



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 82/2026
A New Decade for Social Changes



PLUS
COMMUNICATION P



International
Communication & PR

Community Education, Tradition, and the Reconfiguration of Village Governance among Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands

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Abstract. This paper studies community education and tradition in the sustenance and development of ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The study, through a mixed-method approach, states that community education is more than an avenue for the communication of knowledge; rather, it is a tool of social governance that sustains a community's cultural patrimony and collective identity. Rather than disappearing, tradition as a social phenomenon, under the impact of modernization, changes through adaptation and selective retention. The study also demonstrates that the interaction of education and tradition is foundational to social integration and the governance of villages. The paper further assesses the impacts of state and NGO cultural interventions, in the face of globalization and economic development, and their effects on enculturation. The study, as a whole, underscores the need for a policy encompassing the three integrated components of education, culture, and economic development, specifically targeting ethnic minority groups.

Keywords. Community Education; Cultural Preservation; Ethnic Identity; Political Ecology; Tradition

1. Introduction

1.1. Research context

Vietnam's Central Highlands has many unique social features that set it apart nationally and regionally, accounting for its distinct socio-ecological and geographical settings, coupled with its remarkable ethnic diversity. This region boasts a multitude of ethnic minority groups such as the Êđê, Ba Na, Gia Rai, M'Nông, K'ho, and Xơ Đăng, each maintaining unique linguistic, ritual, social, and village organizational systems. Historically, a village has always served not only as a residential space but also as a socio-cultural and moral arena where governance, customary laws, kinship, ritual responsibilities, and collective remembrance are organized and reproduced (Dang, 2014; Ngo, 2002). This illustrates that the village has been the primary element through which ethnic minority populations of the Central Highlands have managed the intertwining of permanence and transience.

At the same time, the Central Highlands has been the subject of extensive and profound socio-economic changes over the past several decades. Since the Đổi Mới reforms, the expansion of market-driven development, internal migration, state-sponsored integration, and

shifts in land and resource arrangements have impacted local economies as well as social order and cultural systems (Beresford, 2008; Ngo & Tarko, 2018). These developments have not only increased the pressures on traditional village formations but also affected the socio-cultural matrix that sustains community identity. In the same way, the region has been a principal focus of state territorial control, economic restructuring, and overarching governance, which have transformed the ways in which communities, land, heritage, and power intersect (Evans, 2018; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995).

Traditions should not be seen as a frozen relic of the past. In the Central Highlands, traditions are being selectively preserved, adjusted, transformed, and strategically reconfigured in response to the modern state, shifts in religion, commodification, and heritage construction. Saleminck (2000) showed that among ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands, cultural continuity can be achieved through selective preservation rather than through the simple preservation of customs. In her 2016 work, Saleminck further illustrated that the heritagisation process can both connect communities to their past and dislocate them from the original social context of lived cultural practices. These arguments are reflected in studies of transformation and urbanisation of Central Highlands villages, where, alongside new political, economic, and representational logics, the role of tradition is reconfigured (Dang, 2015; Dang, 2019a, 2019b; Le, 2019).

Within this context, the role of community education is pivotal. In ethnic minority villages, it extends beyond the formal education system to include the intergenerational transmission of language, customary laws, ritual knowledge, cultivation techniques, moral values, and collective responsibilities, all of which are embedded in the daily life of the community. These forms of education are essential to the social and cultural reproduction of communities. Thus, the community education system serves as a means through which traditions are understood, expressed, and adjusted to contemporary conditions. Through these localized educational practices, communities assert a sense of belonging and identity, as well as the capacity to adapt to rapid social transformation.

1.2. Research gap

Existing knowledge on the Central Highlands has provided important insights into ethnic identity, cultural transformation, development, land use, religion, and cultural heritage. One strand of ethnographic and anthropological literature has examined the complexity of rituals, social organization, customary law, and village spatial structures among indigenous communities (Dang, 2014; Le, 2019; Saleminck, 2003). Another body of literature has focused on development, governance, and socio-economic transformation, including market changes, livelihoods, and the role of the state (Beresford, 2008; Hoang, 2018; Nguyen, 2008).

