

HO CHI MINH NATIONAL ACADEMY OF POLITICS

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**THE CONTEMPORARY BEHAVIORAL CULTURE OF THE
MA PEOPLE IN THE CAT TIEN NATIONAL PARK AREA**

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale for the research topic

The Ma are one of Vietnam's 53 ethnic minority groups, belonging to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family, with a long history of residency in Lam Dong, Dong Nai, and Binh Phuoc provinces. The culture of the Ma people has been shaped in a close relationship with their natural environment and specific social spaces, expressed through indigenous knowledge, production practices, beliefs, and customary laws to protect resources, maintain ecological balance, and sustain community livelihoods. The establishment of Cat Tien National Park (NP) in 1992, with the goal of biodiversity conservation, brought about profound changes in their residential space and livelihoods, consequently impacting the behavioral culture of the Ma people in the core and buffer zones.

The values of the Ma people's behavioral culture, from traditional knowledge of sustainable resource exploitation to beliefs associated with forests and community rules, have the potential for application in resource management, environmental protection, and livelihood development. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies on the behavioral culture of the Ma people in the context of the human-environment-society interaction following the establishment of Cat Tien NP. This study not only contributes to the preservation of ethnic cultural values but also provides scientific arguments for sustainable development policies.

Based on these reasons, the doctoral student chose the topic "***The Contemporary Behavioral Culture of the Ma People in the Cat Tien National Park Area***" for this PhD thesis in Cultural Studies. Through this research, the thesis aims to contribute practical data to researchers and educators, as well as provide a scientific basis for policymaking regarding cultural development, heritage preservation, and livelihood stability for ethnic minority communities in the core and buffer zones of nature reserves - with the case of the Ma people in Cat Tien as a typical example.

2. Research Objectives and Tasks

2.1. Research Objectives

The thesis clarifies the characteristics of the Ma people's behavioral culture at Cat Tien NP, identifies valuable traditional knowledge, and analyzes the dynamics and changing trends of their behavioral culture in the context of innovation and integration. The research tasks include: systematizing related studies; clarifying the theoretical and practical basis; surveying the current state of behavioral culture; analyzing influencing factors; forecasting change trends and proposing policy recommendations.

2.2. Research Tasks

To achieve the research objectives, the thesis performs the following tasks: Systematize relevant research works on the behavioral culture of the Ma people to identify knowledge gaps and new approaches for the topic; clarify the theoretical and practical basis of behavioral culture and its changes in the modern context; survey and analyze the current state of the Ma people's behavioral culture in the Cat Tien National Park area in relation to the natural and social environments; identify and analyze the factors influencing the dynamics and changes of the Ma people's behavioral culture in traditional and modern living spaces; based on the research results, the thesis discusses the behavioral culture of the Ma people in the current context.

3. Research Subject and Scope

3.1. Research Subject

The behavioral culture of the Ma people at Cat Tien NP.

3.2. Research Scope

The content includes interactions with the natural environment (land, water, forest) and social environment (family, community, lineage, life-cycle rituals); the geographical area covers Ta Lai commune (Dong Nai) and Dong Nai Thuong commune (Lam Dong); the timeframe is from 1992 to the present.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

4.1. Research Questions

What are the characteristics of the Ma people's behavioral culture toward the natural and social environments in the Cat Tien NP area? What factors influence the Ma people's behavioral culture toward the natural and social environments in Cat Tien NP? What is the current trend of changes in the Ma people's behavioral culture? What issues arise from the changes in the Ma people's culture in the context of protecting, developing, and sustainably using Cat Tien NP? What characteristics and values in the Ma people's behavioral culture should be promoted to stabilize livelihoods, protect natural resources, and preserve biodiversity in the Cat Tien NP area?

4.2. Research Hypotheses

The main characteristics of the Ma people's behavioral culture in Cat Tien NP both clearly express their ethnic identity and are a result of their adaptation to the natural environment of Cat Tien NP. The impact of objective and subjective factors has caused changes in the behavioral culture of the Ma people in Cat Tien NP, but their ethnic identity is basically retained. Along with the Party's and State's policies on economic development over time, the values of the Ma people's behavioral culture in the Cat Tien National Park area, when promoted and applied appropriately, bring positive contributions to environmental and natural resource protection and the stabilization of community life today.

5. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

5.1. Theoretical Framework

The thesis is based on the dialectical materialism methodology of Marxism-Leninism and the perspectives and guidelines of the Party, as well as the policies and directives of the State regarding culture and the development of an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity.

5.2. Research Methods

To complete this doctoral thesis, the researcher has used the following primary research methods: collecting and systematically analyzing secondary documents, qualitative methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups), quantitative methods (surveying 110 questionnaires in Ta Lai and Dong Nai Thuong communes), analysis-comparison, and the expert method.

6. Theoretical and Practical Significance

6.1. Theoretical Significance

First, the thesis contributes to clarifying the concept and scope of research on behavioral culture in the relationship between humans and the natural-social environment. By applying theories of behavioral culture, cultural anthropology, and cultural ecology, the thesis systematizes and develops an understanding of behavioral culture not merely as everyday practices, but as a mechanism of negotiation, adaptation, and identity reconstruction in the context of globalization.

Second, the thesis enriches the theoretical foundation on cultural transformation among ethnic minority communities. Through an in-depth case study of the Ma's people in Cat Tien NP, the research demonstrates that cultural change does not follow a unidirectional trajectory from “tradition → modernity,” but rather a two-way process in which indigenous communities both adopt new values and actively redefine their cultural identities. This provides an important contribution to theories of cultural transformation in the era of globalization.

