

Identifying the Traditional Color Scheme in Decorative Patterns Used by the Bahnar Ethnic Group in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

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Abstract—The Bahnar is one of 11 indigenous groups living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It is one among the four most popular groups in this area, including the Mnong who speak the same language of Mon Khmer family, while both groups of the Jrai and the Rhade belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language family. These groups once captured fertile plateaus, left their cultural and artistic heritage which affected the remaining small groups. Despite the difference in ethnic origins, these groups seem to share similar beliefs, customs and related folk arts after a very long time living beside each other. However, through an in-depth study, this paper points out the fact that the decorative patterns used by the Bahnar are different from the other ethnic groups, especially in color. Based on historical materials from the local museums and some studies in 1980s when all of the ethnic groups in this area had still lived in self-sufficient condition, this paper characterizes the traditional color scheme used by the Bahnar and identifies the difference in decorative motifs of this group compared to the others by pointing out they do not use green in their usual decorative patterns. Moreover, combined with some field surveys recently, through comparative analysis, it also discovers stylistic variations of these patterns in the process of cultural exchange with the other ethnic groups, both in and out of the region, in modern living conditions. This study helps to preserve and promote the traditional values and cultural identity of the Bahnar people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, avoiding the fusion of styles among groups during the cultural exchange.

Keywords—Bahnar ethnic group, decorative patterns, the central highland of Vietnam, traditional color scheme

I. INTRODUCTION

ANOTHER name of the Central Highlands of Vietnam is Tay Nguyen which is a part of the Truong Son mountain range. There were many ethnic groups who have particular culture with different languages and origins, but they have lived peacefully together until now with similar customs. The Bahnar is one of 11 indigenous groups who have mainly lived in Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces, but they have also scattered in the western districts of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen [1]. They are also the largest ethnic group of Mon-Khmer ethnic groups living in Central Highlands of Vietnam [2]. Based on historical documents, the Bahnar people have been living in the Central Coast and Central Highlands of Vietnam for about 2-3 thousand years (Bronze Age, Stone Age) and considered the earliest residents in the area of Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces nowadays [3]. They have created a unique local culture and social identity.

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According to the patriarchs of some villages, the name “Bahnar”, which they called themselves in ancient Bahnar language, means “(inhabitants) in flat lands by the rivers or streams” [4]. The Bahnar also has several local subgroups who were usually named after the living location or natural features of the land such as the Bahnar To Lo, Bahnar Krem, Bahnar Go Lar, Bahnar Jo Long, Bahnar Ro Ngao and so on [5]. However, in generally, they have not many differences from each other’s in customs and culture.

The Bahnar people had a high sensitiveness of arts, especially at music and visual arts. People could see the interest in decorating through the knitted, etched or painted patterns on all of their architecture and even daily utensils such as knives, axes, smoking pipes, baskets, especially the kind of baskets for storing clothes [5]. Similar to many other folk arts, decorative motifs of the Bahnar also reflected their cultural and social origins. Studying the Bahnar decorative patterns could clarify the crystalline of Bahnar culture applied on visual arts; conversely, understanding the Bahnar culture could help explain the motifs in decoration of the Bahnar people. On this point of view, this paper simultaneously considered both aesthetic aspects of the Bahnar decorative patterns and their meanings through a cultural perspective.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is based on the method of fieldwork accompanied with description, comparison and analysis methods of the Bahnar decorative patterns. Most of the pictures were taken recently by the author in Gia Lai province, mainly in Kong Chro district, where most Bahnar people have been living. Some other photos taken by other researchers in the series of studies that were ordered by local authorities in 1990s could be used as evidences for comparing to the recent Bahnar patterns that the author has collected. Besides studying decorative patterns of the Bahnar, this paper is also based on the previous study documents on decorative patterns of the Jrai and the M’ngong who has been interspersing in living with the Bahnar people, for comparison and finding the correlation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The earliest documents about the culture in the Central Highlands of Vietnam were written by Western Christians from the mid-nineteenth century but most of them were only personal notes for their missionary work. For examples, in 1833, Combes made the first comprehensive ethnographic [3]