However, there have been too few attempts to bridge these two analytical strands. Three major gaps can be identified. First, there has been insufficient analysis of how community education, tradition, and village governance are interconnected as part of an integrated socio-cultural process. Second, most studies on cultural transformation in the region remain largely descriptive, while analytical approaches drawing on political ecology and critical heritage studies remain limited (Bryant, 1992; Harrison, 2010; Logan, 2012). These approaches are useful for explaining the relationships among power, knowledge, culture, and contested values. Third, much of the existing literature focuses on a single ethnic group or localized case study. There is therefore a need for a comparative multi-ethnic approach that can address both general regional patterns and group-specific dynamics.

1.3. Research questions

In this context, the article poses three key questions: How is community education implemented in ethnic minority villages of the Central Highlands? What is the role of tradition in village governance, social cohesion, and cultural identity? How do community education and tradition intersect in the processes of modernization, market integration, and state integration?

1.4. Contributions of the article

The article's contributions are threefold. Conceptually, it suggests that community education should be understood not only as a cultural or pedagogical practice but also as a form of socio-cultural governance that reproduces norms, identities, and notions of collective responsibility. Empirically, the article provides a comparative analysis of ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands, moving beyond a singular unit of analysis to illustrate both shared patterns and specific differences. Methodologically, the article integrates qualitative and quantitative data to offer a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of education, tradition, and governance in the daily lives of villagers. In these ways, the article engages with broader debates on cultural reproduction, local governance, and the changing socio-cultural fabric of minority communities in Vietnam.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Community education as informal governance

In the Vietnamese Central Highlands, ethnic minority villages illustrate that community education should encompass more than basic formal education and the institutionalized teaching of reading, writing, and other basic skills. Community education, in the case of ethnic minority villages, involves the collective, socially coordinated, multigenerational transmission of a community's knowledge, culture, values, behavioral expectations, and sense of collective responsibility.

In village societies, social education takes place through the active, participatory engagement of community members in everyday life, rituals and ceremonies, kinship relations, community volunteering, and customary practices. The community education process, therefore, involves not only practical learning such as agricultural practices but also the social and ethical formation of the community, the reproduction of community obligations, and the maintenance of socially sanctioned structures of authority.

Overall, this perspective responds to critiques of overly simplistic and reductionist definitions of community. Agrawal and Gibson (1999) noted that communities should not be viewed as homogeneous and harmonious entities, but rather as differentiated structures hierarchically organized through competing interests, institutions, and power relations. This is a particularly useful approach in that it addresses the complexity of community education and recognizes that it is not merely a process of cultural reproduction but also the maintenance of a socially constructed order. In a village setting, the content of knowledge, the identity of educators, and the methods used are shaped by relationships of power and the social contract that underpins community education and the governance of social order.

The same understanding can be derived from Pigg's (1992) study on the construction of social categories through place, representation, and the discourse of development. Although she examines Nepal, the Central Highlands holds similarly relevant implications. Here, the active role of local knowledge and social identity is emphasized, in contrast to a passive understanding of them, as they are continuously produced through naming, teaching, socializing, and related practices. In this respect, community education helps produce

community. It shapes notions of belonging, acceptable behavior, intergenerational obligation, and local identity.

Ethnic minority villages in the Central Highlands especially rely on these processes because their community cohesion is increasingly challenged by state modernity, migration, market expansion, and cultural homogenization. Hence, this paper considers community education to be a form of informal governance. It is “informal” not because it is unstructured, but because it operates through embedded social practices. It integrates social structures, traditional governance, ritual roles, and everyday behavior. In this way, communities not only produce knowledge but also reproduce the social order of village life.

2.2. Tradition and cultural reproduction

The study defines tradition as a dynamic and selective process of cultural reproduction, rather than a rigid construct derived from the past. In many studies of ethnic minorities, traditions are often described as stable, constrained, and likely to disappear under the pressures of modernization. However, this perspective overlooks the complex ways in which communities engage with change.

Communities undergo continuous transformation and are pragmatic in determining which traditions to maintain and which to modify in response to socio-political and economic conditions. This reflects Saleminck's (2016) argument in her discussion of heritagisation: culture is not static, but continually transformed, particularly when it becomes an object of preservation, representation, or institutional attention.

While heritagisation may serve as a vehicle to safeguard vulnerable cultural forms, it may also detach those forms from their original social functions and re-situate them within the socio-political frameworks of state recognition, tourism, and cultural display. This is increasingly observable in the institutional recognition and external framing of rituals, gong traditions, village festivals, and customary practices in the Central Highlands.

