



## The Communal House in the Material and Social Culture of the Mường People in Hòa Thắng Commune, Buôn Ma Thuột City, Đắk Lắk Province

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the role of village communal houses (đình làng) in the material and social cultural life of the Mường people in Hòa Thắng Commune, Buôn Ma Thuột City, Đắk Lắk Province. Through ethnographic field research, community interviews, and an analysis of historical and cultural documents, the study elucidates the formation, development, and impact of village communal houses within the context of migration and cultural exchange. The village communal houses in this region not only exhibit traditional architectural characteristics with the “turtle house” (nhà rùa) model but also serve as centers of religious practice, festival organization, and community cohesion. The culinary practices and traditional attire associated with village festivals reflect the distinct ethnic identity of the Mường people. Specifically, the cỗ lá (a communal meal) represents agricultural beliefs and social etiquette, while the dragon-patterned cạp váy (waistband) symbolizes social hierarchy and aesthetic values within Mường culture. Beyond their spiritual significance, village communal houses also function as coordinators of communal activities, where the village head (chủ đình) conducts rituals, maintains customs, and fosters social bonds among residents. The process of cohabitation with Vietnamese (Kinh) and Ê Đê ethnic groups has led to cultural assimilation, particularly in language and religious practices. However, traditional values continue to be preserved through village communal house rituals and practices. This study contributes to the understanding of the importance of village communal houses in preserving the cultural identity of the Mường people in Hòa Thắng Commune, while also analyzing the adaptation and cultural integration of the community in a new socio-cultural environment.

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### 1. Introduction

The village communal house holds a pivotal position in the cultural landscape of the Mường community in Hòa Thắng Commune, Buôn Ma Thuột City, Đắk Lắk Province. More than a site for ancestral and deity worship, it functions as a nucleus for communal interaction, reinforcing both material and social aspects of cultural identity. This study examines the village communal house from two interrelated perspectives: material culture—encompassing architectural features, festive gastronomy, and traditional attire—and social culture, focusing on communal organization and behavioral norms within the house. Architecturally, the village communal house is distinguished by its “turtle house” design, featuring three-tiered structures and four-sided roofs that encapsulate the Mường cosmology of three realms and four worlds.

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Ritual cuisine, particularly the *cỗ lá*—a ceremonial meal consisting of pork, chicken, sticky rice, and white liquor—embodies agricultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and communal etiquette. Traditional garments worn during village festivals, especially the dragon-embroidered *cap váy* of Mùròng women, symbolize historical perceptions of power and social stratification. In contemporary times, these elements transcend mere aesthetics, serving as markers of heritage and social prestige.

Socially, the village communal house plays a crucial role in maintaining communal cohesion, providing a platform for social governance that parallels formal administrative structures. The head of the communal house assumes leadership in guiding collective activities, often holding greater cultural influence than local village chiefs (*trưởng thôn*). Additionally, cultural exchanges with the Vietnamese (Kinh) and Ê Đê ethnic groups have led to gradual transformations in language, religious customs, and culinary practices. However, the Mùròng community remains steadfast in preserving key traditional elements, particularly through village rituals and ceremonies.

By exploring these dimensions, this study highlights the enduring significance of the village communal house in sustaining the cultural identity of the Mùròng people in Hòa Thắng. It also underscores the dynamic processes of adaptation, integration, and cultural continuity in the face of external influences.

## 2. Research Content

### 2.1 The Mùròng people in hòa thắng commune

Hòa Thắng Commune, one of the eight communes under the administration of Buôn Ma Thuột City in Đắk Lắk Province, is home to a diverse population, with the Mùròng community comprising a significant proportion. The Mùròng people migrated here primarily from Hòa Bình during a historically significant period between 1954 and 1957. This migration was closely linked to members of Battalion Seven—Mùròng soldiers from Hòa Bình who had served in the French army and relocated to the Central Highlands following the signing of the Geneva Accords. Upon settling in Hòa Thắng, they established villages in Thôn 1, Thôn 2, and Thôn 3, naming their settlement “Hòa Bình” as a tribute to their homeland (Hòa Thắng Commune Party Committee, 2019, pp. 12-13) [15].