Third, the thesis affirms the value of indigenous knowledge and customary law in social science research. By illustrating how the Ma's people employ customary law to negotiate with state law, and how they mobilize indigenous knowledge in forest protection and tourism development, the study expands the theoretical basis for understanding the role of indigenous knowledge in sustainable development. This, in turn, deepens applied anthropological studies and multicultural governance.

6.2. Practical Significance

First, the findings provide a scientific basis for formulating and implementing policies on resource management, cultural conservation, and community-based tourism development in Cat Tien NP. By identifying the full range of the Ma's people's behavioral interactions with the natural environment, society, law, and tourism activities, the research offers policymakers grounded evidence for designing appropriate measures to mitigate conflicts and foster consensus and cooperation with local communities.

Second, the thesis clarifies the role of indigenous knowledge and customary law in forest resource management and biodiversity conservation.

These findings constitute valuable references for national park authorities, conservation agencies, and local governments in integrating state governance with community self-regulation toward sustainable and equitable management.

Third, the study generates practical evidence for the design of cultural education and community communication programs, contributing to raising awareness among local residents, visitors, and the broader society about the value of the Ma's people's behavioral culture in the context of globalization. In doing so, the thesis supports the development of community-based tourism models grounded in cultural respect and negotiation, while limiting commercialization and cultural impoverishment.

Fourth, the thesis serves as a useful reference for teaching and research in cultural anthropology, ethnology, cultural management, and sustainable development. The empirical findings from fieldwork and the case study of the Ma's people in Cat Tien may be applied in comparative analyses and extended to other indigenous communities in Vietnam and across Southeast Asia.

Fifth, from a social perspective, the thesis amplifies the voice of the Ma's people community in cultural negotiations with the state, legal institutions, and external actors, while affirming their agency in cultural preservation and sustainable development.

7. Thesis Structure

In addition to the Introduction, Conclusion, List of Author's Published Works related to the thesis, References, and Appendix, the main content of the thesis is structured into 4 chapters, 13 sections, as follows:

Chapter 1: Overview of the Research Situation, Theoretical Framework, and a General Description of the Study Area

Chapter 2: Behavioral Culture of the Ma People with the Natural Environment

Chapter 3: Behavioral Culture of the Ma People with the Social Environment

Chapter 4: Discussion on the Behavioral Culture of the Ma People in the Current Context

Chapter 1

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH SITUATION, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

1.1. OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH SITUATION RELATED TO THE THESIS TOPIC

1.1.1. Research Works on Behavioral Culture

The study of behavioral culture is of interest to many scientific disciplines, from psychology and sociology to cultural studies and anthropology. Western scholars such as Watson, Skinner, Schultz... emphasize the connection between behavior, conduct, and the natural and social environments. In Vietnam, many works by Tran Quoc Vuong, Tran Ngoc Them, Ngo Duc Thinh, Phan Ke Binh... have systematized behavioral culture within the structure of ethnic culture, emphasizing the role of ethics, customary laws, and indigenous knowledge. Research on ethnic minorities (Ma, M'nong, Stieng...) focuses on clarifying their conduct towards nature through customary laws, community knowledge, and production experience. Works on indigenous knowledge also contribute to identifying behavioral culture as a characteristic system of values associated with a sustainable ecological environment and livelihood.

1.1.2. Research Works on the Ma People

The Ma people have been a subject of research by French and American scholars since the colonial period, mainly for exploitation and management purposes. Henri Maitre, Jacques Dournes, Jean Boulbet have many ethnological works that meticulously document the environment, customary laws, cultivation, beliefs, and life of the Ma people. After 1975, Vietnamese researchers such as Phan Ngoc Chien, Phan Xuan Bien, Huynh Van Toi, Lam Nhan... have continued to conduct in-depth surveys on the culture, production, customary laws, beliefs, festivals, and marriage and family life of the Ma people. Many local monographs, specialized studies, and theses have contributed to systematizing knowledge on the behavioral culture and socio-economic life of the Ma people in relation to the natural and social environments. This is a valuable source of data for analyzing, comparing, and evaluating the changes in the Ma people's behavioral culture today.

1.1.3. Research Works on National Parks and Cat Tien National Park

There have been many works by domestic and foreign scholars researching Cat Tien National Park (NP) and the Ma community. Foreign authors such as Sanya K, Ghimire, Biressu, Boulbet... are interested in the role of indigenous communities in the management, resource conservation, and sustainable livelihoods. In Vietnam, many works by Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet, Nguyen Dang Hiep Pho, Vo Cong Nguyen, Lam Nhan... have analyzed the relationship between conservation, livelihood development, and the culture of local ethnic communities, especially the Ma people. However, most of these studies are primarily descriptive, not delving deeply into the analysis of changes in the Ma people's behavioral culture in the context of integration and sustainable development, so this remains a research gap that needs to be filled.

1.1.4. General Assessment of Previous Works and the Gaps to be Continued

Research works on the Ma people, behavioral culture, and Cat Tien National Park (NP) have provided a rich source of data, reflecting various aspects of the history, economy, society, and a part of the indigenous knowledge of this community. However, most of the studies are at a descriptive level, not comprehensively systematizing the behavioral culture of the Ma people in the relationship between human-environment-society, especially in the context of the Cat Tien NP buffer zone. The current scientific gap is the lack of in-depth, comprehensive studies analyzing the changes in the Ma people's behavioral culture under the impact of modernization, conservation policies, and sustainable development. This thesis aims to partially address this gap, contributing to identifying, explaining, and promoting the values of behavioral culture to serve the goals of environmental protection, livelihood stability, and community management.