In a similar vein, though in a different context, Harrison (2010) noted that the past becomes heritage through processes of cultural and political construction shaped by contemporary interests, power relations, and varying systems of value. Logan (2012) likewise argued that cultural heritage should not be understood through romanticized aesthetics alone, but through its grounding in rights, social claims, and diverse cultural demands.

Considering these perspectives, tradition can be understood as an active process of negotiation rather than a static remnant of a former social order. In the case of ethnic minority villages in the Central Highlands, cultural reproduction operates in multiple directions. Tradition is a living phenomenon, and communities actively identify and sustain elements that empower them. Rituals, languages, customary laws, and artistic practices are reproduced through both continuity and reinterpretation within contexts of education, religion, migration, economic change, and state development.

Therefore, traditions are best understood as a dynamic repertoire through which communities express identity in changing contexts. For the purposes of this article, cultural reproduction refers to the ways traditions are reactivated and re-embedded in village life. This avoids idealizing tradition while recognizing its significant contribution to moral order and community identity.

2.3. A political ecology perspective

In studying community education and tradition in the Central Highlands, it is necessary to go beyond cultural dimensions and engage with issues of power, resources, and governance.

A political ecology approach is therefore appropriate, as it situates cultural practices and community knowledge within broader struggles over land, authority, and social order.

Political ecology, as defined by Bryant (1992), seeks to integrate political economy and environmental analysis in contexts of unequal power relations affecting local communities. This is particularly relevant to the Central Highlands, where community governance has been shaped by struggles over forest resources, land management, population movements, and state control. Peet et al. (2010) further emphasized that political ecology focuses on the social relations of control and the inequalities that underpin environmental regulation and community organization.

In ethnic minority villages, the transmission of agricultural knowledge, customary law, and ritual practice is closely linked to issues of resource control, the legitimacy of knowledge, and hierarchical authority structures within village governance. In this sense, education and tradition have both material and symbolic dimensions, reflecting the reproduction of livelihoods, governance systems, and control over land and forests. Peluso's (1992) work on resource control and resistance is particularly useful in highlighting the role of local knowledge and practice in these dynamics.

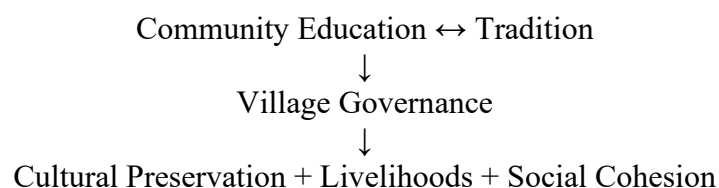
In the Central Highlands, customary norms governing forest protection, sacred spaces, water use, agricultural cycles, and land cultivation have historically structured resource use and collective responsibility. Community education plays a central role in reproducing these norms, while tradition provides their legitimacy and continuity. This intertwining of education, tradition, and political dimensions is often underexplored in existing scholarship.

Beyond cultural preservation, these processes are central to systems of control, resource management, and responses to external pressures—core concerns of political ecology. Thus, village life represents a critical site where culture, knowledge, and power are deeply interconnected.

2.4. Analytical framework

Following the preceding analysis, this article treats community education and tradition as mutually constitutive processes. Community education conveys knowledge, norms, and social expectations, while tradition provides the symbolic, moral, and historical foundations that legitimize such processes. Together, they shape village governance, understood here as a localized system of authority, social regulation, collective accountability, and everyday coordination within ethnic minority communities.

From this nexus, village governance produces three key outcomes: cultural preservation, livelihood reproduction, and social cohesion. Cultural preservation refers to the ongoing transmission and transformation of language, rituals, customary law, and collective identity. Livelihood reproduction involves the maintenance and adaptation of practical knowledge related to agriculture, resource management, and subsistence. Social cohesion refers to shared belonging, commensality, and collective solidarity within the community. This framework can be illustrated as follows:



By applying this analytical model, the article seeks to examine not only the maintenance of traditions but also how they are taught, negotiated, and mobilized in changing village contexts. It also emphasizes that education is not separate from governance, and that tradition is not separate from development. Rather, both are integral to how ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands reproduce social life under conditions of transformation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the interaction of community education, culture, and village governance among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam's Central Highlands. The qualitative component is central to this study, as the object of inquiry concerns meanings, practices, experiences, and forms of situated knowledge that cannot be adequately represented numerically.