study on the Ba Na people, followed by studies of other missionaries such as Guerlach, Kemlin, Alberty, and Dourisboure and many others [6]. Among them, Dournes [7] was a priest who served for long time in the land of Jrai ethnic group and Bahnar ethnic group for more than twenty years, had conducted many high-value research works in the North Central Highlands such as general studies on the minority groups of people here and many studies particularly on the Jrai and the Bahnar. Some of them have been recently published such as “Populations montagnardes du Sud-Indochinois” (1950) [7] “Forêt, femme, folie: une traversée de l’imaginaire jörai” (1978) [8], “Pötao: Une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois Jörai” (1977) [9], “Le Pays Jörai” (photos taken by J. Dournes from 1950-1960, published in 2015) [10], and so on. Unlike the early missionaries’ notes, J. Dournes observed the Jrai and the Bahnar from the perspective of an ethnographer rather than a priest, so his detailed descriptions during the years of fieldwork and participation in the lives of local people has become a valuable resource for researchers today, as these ancient customs have so far mostly faded away. In addition, there were some French politicians and social scientists studied on both natural resources and people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam for the main purpose of cultural exploration to make it easier for colonial exploitation. For examples, Guilleminet who was a governor in Kon Tum in nearly two decades since 1932, studied customary law of ethnic groups in this province and completed the work of “Coutumier de la tribu Bahnar des, Sedang et des Jarai de la province de Kontum (1952) [11]. Besides them, some Western artists, such as Henri Mege, Andre Marie and Henri Maitre, recorded their deepest impression of Central Highlands [12] in nineteenth century by illustrations, sketches and artworks that were valuable in helping Vietnamese researchers nowadays to feel easier in visualizing the life and many customs of the Central Highlands’ ethnic groups in the old days.

During the time before 1975, for political reasons, the Vietnamese researchers were not allowed to travel freely in this area, therefore, it was rarely to see Vietnamese studies on this area except for the brothers of Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi with the book “M i Kontum” (The minority people in Kontum) about the Bahnar (1937) under the support of Guilleminet [12].

After a decade since Vietnam War, the new government had sufficient economic and political conditions to carry on the preservation and promotion of the traditional culture of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Since 1986, a long project had been organized and has lasted for about ten years by the local government agency with a high support to prestigious scientists to do a series of studies on ethnic groups of people here, especially the Jrai and the Bahnar that were the most populated groups in this area. Some studies included science reports or photo books by Nguyen Van Ku [13] Luu Hung [14] [15], Ngo Van Doanh [16], Tran Phong [17] [18], Tu Chi [19] were remarkable in this time.

While the illustration and historical images recorded by Tu Chi in the science report “Hoa v n các dân t c Giarai, Bana” (Decorative Patterns of the Jrai and the Bahnar) (1986) [19]

were used to collate directly with images taken recently by the author of this article, the remaining studies that mainly were ethnographic descriptions and notes might contribute to the interpretation of the motifs, though they were not cited in the article. In spite of the decorative patterns of Bahnar people was investigated in many previous studies, the uniqueness of the traditional color scheme using by Bahnar people was not mentioned. Although there was a great deal of literature on the Bahnar ethnic, even exact studies of Bahnar decorative patterns there are no studies that indicated the difference in style and especially the color of the Bahnar’s patterns compared to other ethnic groups. So the unique of tradition color schemes in decorative patterns of Bahnar ethnic group will be exploited clearly in this paper.

IV. THE OVERVIEW OF THE BAHNAR CULTURE RELATED TO THE TYPES OF DECORATIVE PATTERNS

In traditional conditions of the Central Highlands, ethnic minorities were concentrated in each identified habitat, each of which consists of tribal villages. Usually, families in each village are relatives that were similar to a clan (a group of close-knit and interrelated families). Living space of most ethnic groups here consisted of three important places: The dwelling-place, the upland fields, and the cemetery. Popular custom of them was the extended family of about 10 to 20 members living in a large house with a common space and other smaller spaces for each nuclear family [14]. The Bahnar people is not the same with other ethnic groups, each nuclear family lives in a private house, which located around a vacant lot, where there was a community house of the village that local people calls “Rong”. Bahnar people’s houses are decorated by many traditional decorative patterns. Bamboo knitting is a very skillful art of Bahnar people than any other ethnic groups, they apply extensively the bamboo knitting technique in the walls of architectures, especially on the roof and walls, and in many other handicraft products.