1.2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.2.1. Some Basic Concepts

Culture is a product of human beings, and also an activity used by people in various fields and aspects of life, reflecting human behavior in their living environment (natural and social). Each definition, concept, and approach has both advantages and limitations. For this thesis, the researcher

approaches the concept of culture as the behavior of human beings toward objects, specifically in the relationship with the natural and social environments.

The content of the thesis is related to the behavior of ethnic groups in their living environment. The researcher defines behavioral culture as a system of behaviors and behavioral patterns in the relationship between people and different objects, expressed through behavioral language, psychological lifestyle... in the process of developing and perfecting life, which has been standardized and socialized to become a norm for individuals, social groups, and society as a whole, suitable for social life, with the specific characteristics and identity of an ethnic group or a nation... acknowledged and followed by individuals, social groups, and the entire community... The behavioral culture in this thesis focuses on the behavior of the Ma ethnic group towards the natural and social environments to see their adaptation and coping in the process of survival, stabilization, and development, thereby creating characteristic and unique cultural values, because a community's culture cannot develop without the natural conditions - with its landscapes and ecological environment, etc.

Regarding behavioral culture with the natural environment, the thesis focuses on the knowledge and behavioral culture of the Ma people with water sources, land, and other resources related to the lives of the residents.

Regarding the social environment, the author of the thesis inherits the viewpoint of Nguyen Xuan Kinh, "it is the relationship and connection between human individuals, and it is the product of the mutual interaction between people. Humans live in the environment, act upon it, and can change it." In studying the behavioral culture of the Ma people, the thesis places it in the context of the relationship between individuals, families, lineages, and community organizations with the system of knowledge about customary laws, behavior in traditional society, and the factors of change.

1.2.2. Research Theories

To conduct this thesis, the researcher applies the theories of cultural ecology, behavioral culture, and cultural change in the context of globalization to study, analyze, evaluate, and interpret the issues.

The study of the Ma people's behavioral culture in Cat Tien NP applies the theory of human ecology to find the interactive relationship of the ethnic group with the natural and social environments, paying attention to the

adaptation of economic activities such as protecting and exploiting land resources for cultivation, forest resources for swidden farming, the dependence on nature, and traditional livestock raising of the Ma people. It also explains the disappearance of some traditional cultural forms of the Ma people, such as the traditional social institution of the Ma people, where the village elder played a significant role in all life activities. Currently, this institution no longer exists; the role of the hamlet chief has gradually replaced the village elder in administrative management. The phenomenon of the disappearance of some traditional rituals such as the land selection ceremony, village establishment ceremony, rice swidden worship ceremony, water drop worship ceremony... The transitional and transformative impacts of these elements affect other activities, in awareness and behavior, simplifying or supplementing community knowledge in specific contexts and conditions.

Applying the theory of behavioral culture in the study of the Ma people in Cat Tien National Park allows us to view culture not only through memory and rituals but also through specific daily behaviors. These very behaviors are where the movement, negotiation, and change of culture in the modern context are expressed, thereby highlighting the uniqueness and enduring vitality of Ma culture. For the Ma people in Cat Tien, behavioral culture is expressed in two main dimensions. Behavior towards the natural environment: customary laws prohibiting forest exploitation, rituals for worshipping the forest god and stream god. Behavior towards the social environment: the role of the village elder, community spirit and customary laws, forms of communication, language, relationships with the government and tourism...

Applying the theory of cultural change in the context of globalization is of great significance in studying the behavioral culture of the Ma people in the Cat Tien National Park area. It helps explain the changes in the Ma people's behavior, from a close attachment to forests, customary laws, and traditional beliefs, to new expressions under the impact of the market economy, eco-tourism, introduced religions, and digital technology. It allows for a clear identification of the dual nature of globalization: it creates opportunities to improve living standards and expand cultural exchange, but also harbors the risk of diminishing, or even eroding, traditional behavioral values. This is the theoretical basis for the thesis to propose solutions for preserving and promoting the cultural identity of the Ma people's behavior, while proactively adapting to new trends in contemporary society.

1.3. A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

1.3.1. Cat Tien National Park

Cat Tien National Park is located in the territory of three provinces: Dong Nai, Binh Phuoc, and Lam Dong. The area of Cat Tien NP (central zone) is 71,350 ha (Dong Nai: 39,627 ha, Lam Dong: 27,530 ha, Binh Phuoc: 4,193 ha), and it is considered a "natural museum" with diverse ecology and unique geological values, as well as traces of cultural heritage. In this section, the researcher provides a general overview to understand the history and management of Cat Tien NP; which mentions the characteristics of the natural environment and the population, where the Ma people are an integral part with a long history of existence. The environment and natural characteristics of Cat Tien NP related to residency and livelihood activities have created a system of indigenous knowledge and practices in daily life.

1.3.2. A General Description of the Ma People and the Survey and Research Locations

The Ma people are one of the 53 ethnic minority groups, ranked 28th out of 54 ethnic groups in terms of population. The Ma population currently numbers 50,322 people (24,401 male, 25,921 female), residing mainly in Lam Dong, Dak Nong, and Dong Nai provinces. The Ma are a local ethnic minority group belonging to the Mon-Khmer language family, with a long history of residency in the Southeast and Central Highlands regions, and a close attachment to forests, land, and water. The social culture of the Ma people is deeply communal, with the traditional residential unit being the *bon* (village), led by a village elder who governs according to customary laws. Their economic life is based on swidden farming, hunting, and gathering, with many rituals associated with the agricultural cycle. The family is patriarchal, and kinship ties are strong, with many meaningful life-cycle rituals. The Ma people have a rich system of beliefs, worshipping multiple gods, especially venerating the gods of the forest, mountains, and rice. Their treasury of folk art and literature is diverse, including legends, myths, folk songs, and traditional musical instruments. The social culture of the Ma people expresses the connection between humans and nature and the community, creating a unique identity in the regional cultural space.