Currently, the Mùròng population in Hòa Thắng Commune accounts for 13.47% of the total population, comprising 546 households and 2,098 individuals, predominantly residing in Thôn 1, Thôn 2, and Thôn 3. This is one of the largest Mùròng communities in the Central Highlands, representing the first wave of Mùròng migration to the region. The social organization of the Mùròng people follows not only administrative units but also the village communal house, an institution of profound religious and cultural significance. The commune has seven Mùròng communal houses, representing five major sub-groups: Mùròng Bi, Mùròng Lạc Sơn, Mùròng Thạch Yên, Mùròng Cao Phong, and Mùròng Thịnh Lang. Each communal house serves as a center for cultural activities, religious practices, and the preservation of Mùròng traditions (Hòa Thắng Commune People's Committee, 2019) [14].

Despite social transformations, the village communal house continues to play a vital role in fostering community cohesion among the Mùròng people, ensuring the preservation of their

cultural identity in a new environment. While interactions and cultural exchanges with other ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese (Kinh) and Ê Đê have influenced aspects of daily life, the Mùròng community has maintained its traditional values. Architectural features of the communal house, festivals, cuisine, and social organization remain fundamental to their cultural identity, reinforcing their connection to ancestral heritage within the broader cultural landscape of the Central Highlands.

### 2.2 The Communal house in material culture

#### Architecture of the Mùròng communal house

The village communal houses of the Mùròng people in Hòa Thắng Commune strongly reflect traditional cultural identity through their distinctive “turtle house” architecture. These structures feature three tiers and four roofs, symbolizing the Mùròng cosmological concept of three realms and four worlds. Typically, the communal houses are constructed with their backs against hills or mountains, facing open fields, illustrating the Mùròng people's deep connection with nature. Among them, the Mùròng Bi communal house stands as one of the oldest, maintaining its architectural orientation toward the fields despite having its gate facing the main road, thus preserving tradition.

In terms of spatial organization, Mùròng communal houses have large courtyards and a three-chambered worship area dedicated to Saint Tân Viên Sơn, the Thành Hoàng (village guardian deity), and other figures who have contributed to the community. Additionally, there are designated spaces for the worship of the Earth Deity (Thổ Công), a kitchen, and a storage house for ritual purposes. The primary decorative motifs include “paired dragons flanking the supreme ultimate” (*lưỡng long chầu thái cực*) on the worship area and “paired dragons flanking the moon” (*lưỡng long chầu nguyệt*) on the rooftop, symbolizing sacredness and prayers for favorable weather. The four-clawed dragon motif, frequently seen in Mùròng communal houses, serves to differentiate it from the five-clawed dragon, which represents imperial authority (Nguyen, D. K., 2021, pp. 30) [5].

Certain communal houses, such as Thịnh Lang, constructed by Mùròng migrants from Hòa Bình, explicitly reflect their profound connection to their homeland. The architectural style, featuring twelve large wooden pillars and couplets inscribed in classical Chinese, reinforces their enduring loyalty to their ancestral roots. Cultural exchange with Vietnamese traditions is evident in the increasing multifunctionality of these communal houses, which have evolved into centers for both religious and communal activities. However, unlike Vietnamese communal houses, Mùròng communal houses lack intricate decorative carvings, highlighting the Mùròng aesthetic preference for simple geometric forms.

Despite significant cultural interactions with the Vietnamese, the Mùròng people have preserved their distinct identity in communal house architecture. Presently, only the Mùròng Bi communal house features wooden statues of the Thành Hoàng, whereas most Mùròng communal houses uphold the tradition of abstaining from sculpting deities, maintaining the longstanding belief of avoiding divine imagery within these sacred spaces.

