life. From this story frame (Note 7), there are many *subnarratives* in the form of single epics surrounding the heroes and linked together in *The Dam Giong epics*. The plot is subnarrative in the form of single epics surrounding the heroes and linked together into *cycle epic*. From the main narrative, single epics develop according to the hero's action axis: *farming-fighting the enemy-getting married*. It can be said that every hero's actions are a story that makes a single epic. In it, each story follows each other in the style of "each story echoes into

another story, in a series of reflections that can only ends if it becomes permanent: so it is through storytelling and integration with together” (Todorov, 2014).

The structure of *The Dam Giong epics* can be compared to the type of “*epic cycle*” of the world epic. “*Epic cycle*” concept of only 12 ancient Greek epics tells of the return of the heroes of the Trojan War that revolves around two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odysseys*, including, *Titanomachy*, *Oedipus*, *Thebais*, *Epigoni*, *Cypria*, *Iliad*, *Aethiopsis*, *Little Iliad*, *Sack of Troy*, *Returns*, *Odyssey*, *Telegony*. These epics may initially have existed as independent works of art, but with the focal point of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they could stand together, linked together to complement one another. Although the connections between the epics are loose, they form a unity through the “fragments” of stories related to the Trojan War and the protagonists are Troy heroes. Performers can add a few details or some scenes to link between epic and epic. The similarity of *The Dam Giong epics* structure and *cycle epic* is that the epics revolve around a concentric shaft and their focus is the epic hero or the original epic. Each “*round*” corresponds to a single epic and corresponds to a cyclic period around the centre. However, the focus of *The Dam Giong epics* structure is the character Dam Giong, while the focus of the 12th Greek epic is the *Iliad* and *Odysseys* epic.

2.4 The Character System Constructs H'mon Structure

2.4.1 Character Dam Giong Are the Focal Point for Converging Other Characters and Events that Create the Concentric Structure

The Dam Giong epics is an epic series of single epics about hero Dam Giong. Each single epic is like a “passage” on the life of the hero. The “passages” have the ability to narrow or expand the scope of the character’s activities and make *The Dam Giong epics* develop continuously. Character Dam Giong is always the central character to gather the other characters and events. By the relationship with the main character (Dam Giong), the other characters in the epic form a system of protagonists and supporting characters interwoven with events and motifs that create a firm structure for *The Dam Giong epics*. This form of character creates the concentric structure of *The Dam Giong epics*. It allows the performer to close or open the work flexible and the stories of character Dam Giong without a limit.

2.4.2 Re-Appearing Characters Connect Single Epics with an Integrated Structure

The Dam Giong epics usually has a re-appearance characters system. This character system appears regularly in many epics and always revolves around character Dam Giong. They have the function of clarifying the character, actions of character Dam Giong and linking other epics. The re-appearance characters have many relationships with character Dam Giong such as parents, relatives, brothers, friends, enemies, gods. These relationships have not changed in many single epics. With the re-appearance characters system, single epics gather into a group, connected by themes, characters and some common features that make up the *epic cycle*. In particular, the re-appearance characters often appear in pairs. So, we called the pair reappearance character. This type of character appears as two characters with similar characters and names with rhymes together, read up to create pleasant sounds, easy to remember, such as Giong-Gio; Ma Dong-Ma Wat, Xem Dum-XemTrenng, Pu Pung-Xor Mam,

Aying Ayong, Chun Bing-Win Krong, Hri Ko Dong-Chrong Do Xi, etc. (Vietnam Academy of Social Science, 2001-2007).

The re-appearance characters and the pair reappearance character add the qualities to Dam Giong so that the character becomes the ideal character. In addition, they also function as a word-of-mouth formula, a type of performance that helps artists create and perform epics. This feature gives *The Dam Giong epics* an open structure in its process of formation and transmission. It contributes to the uniqueness of *The Dam Giong epics* that is “living epic”. The re-appearing characters can be compared with type of dualistic character (Hero Hunahpú and hero Xbalanqué) in the *Popol Vuh* epic of Mayan (Mark, 2014) and type of pair character (divine pair, brothers Afrodit and Adonis, Kibel and Attis) in the Caucasus epic (Soviet Academy of Science, 2012). This shows that *The Dam Giong epics* of the Bahnar people in the Central Highlands-Vietnam have similarities with the epic in the world.

3. Conclusion

3.1 *H'mon Is a Special Kind of Folk Performance*

H'mon is a special kind of folk performance of Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Typical of this type is *The Dam Giong epics* (or called *h'mon Dam Giong*). *H'mon* is closely associated with the space of performance, the traditional living environment of the Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands such as culture, customs, festivals, religious practice environment, etc. Without that space, *h'mon* does not exist.

3.2 *H'mon Is a “Living Epic”*

Calling *h'mon* is a “living epic” because it is being performed in the Bahnar villages in a traditional way from ancient times. In particular, it is capable of adding new details of modern life and non-native cultural elements, non-native religions into the work. The addition of new details makes the content of *h'mon* richer and increasing the attractiveness to the audience. The Dam Giong epics contain a Christian element that shows its content is “open”. It is the ability to accept non-native cultural elements to enrich the content and fit the new performing environment.

3.3 *The Epic Cycle Structure Creates New Epics*

The epic cycle structure allows linking hundreds of single epics into *The Dam Giong epics*. This structure creates the characteristic “living epic” of *h'mon*. It is capable of renewing epic content and producing new epics. It allows the performer epic creativity without being limited. In fact, many performers have created so many new epics beyond the epics that he learned from others.

3.4 *The Re-Appearing Character Is Seen as a Performance Pattern for Performers to Perform and Create New Epics*

The re-appearing character is seen as a performance pattern for performers to perform and create epics. With the character system, performers can remember details, events and content of hundreds of epics and creates new epics. So *h'mon* is “alive” until today. Currently, it is still performing in villages of Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

3.5 *H'mon* in the Central Highlands still Exist

Although the performance environment of *h'mon* is narrow and the performers are not much (due to old age, death) *h'mon* in the Central Highlands still exist. It is hoped that the government and the cultural management agency will be interested in preserving and developing this unique cultural form.

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Notes

- Note 1. House Rong is common house of the Bahnar village. All the cultural activities and religious practices of the villagers take place here.
- Note 2. In funeral rites.
- Note 3. The traditional Bahnar jewelry does not have gold rings and gold chains.
- Note 4. Kon Tum city in Kon Tum province.
- Note 5. According to the annual statistics of the Kon Tum Bishops' Conference in 2014.
- Note 6. Each single *h'mon* (single epic) is printed in the length of 200-300 pages of 16cm x 24cm. So, if you print out the number of epics collected (more than 100 epics) will be thousands of pages.
- Note 7. Haase D. (2008), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, Vol. 1-3, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut-London, England (Haase, 2008).