Summary of chapter 1

The study of behavioral culture has been of interest to many scientific disciplines, with a valuable source of data and diverse approaches. However,

studies on the Ma people have mainly focused on describing history, folk culture, customs, practices, and economy, with little emphasis on analyzing behavioral culture in the context of innovation. The study of the Ma people's behavioral culture in Cat Tien NP requires a cultural and interdisciplinary perspective to identify community norms, behaviors, and knowledge in their livelihoods. The process of conservation and exploitation of Cat Tien NP has had a significant impact on the economy, society, and culture of the Ma people. Based on this overview, the thesis applies the cultural ecology theoretical framework combined with interdisciplinary theories to analyze the Ma people's behavioral culture in the current context.

Chapter 2

BEHAVIORAL CULTURE OF THE MA PEOPLE WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

2.1. MANIFESTATIONS IN BEHAVIOR TOWARDS THE LAND

2.1.1. Conceptions of Land

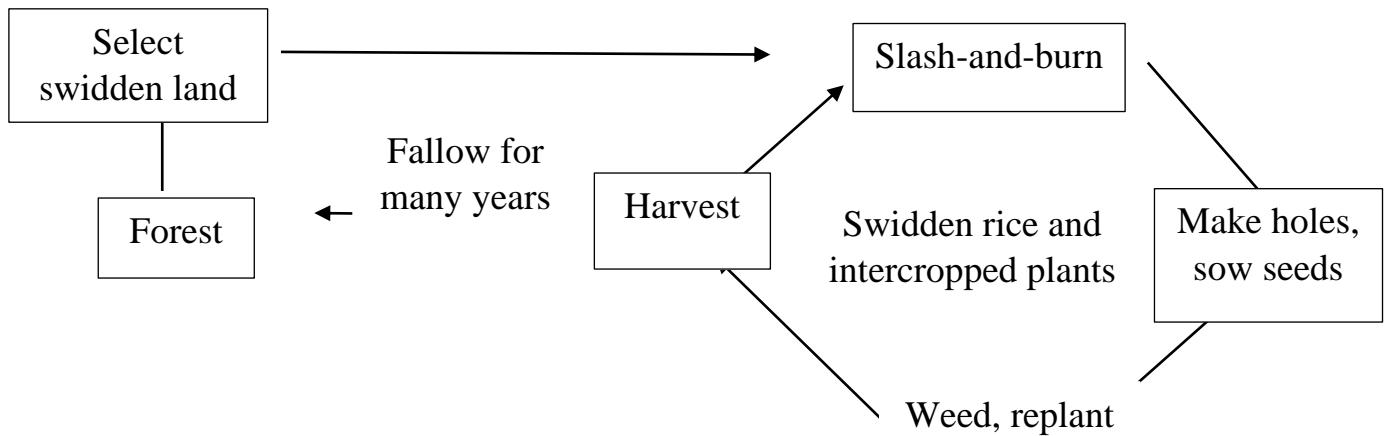
Land plays a central role in the lives of the Ma people in Cat Tien NP, viewed as a sacred community asset and tied to the protection responsibilities of the entire community. Traditionally, the Ma people classified land according to its function, such as residential land, swidden land, paddy fields, cemetery land, and forest land, with clear community ownership and demarcation. Customary law strictly regulates land use and penalizes violations, especially on cemetery land and sacred forests. Currently, the residential and garden land of the Ma people is mainly acquired through inheritance or granted by the state, with little change in area. Agricultural land remains important, primarily from reclamation and inheritance, with swidden farming once being the main form of cultivation. The Ma people do not own forest land for planting but participate in its protection under state-assigned contracts.

2.1.2. Behavior Towards Land

The Ma people place great importance on choosing land to establish a *bon* because land is closely linked to the community's life, economy, and culture. The *bon* is a traditional residential unit, where lineages with blood relations or neighbors gather, with the land belonging to the community. Land for the *bon* is carefully selected: it must be flat, near a water source, convenient for cultivation and daily life, and must be approved by the gods

through rituals. The Ma people clearly distinguish between different types of land (residential land, garden land, swidden land, sacred forest land) with strict regulations on exploitation, use, and protection. When choosing land for cultivation, they pay attention to the soil characteristics and perform rituals to ask for permission from the gods before clearing the swidden and planting. The traditional method of swidden farming follows the rules of crop rotation and fallow periods to allow the land to regenerate, protecting the natural environment. The land use rights of the Ma people today have changed significantly due to state land policies, leading to changes in residential space and the community's behavioral culture towards land.

Traditional process of Ma people's swidden rice cultivation



Currently, with the application of science in production, which brings efficiency and high yields, the Ma people combine and apply new techniques, use machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides in their cultivation, in addition to their community experience.

2.2. MANIFESTATIONS IN BEHAVIOR TOWARDS WATER

2.2.1. Conceptions of Water Sources

In the Ma people's view, water is a symbol of life and is closely associated with behavioral culture and rituals of worshipping water sources in community life. When choosing land to establish a village, the Ma people always prioritize a place with an abundant and clean water source for daily use and cultivation. Water sources from rivers, streams, ponds, and lakes not only serve daily life but also nurture the ecosystem, linked to the belief in worshipping Yang Da (water god). The Ma people believe the water god is gentle and loves singing, and they hold a water-wharf worship ceremony every year to express their gratitude. Sacred water is associated with

community ethics, and the crime of defiling water, such as incest, will be severely punished, requiring a purification ceremony at the water trough.