#### Culinary traditions in communal house festivals

The cuisine in village communal house festivals of the

Mường people, as well as other ethnic groups in the Northwest region, strongly reflects traditional culture, deeply rooted in their valley-based living environment and longstanding agricultural practices (Chu, X. D., 1999, pp. 289-290) <sup>[1]</sup>. The primary cooking methods include steaming and grilling, such as steamed glutinous rice, steamed fish, steamed snails, and steamed vegetables. In village communal house rituals, modern dishes rarely appear; instead, traditional offerings are prioritized to express reverence for deities.

During these festivals, the Mường people prepare *cỗ lá*, a ceremonial meal consisting of pork, white sticky rice, plain salt, white liquor, and chicken. The *cỗ lá* is served on banana leaves rather than in bowls or plates, symbolizing the purity of the banana plant. The arrangement of the *cỗ lá* must include all parts of the sacrificial animal, from internal organs to meat, representing completeness and abundance while avoiding any symbolic “diminishing” of the offering. When offering chicken, the Mường choose young roosters, as they are considered pure and embody *thuần dương* (pure yang energy).

Besides animal-based offerings, white sticky rice holds a crucial role in the New Rice Festival (*Lễ Mừng Cơm Mới*), representing the harvest’s bounty and gratitude to agricultural deities. The Mường traditionally cultivate more glutinous rice than ordinary rice due to its high nutritional value and suitability for agricultural labor. However, in contemporary times, they grow more ordinary rice for daily consumption while reserving glutinous rice for ritual purposes.

Other dishes in the *cỗ lá* include specialties such as *chả lá bưởi* (grilled meat wrapped in pomelo leaves), *canh lòng* (a traditional soup), steamed vegetables, and grilled fish, all of which highlight the rich biodiversity of mountainous resources. According to Nguyen, C. B. (2013, p. 287) <sup>[4]</sup>, these ritual foods are not exclusive to festival days but are also part of daily life, though they are prepared with greater care to enhance their spiritual significance.

Essential offerings in village rituals include betel leaves, areca nuts, lime, white liquor, and pure water. The betel-chewing tradition among the Mường dates back centuries. Although its prevalence has declined, it remains a fundamental element in ceremonial practices. Betel and areca symbolize connection and fidelity, reflecting the influence of Đông Sơn culture and broader Southeast Asian traditions.

### Traditional attire in communal house festivals

Village communal house festivals serve as a space where the values of Mường traditional attire are “revived.” Festival garments are more vibrant and elaborately crafted, reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities and worldview of the Mường people. Notably, the *cạp váy* (waistband) of Mường women carries profound symbolic significance. Scholar Nguyễn Đức Từ Chi regarded it as one of the most important elements in traditional Mường decorative arts (Nguyen, T. C., 2003, pp. 109–110) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Women’s festival attire consists of a headscarf (*cạp mũ*), bib (*cạp yếm*), short blouse, long robe (*cạp áo chung*), waistband (*klôóc wải*), skirt (*cạp wải*), *cạp tênh* (a ceremonial shawl), and various jewelry such as *xà tích* (chain pendants), silver necklaces, and tiger tooth pendants (Tran, T., 1996, pp. 90) <sup>[11]</sup>. In contrast, men’s attire, influenced by Vietnamese clothing, includes a short four-paneled blouse, loose trousers (*quần lá tọa*), and a headscarf. Ritual practitioners wear a

black or dark blue long tunic, fastened at the right side, resembling the *áo dài* the worn by Vietnamese men.

Despite intense cultural exchanges, women’s festival attire has largely retained its traditional elements, with elaborate detailing preserved. The dragon-patterned *cạp váy* remains a favored design, though historically reserved for daughters of noble Lang families. However, within Mường belief systems, garments featuring dragon motifs are not used for the deceased, as it is believed that wearing them in the afterlife would result in punishment by the lang spirits when crossing into Mường Ma (the land of the dead).