Simultaneously, quantitative data are used in a supportive capacity to enhance descriptive reliability, identify cross-site patterns, and complement the qualitative analysis. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive ethnography while avoiding excessive statistical reduction of complex socio-cultural phenomena. Given that community education and culture operate at integrative, systemic, and practical levels, a mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate.

The qualitative component seeks to examine how local communities perceive cultural continuity, collective responsibility, and social transformation. The quantitative component, based on survey data, is used to assess levels of participation in community education, literacy, and engagement in cultural practices. The methodological orientation thus emphasizes complementarity rather than competition between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

3.2. Data sources

The research is based on three primary sources of data: anonymized semi-structured interviews, field notes, and survey data. As the main qualitative component, 112 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2023 with village elders, community leaders, educators, local administrators, artisans, and members of various ethnic minority groups. These interviews explored understandings of education, traditional practices, intergenerational knowledge transmission, normative systems, and contemporary challenges in village life.

Second, the study draws on field notes collected during multiple visits to selected villages. These notes document observations of community meetings, everyday interactions, educational practices, rituals, and local discourses on cultural preservation and social organization. Field observations were used to contextualize interview narratives and to bridge gaps between stated values and actual practices.

Third, survey data were used to provide additional quantitative support. These data examine literacy levels, household participation in community educational activities, and engagement in cultural practices. In this article, interviews, field notes, and survey data are treated as integrated sources rather than as separate bodies of evidence.

Additionally, personal communications are not listed in the References. All interview-based materials are treated as anonymized primary data for the purposes of the methodology and findings sections.

3.3. Sampling strategy

The study employs a multisite and multi-ethnic sampling strategy. Fieldwork was conducted in the provinces of Đắk Lắk, Lâm Đồng, and Đắk Nông, which collectively reflect significant socio-cultural and developmental variation within the Central Highlands. These sites were selected due to differences in market integration, migration patterns, state interventions, and cultural transformation.

The sampling strategy also incorporates ethnic diversity, including participants from the Êđê, Ba Na, Gia Rai, M'Nông, K'ho, and Xơ Đăng communities. This approach aims to capture both shared regional patterns and group-specific variations in the understanding and practice of community education and tradition. The goal was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to ensure sufficient variation for meaningful comparative analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded according to key themes, including intergenerational learning, customary authority, ritual transmission, situated knowledge, cultural resilience, and social solidarity. Broader interpretive themes aligned with the central research questions were developed through iterative reading and recoding.

In addition, comparative analysis across research sites and ethnic groups was conducted to identify similarities and differences in how community education is organized, how tradition functions within village governance, and how cultural preservation interacts with socio-economic transformation. Quantitative data were used descriptively to support and clarify these comparisons, rather than to establish causal relationships.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study adheres to established principles of research ethics, particularly those relevant to community-based social research. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and participants were informed of the academic purpose of the study.

To protect privacy and minimize risks of identification, all interview data were anonymized and are presented in anonymized form. Particular care was taken in handling sensitive information related to individuals, locations, and contextual details. This is especially important in small-scale rural village settings, where personal identities may be more easily inferred.

4. Results

4.1. Community education as a knowledge transmission system

The study results indicate that community education in ethnic minority villages of the Central Highlands functions as a practical and culturally integrated knowledge system, rather than a simplistic extension of formal education. Respondents across study sites consistently cited learning as a result of family, village, and community engagement, seasonal work, rituals, and communication with elders and local knowledge custodians. Here, community education operates through the texture of daily social life and uses social mechanisms to transmit knowledge for the sustenance and survival of the community.

In particular, the components of language, agriculture, and rituals were prominent in the findings. First, communication in the local indigenous language is fundamental to community education. In several villages, the local language serves as the principal means of communication, especially within families, ritual contexts, and informal intergenerational

education. Respondents commonly pointed out that language is more than a means of communication; it is a vessel of memory, customs, and ethnic identity. This confirms previous studies which argue that education in Central Highlands villages is value-based and locally grounded, rather than limited to literacy (Jamieson et al., 1998; Nguyen, 2010).

Second, learning in village contexts is incomplete without agricultural knowledge. Interviews and observations show that children and young people learn by doing through participation in agriculture, animal husbandry, forest-related activities, and the organization of seasonal labor. This type of learning encompasses not only technical skills but also elements of timing, collaboration, and moral responsibility, including reciprocity and collective obligation. These elements are especially critical in communities whose livelihood systems are directly dependent on land, water, and cooperative labor arrangements.