2.2.2. Behavior Towards Water

The Ma people highly value water sources when choosing land to establish a *bon*, always prioritizing areas near rivers and streams to serve their year-round needs. They have a ritual to worship the water god before exploiting a water source, which is performed by the village elder to ask for blessings. In daily life, the Ma people clearly demarcate areas for drinking water, daily use, and washing clothes, strictly prohibiting defiling the water source and imposing severe penalties according to customary law if violated. Each *bon* or village is responsible for protecting the water source, organizing an annual water-wharf worship ceremony to show gratitude and remind the community to preserve its purity. Currently, the Ma people have switched to using dug wells, boreholes, and water filters but still maintain the water-wharf worship ceremony in some places. However, droughts and water shortages still occur during the dry season, forcing the government to provide domestic water for the residents.

2.3. MANIFESTATIONS IN BEHAVIOR TOWARDS FORESTS

2.3.1. Conceptions of Forests

Forests play an important role in the material and spiritual life of the Ma people, associated with livelihoods, beliefs, and a system of folk knowledge. They classify forests into many types such as *Yang* forest (sacred forest), *Krong* forest, *Buuc* forest (cemetery), *Rlau Goe* forest, and *Sar* forest, with specific behaviors and customary law regulations. *Yang* forest and *Krong* forest are where the gods reside, and exploitation is absolutely forbidden; only worship rituals are held there. *Buuc* forest is where the dead are buried, and cutting trees or hunting is prohibited. *Rlau Goe* and *Sar* forests are allowed for livelihood exploitation, but there are still prohibitions and rituals to pray to the forest god. The Ma people maintain an awareness of forest protection to preserve the environment, water sources, and the ecosystem. Today, despite many changes due to state forest management policies, they still maintain beliefs and rituals related to forests.

2.3.2. Behavior Towards Forests

The forest is an essential living environment for the Ma people, closely associated with cultivation, livelihoods, and cultural life. The Ma people exploit many products from the forest such as wood, rattan, bamboo, honey,

bamboo shoots, wild vegetables... for building houses, weaving, making food, tools, musical instruments, and medicine. They have a rich folk knowledge of identifying and exploiting plants and hunting animals, while also maintaining customary laws for forest protection. However, resource exploitation is no longer as free as before due to state forest protection regulations. There are still instances of illegal logging, hunting, and livestock grazing that affect the ecosystem. The main reasons stem from poverty, lack of production land, and lack of employment. Although the awareness of forest protection is maintained, under the pressure of life, many people still encroach on the forest. Resource management needs to be combined with education, livelihood support, and reasonable penalties to achieve sustainable effectiveness.

Summary of chapter 2

Chapter 2 has clearly analyzed the Ma people's behavioral culture towards three essential resources: land, water, and forests. The Ma people have a rich indigenous knowledge, expressed through customs of choosing land to establish a *bon*, practicing crop rotation, protecting swidden land and cemeteries, along with production taboos to maintain ecological balance. With water, they consider water sources as life, practice the water-wharf worship ceremony, and establish customary laws to protect the purity of the water source and clearly define usage areas. In their behavior towards forests, the Ma people classify forests according to their function, maintaining strict customary laws to protect sacred forests, cemetery forests, and rationally exploiting production forests. However, under the pressure of livelihoods, a part of the Ma people still violates resource protection regulations, illegally logs, hunts animals, and grazes livestock in the NP, requiring solutions that both conserve and promote sustainable development.

Chapter 3

BEHAVIORAL CULTURE OF THE MA PEOPLE WITH THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

3.1. MANIFESTATIONS IN FAMILY AND LINEAGE RELATIONSHIPS

3.1.1. Conceptions of Lineage among the Ma People

The Ma people's lineage is a group of people with blood relations through the paternal line, having a sacred and cohesive communal nature within the *bon* village. Each lineage has its own residential area, often

associated with the name of a stream or mountain where they live, and has its own customs, such as burying or hanging the placenta after birth. The head of the lineage plays an important role, presiding over rituals, assigning production tasks, resolving disputes, and leading community activities. Each lineage has its own rules for weddings, including the number of ritual items the groom's family must provide. Previously, the lineage was a rigid social institution, but its role has gradually diminished as families now make their own decisions. The culture of the lineage, although still maintained, has seen many of its unique features fade in the context of integration and development.

3.1.2. Manifestations in Intergenerational Relationships

In the traditional culture of the Ma people, intergenerational relationships within the family and lineage are based on respect for the elderly and honoring one's position. The elderly are considered a treasure trove of knowledge and a moral and behavioral role model. Children are taught from a young age to show filial piety to their grandparents and parents and to preserve kinship ties. The Ma family follows a patriarchal system, but daily life shows a harmonious division of labor between men and women. The relationship between husband and wife, and among siblings, is built on respect, solidarity, and sharing. Traditional customary laws and customs play a role in maintaining order and stability for the family institution.

3.2. MANIFESTATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT

3.2.1. Manifestations of Community Cohesion

In Ma culture, community cohesion is expressed through the strong bond among members of the *bon*, lineage, and family. Everyone shares difficulties and helps one another in labor, production, and daily life. Rituals and festivals, especially the buffalo stabbing festival, become an occasion for the community to show solidarity and pray for a bountiful harvest and peace in the village. The spirit of mutual support is fostered through customary laws and community regulations, protecting shared resources like forests, water, and land. When conflicts arise, the community prioritizes peaceful resolution to maintain harmony. The role of the village elder and lineage head is very important in uniting and leading the community. This is the foundation for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Ma society.