Festival attire in village communal house ceremonies represents the contrast between the sacred and the secular, as well as the balance between tradition and modernity. These festivals serve as cultural reminders, fostering a sense of pride in Mường heritage. Although everyday clothing has undergone transformations due to interactions with the Vietnamese, particularly in wedding ceremonies, traditional dress remains preserved within village communal house rituals. In recent years, young Mường people in Hòa Thắng Commune have increasingly expressed interest in traditional attire, recognizing it as a powerful symbol of their ethnic identity.

### 2.3 The communal house in social culture

#### Social organization based on the communal house

According to K. Marx, society does not exist as a collection of isolated individuals but as an aggregate of social relationships (Nguyen, M. H., 1993, pp. 21) <sup>[6]</sup>. Upon settling in new regions, the Mường people rapidly established village communal houses as symbols of their community, serving both as a means of collective cohesion and as a way to maintain their connection to their homeland.

In Hòa Thắng Commune, the population is organized into 11 hamlets, each with a cultural house. However, the Mường people structure their social organization not only based on administrative units but also around village communal houses. The main Mường community groups in the area—Mường Thịnh Lang, Mường Bì, Mường Lạc Sơn, Mường Cao Phong, and Mường Thạch Yên—operate under the governance of these communal houses. At present, there are seven communal houses, each with unique characteristics but following a similar structural model.

Historically, village communal houses also functioned as administrative centers. According to elders, these houses upheld strict social order, serving as venues for resolving disputes and administering punishments for offenses such as theft or out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which could result in corporal punishment or the communal slaughtering of a buffalo as a form of restitution. While village communal houses no longer hold administrative authority today, they continue to serve as centers for ritual practices, communal activities, and social cohesion.

Each communal house has a *chủ đình* who represents the community in ritual ceremonies and oversees communal activities. Unlike hamlet leaders, who are government-appointed and salaried, the *chủ đình* does not receive financial compensation but is highly respected within the community. Local authorities recognize the *chủ đình* as an autonomous institution that assists in disseminating state policies. Although *thầy mo* (shamans) conduct rituals in certain Mường groups, the *chủ đình* remains the primary figure responsible for organizing communal affairs and

ensuring social harmony.

When compared to other ethnic organizational structures, the Ê Đê have a village council (Hội đồng làng) composed of elder women, while traditional Vietnamese villages had the Council of Notables (Hội đồng Kỳ mục) (Tran, N. T., 2022, pp. 101–102)<sup>[12]</sup>. Although the Mường no longer maintain the nhà lang (lord's house) system, they continue to uphold the authority of the chủ đình, who is regarded as a figure of prestige, believed to be under divine protection, and instrumental in preserving community cohesion in their new settlement areas.

### Social interaction culture in the communal house practices

The migration process from Hòa Bình to Đắk Lắk led to structural and cultural transformations within the Mường community, placing them in a multi-ethnic environment with the Ê Đê, the Vietnamese (Kinh), and other ethnic groups (Dang, T. K. O. & Nguyen, Q. T., 2020, pp. 28)<sup>[9]</sup>. The Central Highlands has traditionally been home to ethnic groups belonging to the Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian linguistic families, with the Ê Đê and M'Nông serving as the dominant cultural entities in Đắk Lắk (Dak Lak Electronic Information Portal, 2015)<sup>[3]</sup>. Despite cohabitation among different ethnic communities, cultural integration has been organic, without significant conflicts or cultural disruptions (Condominas, 1998)<sup>[2]</sup>.

In Hòa Thắng Commune, the Mường have established a well-organized community, primarily residing in Hamlets 1, 2, and 3, while maintaining close interactions with the Ê Đê and Vietnamese. Local authorities recognize the Mường's role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, particularly through communal house practices (Hoa Thang Commune People's Committee, 2024)<sup>[16]</sup>.