As Jamieson et al. (1998) pointed out, development processes in the Central Highlands have transformed livelihood systems; however, local knowledge remains integral to community responses in later stages of development. Likewise, Nguyen (2010) argued that among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, social resilience is sustained through the practical retention of culturally embedded knowledge.

Community education also transmits ritual knowledge. Learning occurs through multiple pathways, including participation in ceremonies, observation of ritual practitioners, involvement in preparatory activities, and repeated exposure to oral narratives related to rituals, sacred spaces, and communal responsibilities. Through these processes, younger generations acquire both the moral and symbolic meanings of village life, alongside practical knowledge.

The evidence suggests that community education in the Central Highlands integrates cultural and economic practices. It weaves together ritual, language, and livelihood into a comprehensive process of social reproduction. Table 1 summarizes these patterns by outlining the primary domains and functions of community education identified in the research.

Table 1. Main domains of community education in ethnic minority villages of the Central Highlands

Domain of transmission	Main content	Primary mode of transmission	Main social function
Language	Mother tongue, oral expression, collective memory, local categories	Family interaction, elder instruction, village communication	Preserving ethnic identity and intergenerational continuity
Agriculture	Farming techniques, animal husbandry, seasonal timing, labor cooperation	Observation, participation in household and communal work	Sustaining livelihoods and practical adaptation
Rituals and customs	Ceremonies, customary norms, sacred spaces, symbolic meanings	Ritual participation, oral instruction, observation of elders	Reproducing moral order and cultural belonging

Note: The table is synthesized from anonymized interviews, field notes, and survey-supported observations collected during fieldwork in Đắk Lắk, Lâm Đồng, and Đắk Nông between 2018 and 2023.

The table indicates that community education is multifunctional. It not only conveys information but also structures understanding of the relationships between knowledge, identity, power, and everyday life. These findings suggest that education within the village is not merely a reflection of state-led reductionist models, but rather a more complex and deeply embedded process within the community's social fabric.

4.2. Tradition as social glue and identity mechanism

The continued existence of social cohesion and ethnic identity in the studied villages is closely linked to the use of customs and practices within the community. Festivals, folklore, and rituals promote social cohesion and ethnic identity through the social interactions and cultural reiteration they generate. Folklore, oral narratives, songs, proverbs, and historical accounts provide a sense of continuity and identity for the community.

Beyond recorded and unrecorded cultural knowledge, including oral and performative communication systems, everyday community interactions also depend on embodied knowledge and social practice. The culture of gongs and public village celebrations exemplifies the role of folklore in community life. Cultural transmission, social cohesion, collective visibility, and individual recognition are among the socially visible outcomes of gong culture. The restoration and continuation of cultural and social practices can be understood through the role of folklore and communal performance. In this sense, folklore functions as a medium through which social practices, interactions, and cultural meanings are expressed and sustained. Cultural changes in the Central Highlands are thus closely linked to broader spatial and social transformations, as noted by Dang.

Le (2019) also observed that the retention of cultural practices among indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands occurs not only through visible rituals but also through memory, narrative, and local interpretations of less formal and less visible practices. Ritual practices, through processes often described as 'spirit strengthening', extend and integrate multiple households into a cohesive village community. In many instances, rituals facilitate cross-family participation and reaffirm the authority of ancestors, ritual specialists, and the prevailing social order.

The evidence suggests that these practices are not merely spiritual in nature, but are also relational and morally integrative, providing a shared interpretive framework through which communities understand principles of service, respect, and social responsibility. In this sense, tradition functions as a form of social adhesive, integrating individuals into a collective consciousness of the past, a shared system of meaning, and recognized structures of social inclusion.

4.3. Interaction between education and tradition: implications for village governance

The study does not support the view that community education and tradition operate as separate entities. Instead, their interconnection provides a basis for understanding how they jointly shape village governance. These interactions are evident in areas such as customary law, resource distribution, and community solidarity.

Customary norms and local rules are transmitted as part of everyday community life. Young people are taught not only acceptable forms of behavior but also the rationale underlying these norms. Participation in rituals, guidance from elders, and observation of dispute resolution processes all contribute to this form of behavioral education. In this way, the self-reproduction of village governance can be understood as an educational process through which governing

norms are continuously reinforced. This aligns with Ngo’s (2002) observation regarding the foundational role of customary law and village institutions in community management in the Central Highlands.