3.2.2. Manifestations in Behavior Towards Deities

The primitive beliefs of the Ma people are rich in polytheism, with the conception that all things have a spirit and a parallel existence of a

supernatural world with gods and ghosts. The god N'du is revered as the supreme god, alongside the House god, Rice god, Forest god, Mountain god, Water god... Worship rituals such as the forest god ceremony, rice god ceremony, stream god ceremony, and kitchen god ceremony are maintained in the cycle of production and community life, with offerings of *can* wine and sacrificial animals. Each ritual not only has a spiritual meaning but also expresses community cohesion, gratitude to nature, and educates on ethics and a harmonious lifestyle with nature. However, under the impact of modernization, many traditional beliefs of the Ma people are gradually fading away.

3.3. MANIFESTATIONS IN LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS

3.3.1. Manifestations in Childbirth, Care for Pregnant Women and Newborns

Ma women consider childbirth a momentous event, associated with many rituals, taboos, and behavioral rules to protect the mother and child. During pregnancy, they avoid eating certain meats like python, elephant, turtle, or iguana, and do not go to mourning sites or encounter animals with bad omens. In the last two months, the husband prepares a separate birth chamber or builds a hut in the garden. After giving birth, the mother stays confined for 7 days, not entering the main house. The newborn is given a name through a ritual to thank the midwives and ancestors, with offerings of chicken, *can* wine, and chicken blood used for purification and prayer for peace. Today, many customs have been simplified, women receive better medical care, and the way of naming also has changed, reflecting cultural exchange and modern trends.

3.3.2. Manifestations in Marriage

In the Ma people's tradition, men and women of legal age are free to get to know, love, and marry after going through maturity rituals such as teeth filing and ear stretching (now faded). Monogamy is valued, marriage between paternal aunt's child and maternal uncle's child is allowed, but between paternal uncle's child and paternal uncle's child is forbidden. The wedding consists of three steps: proposing, engagement, and wedding, with many rituals such as worshipping the *Yàng*, the forehead-touching ritual for the bride and groom, and sacrifice. The bride price custom used to be a heavy burden but is now simpler. Adultery is considered a serious offense, requiring compensation with ritual items, and even a ceremony to apologize

to the deities. Funerals are divided into good death and bad death, with regulations for burial, grave goods, and many farewell rituals, reflecting the deep sense of gratitude and humanity of the Ma people.

Summary of chapter 3

Chapter 3 has analyzed and discussed the behavioral culture of the Ma people through relationships within the family, lineage, community, and with nature. Community cohesion is expressed through the residential organization, mutual support in production, festivals, and agricultural rituals. In the family, the Ma people highly value respect for the elderly and their position, and a harmonious division of labor between men and women. Marriage adheres to the monogamous system, valuing fidelity, with distinctive traditional rituals, including the bride price and the forehead-touching ceremony. Funerals reflect a deep-seated view of life, death, and gratitude towards the deceased. The polytheistic belief rituals of the Ma people demonstrate their close connection to nature, educating them on the awareness of protecting the environment and the community.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION ON THE BEHAVIORAL CULTURE IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

4.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IMPACTING THE BEHAVIORAL CULTURE OF THE MA PEOPLE

4.1.1. Party and State Policies

Since 1975, development policies for ethnic minority regions have profoundly changed the ownership and exploitation of land and forests for the Ma people, from community ownership to state management. Programs such as 134, 135, and New Rural Area have helped stabilize lives, promote settled farming, and diversify crops and livestock, but they have also caused the Ma people to gradually move away from the forest and lose the environment for cultural practice. The resource management policies of Cat Tien National Park have limited the traditional right of the Ma people to exploit forests. However, many conservation, livelihood development, and community tourism projects have helped the Ma people stabilize their lives, raise their awareness of environmental protection, and maintain their cultural identity. These policies have contributed to a shift in the Ma people's behavior towards the natural environment.

4.1.2. The Context of Economic Restructuring

The traditional economy of the Ma people was based on swidden farming, but nearly 40 years of the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) period have brought about clear changes in their economic structure. Community-owned forest land has shrunk, individual ownership has increased, and cultivation methods have shifted to planting industrial crops, fruit trees, and commodity production. Traditional exchange activities have gradually changed, and the Ma people have become more involved in the market economy and community tourism. Material life has improved, but traditional cultural values are gradually fading. The status of a family or individual is no longer based on cultural assets like gongs and jars but on houses and vehicles. This development brings opportunities but also poses challenges for preserving cultural identity.

4.1.3. The Context of Changing Residential Environment and Social Institutions

Currently, the Ma community no longer resides in a single *bon* as before, but is divided into hamlets and villages intermixed with many other ethnic groups. The division of *bon* into sub-hamlets and hamlets facilitates management but weakens the spirit of community cohesion. The nuclear family model is widespread, and the traditional longhouse is becoming rare, affecting intergenerational interaction. Traditional rituals, especially the buffalo sacrifice ritual, face difficulties due to limited economic resources. Cultural transmission between generations has also significantly declined.