The coexistence of the Mường with the Vietnamese and Ê Đê has led to cultural adaptation, particularly in language and religious practices. Younger generations increasingly use Vietnamese in communal house festivals, while ritual ceremonies are still conducted in Mường language. The introduction of deity statues (Thành Hoàng) into Mường communal houses reflects the influence of Vietnamese sculptural traditions, despite the absence of idol worship in traditional Mường spirituality (Phan, C. T., 1997, pp. 5)<sup>[10]</sup>.

In terms of cuisine, the Mường have integrated several Vietnamese dishes into their daily diet; however, sacrificial offerings in communal house rituals remain unchanged. Essential ritual foods, such as boiled chicken, sticky rice, and rice wine, continue to be used, without substitution by other dishes. At the family level, ancestral offerings have become more flexible, adjusted to individual needs and modern lifestyles.

Regarding traditional attire, Mường women traditionally wear white headscarves, symbolizing purity and elegance. However, some Mường subgroups, such as Mường Thịnh Lang, avoid wearing white scarves in communal house ceremonies, as they associate white with mourning—a cultural influence from Vietnamese traditions (Tran, N. T., 1996, pp. 297)<sup>[13]</sup>.

Although the Mường have absorbed elements of external cultures, they continue to preserve their distinct identity, maintaining a strong belief in indigenous deities. These cultural changes are voluntary and harmonious, yet do not disrupt the fundamental patterns of Mường culture (Nguyen,

V. H., 2021, pp. 45)<sup>[8]</sup>. This resilience is evident in communal house festivals, where rituals have been adapted to contemporary life while retaining their spiritual significance and ancestral connections.

### 3. Conclusion

The architecture of communal houses, culinary practices, and traditional attire in communal house festivals strongly reflect the Mường people's cultural identity and their collective consciousness toward ancestral heritage. Various traditional elements are still preserved within the Mường community, including the construction of communal houses, regulations on ritual feasts (cỗ lá), and women's ceremonial attire. The communal house serves as an essential space for educating younger generations about ethnic identity and cultural traditions through periodic rituals and gatherings. It can be asserted that the communal house represents the most concentrated symbol of identity for each Mường subgroup in Hòa Thắng Commune, reinforcing their connection to other ethnic communities.

Existing alongside the administrative system of local government, the Mường primarily organize their community through communal house activities. In this system, the communal house leader plays a central role in organizing and overseeing community affairs. In contrast, the administrative structure of hamlet governance, led by Vietnamese village heads, has minimal influence on Mường social organization. Instead, the communal house serves as a unifying institution, linking community members through shared origins and collective memory. This process represents a form of "social restructuring", allowing the Mường to maintain their communal life in a new settlement area. Although multiple Mường subgroups reside in Hòa Thắng Commune, they primarily consolidate into five major groups: Mường Thịnh Lang, Mường Bi, Mường Lạc Sơn, Mường Cao Phong, and Mường Thạch Yên. With seven distinct communal houses, these Mường groups uphold strong social cohesion, continuously fostering their cultural values while selectively adopting external cultural elements without altering their core cultural consciousness.

Some cultural elements have been assimilated and exchanged through cohabitation with other ethnic groups in Hòa Thắng, such as the Vietnamese and Ê Đê. The Mường have selectively integrated various aspects of Vietnamese culture (language, cuisine, sculpture, clothing) in a proactive and harmonious manner, under normal conditions without coercion or conflict. A small portion of the Mường population has also adopted religious beliefs from Buddhism and Christianity. However, due to their concentrated settlement patterns and strong attachment to their homeland (Hòa Bình), the Mường community tends to be socially insular, preserving their cultural identity while undergoing gradual and surface-level cultural changes. The process of cultural adaptation and exchange occurs organically and objectively, aligning with modernization and practicality without disrupting core cultural values.

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