The findings further suggest that the interaction between community education and tradition shapes how communities understand the use and distribution of resources. In many cases, respondents referred to traditional practices governing access to and use of forests, water, and agricultural land. These practices are not always formally codified but are widely recognized and socially enforced. The sense of obligation linking resource management to collective norms is a key dimension of community education. This is consistent with Nguyen and Pham’s (2013) observation that, despite increasing social and religious diversification, traditional beliefs continue to play a significant role in maintaining social order.

The intersection of tradition and education also contributes to community integration. Due to the inherently collective nature of both processes, they generate repeated instances of social coordination and moral reinforcement. Children and youth acquire socially appropriate behaviors not only through direct instruction but also through participation in communal routines. Adults, in turn, reinforce these norms through rituals, guidance, and collective activities.

Consequently, both education and tradition contribute to forms of social control grounded in trust, obligation, and shared understandings of appropriate behavior. These interactions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The interaction of community education and tradition in village governance

1. Dimension	2. Role of community education	3. Role of tradition	4. Governance outcome
5. Customary law	6. Transmits norms, obligations, and accepted behavior	7. Legitimizes rules through inherited authority	8. Local regulation and dispute management
9. Resource allocation	10. Teaches practical knowledge about land, labor, and communal responsibilities	11. Provides moral basis for fair use and collective restraint	12. Community-based resource management
13. Social cohesion	14. Socializes youth into cooperation and communal roles	15. Reinforces belonging through shared rituals and symbols	16. Collective trust and village solidarity

Note: The categories in this table are analytical syntheses derived from thematic coding of interview and fieldwork materials. They do not imply that governance is uniform across all villages; rather, they indicate recurring patterns observed across the study sites.

These results indicate that understanding village governance in the Central Highlands requires attention not only to administrative institutions or state policy, but also to the everyday workings of communities, the socialization of norms, the preservation of traditions, and the structuring of collective social order.

4.4. Variations across ethnic groups

A cross-ethnic perspective on community involvement and cultural traditions, combined with document analysis, reinforces the overall patterns identified in this study while also revealing notable variations. These variations are particularly evident in the organization of ceremonial practices, the structuring of community education, and the extent of state influence on cultural activities.

In some communities, such as the M'Nông, ceremonial traditions are more closely institutionalized and increasingly linked to public cultural programs and tourism-oriented activities. In these contexts, community rituals and cultural practices tend to be more formally organized, documented, and adapted for broader public engagement. As a result, certain elements of tradition are simplified and restructured, with ritual practices becoming integrated into more formalized social and cultural systems.

By contrast, in Ba Na communities, traditions are more closely embedded in everyday social life and oral cultural practices. Rituals, narratives, and community participation remain strongly localized, with traditions sustained through direct engagement and collective acknowledgment within the community. In these settings, tradition continues to function as an integral part of social organization and moral order, rather than being extensively formalized or externally mediated.

Across different field sites, variations can also be observed in the degree to which traditions are preserved, adapted, or transformed. In some cases, traditions are selectively maintained and integrated into evolving social structures, while in others they are reinterpreted in response to external influences such as state policies or economic opportunities. These differences reflect the diversity of community contexts and the varying ways in which ethnic groups negotiate continuity and change.

What remains consistent, however, is that community education and tradition continue to function as key mechanisms through which ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands sustain continuity under conditions of transformation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reinterpreting community education: from learning practice to governance mechanism

The findings of this study reveal that policy frameworks and formal education systems often adopt a narrower understanding of community education than is appropriate for ethnic minority villages in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Community education, as conceptualized in this study, is not merely a process of informal learning or knowledge transmission, but one that organizes, regulates, and reproduces the social life of the village.

It extends beyond the teaching of skills to include the social construction of norms, obligations, power relations, and participatory expectations. From this perspective, community education should be understood as inherently socio-political. It shifts the analytical focus from education as an individual process to education as a collective and socially embedded practice.

Village life produces forms of knowledge that are context-specific and essential to the socio-political order, whether related to language, agricultural timing, ritual participation, or social obligations. Learning is embedded within social structures and is not neutral; it defines acceptable behavior, shapes pedagogical authority, and regulates the incorporation of new elements into the community.

The findings support the argument that community education is not simply an extension of informal education, but a socio-cultural system of governance in its own right. This

also explains its continued importance in contexts where formal education has expanded. To some extent, community education fulfills social functions that school-based education does not, despite the provision of literacy, standardized curricula, and access to state resources.