4.1.4. The Context of International Exchange and Integration

In the context of integration and globalization, the Ma culture has strongly embraced other cultural values, especially from the Kinh people and through modern media. Inter-ethnic marriages, studying and working far from home, and the introduction of Catholicism and Protestantism have deeply impacted the cultural life and beliefs of the Ma people. Traditional rituals are gradually fading, replaced by new religious ceremonies. However, some cultural elements such as language, gongs, and traditional clothing are still maintained in religious activities. This change reflects the acculturation and fusion process specific to the community.

4.1.5. Manifestations of the Role of Cultural Agents

The traditional culture of the Ma people, especially their behavioral culture, has an enduring vitality but is currently facing the risk of decline in

modern society because it is only transmitted orally and practiced directly, with no written form for preservation. The influence of the elderly is diminishing, while the younger generation easily accesses new information flows, so their beliefs and ritual practices are gradually fading. The low educational level of the population and the lack of a team with a deep understanding of the culture make it difficult to preserve the heritage. Many people consider rituals like buffalo sacrifice, gongs, and jars to be backward and costly. The longhouse cultural space, a symbol of family pride, is no longer what it once was, creating a cultural void that is difficult to fill.

4.2. DISCUSSION ON THE CHANGES IN BEHAVIORAL CULTURE WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

4.2.1. On the Decline of Rituals and Customary Laws Associated with Nature

The Ma people have a rich experience in their behavior towards the forest, contributing to the sustainable protection of forests, water sources, and the ecosystem. Rituals such as worshipping the forest god and the water-wharf ceremony demonstrate an awareness of protecting the living environment and natural resources. The custom of crop rotation and fallowing helps the land regenerate, and the rational exploitation of forests, plants, and aquatic products is tied to a natural ethic. However, this system of customary laws and rituals is currently in decline due to the impact of modernization, centralized resource management, and lifestyle changes. This decline not only threatens traditional culture but also affects the ecological balance in Cat Tien NP.

4.2.2. On Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Land, Forests, Water, and Wild Animals

In traditional culture, the Ma people considered land, forests, water, and wild animals to be sacred entities, associated with gods and ancestors, so all exploitation had to be done with permission and in compliance with customary laws. Today, an economic mindset is gradually taking over; forests are being overexploited, and land and streams are being encroached upon and polluted. The hunting of wild animals is no longer a taboo; many sacred animals are also hunted for livelihood. The breakdown of traditional knowledge and ethics is becoming evident. If the culture is not preserved and

educated in time, the harmonious relationship with nature will be increasingly damaged.

4.2.3. On the Risk of Breaking the Transmission of Traditional Knowledge between Generations

The indigenous knowledge of the Ma people about forests, medicinal plants, cultivation, and hunting is tied to their behavioral culture toward nature and is transmitted through practice and observation between generations. Currently, this process is interrupted due to the prevalence of nuclear families, young people leaving home, and a clear generational gap. The modern education system rarely addresses traditional knowledge, and the younger generation is gradually drifting away from customs, rituals, and indigenous skills. This knowledge breakdown threatens the loss of both survival knowledge and ethical values. Conservation needs to be linked with community education, encouraging the elderly and artisans to pass on their knowledge to the younger generation.

4.3. DISCUSSION ON THE CHANGES IN BEHAVIORAL CULTURE WITH THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

4.3.1. On Social Structure and Family Relationships

In traditional society, the Ma people's family and lineage had a tight-knit structure, with the elderly playing a central role in transmitting knowledge and ethics. Currently, with the process of modernization, the nuclear family model is widespread, and young people separate to study and work far from home, with less attachment to the community. The generational gap is growing, the role of the elderly is diminishing, and the values of respect and community responsibility are fading. Fewer young people participate in traditional rituals, and the space for organizing them is also shrinking. This is a challenge that requires solutions to preserve the role of the elderly and core cultural values.

4.3.2. On the Decline of Community Spirit and Collective Sharing

Community spirit was once a core value in Ma culture, expressed through sharing and helping each other in labor, festivals, and daily life. However, the process of modernization, the market economy, and the individualistic mindset have caused the spirit of "working together, sharing together" to gradually fade. Competition in resource exploitation, benefiting

from projects, and conflicting interests have reduced community trust. Young people participate less in shared activities, community rituals are simplified, and there is a lack of inheritance. Preserving the community spirit requires synchronous solutions from the government, the community, village elders, and social organizations.

4.3.3. On the Changes in Etiquette, Communication Customs, and Behavioral Language

In traditional society, the etiquette and communication customs of the Ma people played a crucial role in maintaining community harmony and showing respect for ancestors, deities, and elders. However, the process of modernization and the impact of education, religion, and media have caused many traditional communication norms to fade. The Ma language is used less in rituals and community activities; many traditional greetings and ways of speaking are gradually disappearing. The simplification of rituals leads to a decline in ritual communication, and the mother tongue is no longer taught, leading to a breakdown in the transmission of communication culture and a reduction in community cohesion.

4.3.4. On the Function of Customary Law in Social Adjustment for Conflict Resolution

In traditional society, the customary law of the Ma people played a role in regulating behavior, maintaining order and community harmony through clear and strictly enforced rules. The village elder was the one who presided over the resolution of disputes and conflicts, aiming to restore relationships rather than just punish. Currently, the role of customary law is diminishing due to the impact of state law, religion, and social changes; people turn more to religious functionaries and local authorities. However, customary law still has value in social reconciliation and needs to be preserved as a part of their cultural identity.

4.4. BEHAVIORAL CULTURE OF THE MA PEOPLE IN THE PROCESS OF INHERITANCE AND PROMOTION

4.4.1. On the Relationship between Biodiversity Change and Cultural Diversity Change

The process of socio-economic development and population growth in the Central Highlands since 1975 has strongly changed the residential space,

resources, and social structure of the Ma people. Cohabitation with other ethnic groups and overexploitation of resources have led to environmental degradation, breaking the traditional cultural-natural bond. Longhouses, *bon* villages, and customary laws are fading; the nuclear family and individualistic economy are taking precedence. The Ma culture faces the risk of breakdown, requiring solutions that link conservation with ecology and sustainable development.

4.4.2. Trends in Adjusting Rituals and Customs to New Circumstances

In the process of integration, the Ma people in Cat Tien National Park have adjusted their rituals and customs to adapt to modern society. Rituals such as worshipping the forest god, the new rice ceremony, weddings, and funerals have been simplified in scale, duration, and method. Some rituals have become "touristified," serving cultural exchange and performances for visitors. Some traditional rituals have become simpler due to economic conditions but still retain their core meaning. This change reflects their ability to adapt, but solutions are needed to avoid the risk of becoming superficial and losing their identity.

4.4.3. The Proactive Role of Agents in Conserving and Promoting Ma Culture

In the context of changing Ma culture, the role of village elders, artisans, and Ma cultural officials is increasingly important. The village elder is a "living knowledge bank," preserving and transmitting customs, rituals, and customary laws, and is also a spiritual pillar, resolving conflicts in the community. Artisans contribute to preserving and reenacting cultural spaces through performances, musical instruments, and festivals, inspiring the younger generation. Ma cultural officials act as a bridge between indigenous knowledge and policy, promoting education and preserving identity. Cultural conservation, therefore, needs to promote internal community strength, not just rely on policy.

4.4.4. The Preservation of Symbolic Cultural Space

The traditional residential space of the Ma people is associated with their social structure, kinship ties, and unique cultural values, typically the longhouse and the community house - symbols of solidarity and family bonds. The process of modernization, urbanization, and settled farming has caused the longhouse model to fade, replaced by individual houses mixed

with Kinh architecture. However, the Ma people still preserve the longhouse and community house as cultural symbols, places for festivals and welcoming tourists. This preservation reflects the effort to maintain identity amidst integration, with the important role of village elders, artisans, and cultural officials in transmitting and arousing community pride.

4.4.5. Restructuring and Selecting Values among the Youth

The Ma youth today are the group that most clearly expresses the process of restructuring and selecting cultural values in the context of integration. They both embrace modern values such as individual freedom and gender equality, and retain some traditional elements such as wearing ethnic clothing at weddings or participating in community festivals. Exposure to education, media, and social networks helps young people broaden their horizons, but at the same time, it diminishes the role of indigenous culture. In their careers, young Ma people are increasingly choosing to study new fields and participate in tourism and resource management, instead of only doing traditional agriculture. However, this process is not uniform; there is still a clear division between young people in the core and buffer zones. Developing appropriate educational and cultural policies will help the youth both maintain their identity and create new values for the community.

Summary of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 has analyzed the socio-economic context and development policies that have deeply impacted the lives of the Ma people in Cat Tien National Park, especially through programs for settled farming, poverty reduction, and new rural areas. These policies have contributed to stabilizing livelihoods, but they have also changed the ownership of land and forest resources, leading to a disconnect from the natural environment - the foundation of traditional culture. The changes in economic structure, crops, occupations, and residential space have led to a cultural and social restructuring: longhouses giving way to nuclear families; traditional customary laws and rituals being simplified; and the role of village elders and artisans diminishing. The youth both inherit and select values, and gradually create new cultural expressions, reflecting their adaptation in the process of integration and development.

CONCLUSION

The Ma people in the Cat Tien National Park area are an important part of the Ma community in Vietnam, with many distinctive material and spiritual cultural values that have been formed and maintained for centuries. The behavioral culture of the Ma people towards the natural environment (NE) and social environment (SE) is linked to indigenous knowledge, customary laws, beliefs, and life-cycle and agricultural rituals. These values reflect a harmonious relationship between human beings, nature, and the community, contributing to shaping the ethnic cultural identity

Under the impact of development policies, the process of settled farming, resource exploitation, along with population growth, cultural exchange, and the adoption of new religions, the lives of the Ma people in the Cat Tien NP area have undergone many changes. The right to own and exploit resources has shifted from the community to the State; the residential space from the traditional longhouse to the nuclear family; the role of the village elder and customary law is gradually giving way to administrative management structures and religious institutions. The youth both inherit and select values, while also creating new cultural expressions.

The thesis has identified and analyzed the fundamental factors impacting the behavioral culture of the Ma people with the NE and SE; it affirms the positive values that still exist, such as the awareness of resource protection, community customary laws, the role of respected individuals, and the spirit of solidarity. At the same time, it points out the challenges from the pressure of livelihoods and economic development, which cause a part of the population to violate regulations on forest and resource protection. Based on this, the study recommends promoting traditional behavioral cultural knowledge in sustainable development, combining heritage conservation and natural resource protection with the development of eco-tourism and the local socio-economy.

**LIST OF THE AUTHOR'S PUBLISHED RESEARCH WORKS
RELATED TO THE THESIS**

1. Nguyen Kieu Lan Thuong (2018), “Environmental Communication Activities for the Ma People in Ta Lai Commune, Tan Phu District, Dong Nai Province”, *Journal of Theoretical Education*, No. 285 + 286, pp. 94-100.
2. Nguyen Kieu Lan Thuong (2019), “Language in Environmental Communication through a Survey of the Ma People in the Ta Lai Area, Cat Tien National Park”, *Journal of Culture and Resources*, No. 1, pp. 98-105.
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