Community education maintains local belonging, transmits both practical and symbolic knowledge, and sustains forms of collective coordination that formal education cannot replicate. In this sense, education is embedded in governance and constitutes one of the mechanisms through which governance operates in everyday life.

5.2. Tradition under modernity: persistence through adaptation

The findings challenge the assumption that tradition necessarily erodes or disappears under modernization. The data show that migration, markets, religion, state intervention, and new cultural policies reshape traditions in the Central Highlands, but do not eliminate them. Instead, traditions persist through processes of transformation, selective preservation, and recontextualization.

This supports Saleminck's (2000) argument that cultural continuity among minority groups in the Central Highlands is largely achieved through selective preservation rather than the retention of fixed forms. It also aligns with Culas (2010), who noted that highland cultures are shaped through the ongoing transformation of cultural and political practices.

These findings suggest that tradition is not static or purely defensive, but rather hybrid and adaptive. Changes in ritual organization, the modification of oral traditions, the integration of customary practices with formal legal frameworks, and the use of tradition to regulate social behavior do not necessarily indicate cultural loss. Instead, they often reflect processes of reinterpretation and adaptation to changing conditions.

What may be altered is not always the form of tradition itself, but its social, symbolic, or moral function. This helps explain the continued significance of folklore, rituals, and festivals, which do not depend on exact repetition but on their capacity to generate shared meanings and reinforce social cohesion across generations.

Modernity, therefore, does not render tradition obsolete; rather, it creates conditions under which tradition is actively reworked. This perspective avoids both essentialist interpretations and narratives of inevitable decline.

5.3. Political economy dimensions: market expansion and the commodification of culture

While tradition continues to hold social significance, the contexts in which it is reproduced are increasingly shaped by broader political-economic processes. The expansion of market relations in the Central Highlands has transformed not only livelihoods and land use, but also the ways in which culture is valued, displayed, and circulated.

A clear example is the commodification of culture, whereby rituals, festivals, and ethnic symbols are reinterpreted as cultural products, tourist attractions, or development assets. While this transformation may alter how traditions are experienced and performed, it does not necessarily eliminate their local significance.

Bui and Lee (2015), in their analysis of heritage commodification in Vietnam, demonstrated how cultural expressions are reshaped by state, tourism, and market interests, and how these processes affect their meaning and ownership. Although their case focuses on Hanoi, similar dynamics are increasingly observable in the Central Highlands, where ethnic cultures are incorporated into broader narratives of cultural preservation and economic development.

Hoang (2018) also highlighted how shifts in livelihood practices and development discourses influence cultural change among the Êđê and Cơ Ho. These processes indicate that culture is no longer reproduced solely within the village as a communal resource, but also within external institutional and market frameworks.

Evidence from the field suggests that where cultural practices intersect with development initiatives, traditions tend to become more structured, visible, and formalized. While this may generate opportunities for resource mobilization and recognition, it can also create tensions between lived cultural practices and staged or performed representations.

In this context, external audiences may assign different meanings to cultural practices than those held by community members themselves. Thus, market expansion does not simply threaten tradition from the outside; it reshapes the conditions under which tradition is reproduced and sustained.

5.4. The role of the state and NGOs: support, mediation, and reshaping

The study reiterates that government agencies and NGOs play a mixed and sometimes inconsistent role in supporting community education and community traditions. On the one hand, they can provide funding, recognition, support for cultural preservation, and assistance in documenting, upgrading, and maintaining community infrastructure. These initiatives can contribute to strengthening local capacities and resources.

On the other hand, externally funded support rarely operates in a neutral manner; it may also function in dominant and unequal ways. The nature and impact of such support are defined, valued, and practiced differently across contexts. This dual role can be understood through Ferguson's (1994) critique of development, which describes it as an "anti-politics machine," whereby technical interventions depoliticize social relations and reconfigure them into forms of administrative order and social control.

Similarly, Clarke (2001) noted that state policies toward ethnic minorities and indigenous populations in Southeast Asia oscillate between recognition and incorporation. While such policies are often framed as respecting cultural diversity, they can also operate as mechanisms of control that limit local self-determination. These perspectives help explain the situation in the Central Highlands, where support for cultural preservation simultaneously enables and reshapes local practices.

In this study, the most significant influence of state and NGOs is observed in the institutionalization of community cultural and educational activities. While such involvement can enhance local capacity, it may also elevate certain dominant practices, translate local traditions into official heritage frameworks, and present them through externally defined representations. The outcome is not the disappearance of culture, but a reordering of practices.

The negotiation of what is considered authentic, preservable, or of public value may increasingly take place beyond the boundaries of the village. Community education, therefore, becomes a site where local and external interests converge. Table 3 summarizes the main analytical shifts proposed in this article to clarify these broader patterns of interpretation.

Table 3. From descriptive findings to broader analytical interpretation

Empirical finding	Conventional reading	Interpretation proposed in this article
Community education transmits language, agricultural knowledge, and rituals	Informal learning or cultural preservation	A mechanism of socio-cultural governance
Traditions continue under modern pressures	Partial survival of older customs	Adaptive, selective, and hybrid cultural reproduction
Cultural activities become more visible in public programs	Heritage promotion or local celebration	Reframing of tradition within market and institutional logics
State and NGO support expands cultural and educational initiatives	External assistance for preservation	Simultaneous support and reshaping of local tradition

Note: The table presents the article’s interpretive move from descriptive village-level findings toward broader theoretical implications. It is not intended as a rigid typology, but as a heuristic summary of the discussion.

As Table 3 indicates, the central issue is not whether tradition and education survive modernization, but how their meaning, authority, and institutional location are transformed within broader political and economic processes.

5.5. Theoretical implications: toward an “education–tradition nexus”

This article’s most significant theoretical contribution is the formulation of an education–tradition nexus as a means to theorize how ethnic minority communities reproduce social life under changing conditions. The education–tradition nexus captures the interdependent relationship between a community’s education and its traditions. Education socializes and structures knowledge, while tradition anchors the social, moral, and historical legitimacy of that knowledge.

This nexus reinforces systems of governance, cultural continuity, and social cohesion within communities. It also contributes to political ecology by emphasizing that the transmission of local knowledge is inseparable from power relations, resource organization, and social order. In this sense, education and tradition are not merely reflections of culture, but central to the operation of power within community life.

The concept also contributes to heritage studies by recognizing that tradition is not a static artifact to be preserved, but a dynamic social process continuously reproduced through education and practice. Heritage, therefore, is not simply an object of representation, but a lived and performed process embedded in community education. This is inherently intergenerational in nature.

The education–tradition nexus thus provides a framework for understanding how governance and culture are co-constituted, and how communities navigate the relationship

between the modern and the traditional. The findings of this study demonstrate that in the Central Highlands, community education and tradition are not peripheral, but central to the reproduction of social life.

6. Conclusion

The primary focus of this study has been on community education and tradition as foundational elements of governance, identity, and development among ethnic minority villages in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Community education extends beyond informal learning and encompasses systems of knowledge transmission that sustain social organization and governance. It includes practical and agricultural learning, reinforces community structures, and supports intergenerational responsibilities and roles, thereby contributing to the reproduction of social order.

At the same time, tradition, transmitted through rituals, folklore, and festivals, functions as a key mechanism of ethnic identity formation and social cohesion. Under contemporary conditions of transformation, traditions do not disappear; rather, they adapt, incorporating new elements while maintaining core meanings and functions.

The findings also highlight that education and tradition together enable communities to maintain cultural continuity, navigate social and economic change, and sustain collective integrity in shifting political and economic contexts.

These insights suggest the need to reconsider development policies for ethnic minority communities by integrating education, culture, and economic development into a coherent framework. While existing policies often prioritize either education or economic growth, this study demonstrates that these domains are deeply interconnected. Community education involves not only literacy and vocational skills but also participation in governance, cultural preservation, and sustainable livelihoods. Policies that overlook these dimensions risk missing key factors that contribute to community resilience and social stability.

However, this study has several limitations. The research was conducted in selected villages across three provinces and, although it includes multiple ethnic groups, it does not fully capture the diversity of all ethnic minority experiences in the region. In addition, the study relies primarily on cross-sectional data and does not incorporate a longitudinal perspective necessary to assess long-term transformations.

Future research should expand comparative analysis across regions, including other parts of Southeast Asia where similar dynamics between community education, tradition, and development are present. Further studies could also refine theoretical approaches to cultural adaptation and community resilience. In addition, the impact of digital transformation on community education and cultural preservation represents an important area for future investigation. Understanding how digital tools and platforms can be integrated with traditional forms of knowledge transmission will be crucial for sustaining cultural practices in contemporary contexts.

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