There were two main groups of titles in decorative patterns created by the Bahnar: Firstly, there were a lot of decorative patterns that reflected natural shapes. Because they took the main food source from swiddens (areas of land cleared for cultivation by slashing and burning a part of forests), their living must have been harmonious with and tied to nature, so it was easy to find out the reason why most of their decoration originated from natural inspiration. Because knitting techniques are first popular on the most basic needs, such as accommodation (architectures) and clothing (brocades), these motifs were often geometrically shaped, however, it was still easy to recognize that those patterns were stylized from the shapes of nature such as flowers, animals, flowing water, mountains, and so on. Secondly, there were many decorative patterns derived from folk stories, myths and beliefs. As many other groups of Montagnards in Central Highlands of Vietnam in traditional condition, the Bahnar people also thought that their living was dominated by many Gods [15]. The relationship between the human and the super-nature was the basis of religious belief. In other words, they believed that there was a supernatural world that included the world of the

divine and the world of the dead that existed in parallel with the human world [4]. The traditional belief of the Bahnar was animism which was characterized by susceptibility to nature and a belief that everything in the nature world has spirits, in which existed both good and bad spirits [3]. In fact, the supernatural world with a system of spirits built in the Bahnar's mind was also to dominate (support or destroy) the cultivation, so it was a part of cultivated culture. Many rituals, often involving the sacrifice and bloodletting of animals, were practiced regularly to appease the spirits.

In general, we could recognize that the characteristics of this culture was the manner in which they deal with nature, because the cultivation was the only way to survive, so it also the main factor which inspired them in creating arts. Therefore, the Bahnar people have created many mystery stories and legends which became reference materials for many art fields in their lives, especially the visual arts. Typical patterns in this group of titles included many shapes inspired by the sun, the moon, and banyan tree, which was thought to be the birthplace of everything, including the humans. In the next part with description and analysis, we will indicate the location, the characteristics of decoration in living space of the Bahnar.

V. THE BAHNAR DECORATIVE PATTERNS

A. Determine the Shapes, the Background, and Colors in the Bahnar Decorative Patterns

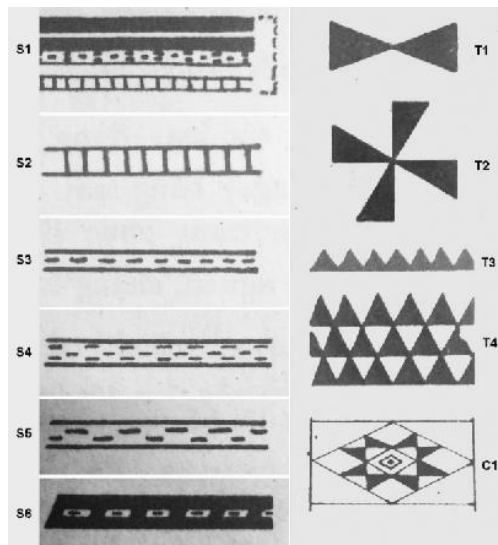


Fig. 1 Some of the most popular decorative patterns of the Bahnar people [10]: S1: AR (no meaning); S2: leech's venter; S3: rattan's fruit; S4: worm's eyes; S5: Cuckoo's neck; S6: rattan's thorns; T1/T2: A part/the whole of the leaf from a tree named "Hlu"; T3: Thorns of the tree named "S r"; T4: bee hive; C1: Shape of a star or the sun

According to the field report of Tu Chi in 1986, this author synthesized 26 decorative patterns of the Bahnar people and [19] divided them into six groups of shapes, including "straight lines", "zigzag", "curve", "triangle", "polygon", and

"complicated shapes". In the list of these 26 patterns, there were at least 17 patterns inspired by nature, including native plants, native animals, and native insects. For example, a vegetable named "Don" which was a species of plant in the fern family with leaves bent at the top, some animals such as cuckoo crows, some bugs or worms, and bee hive. Besides that, except for a human-shaped motif, the remaining patterns were noted but the meaning of their names was still unclear.

A weakness of the valuable report of Tu Chi was that the drawings were printed in black without any notes about colors, and the printing quality was very low due to the limitation of technical ability in Vietnam at that time. There were also a few colored drawings for illustration but they might have been inaccurate with reality because they looked very different from the photos in this book. Based on the list of 26 black-printed patterns in the book of Tu Chi, we made a review of the decorative patterns in the living space of the Bahnar in Kong Chro recently (as a case study) in order to confirm the way that the Bahnar used colors in their decorative patterns.



Fig. 2 A dwelling-house in Kong Chro district, Gia Lai province, Vietnam; Photo: Nguyen Viet Tan (2018)



Fig. 3 A tomb-house in Kong Chro district, Gia Lai province, Vietnam; Photo: Nguyen Viet Tan (2018)

Similar to the other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, the Bahnar had three main architectural types, including dwelling-houses, a community house (Roong), and tomb-houses. The dwelling-houses of other ethnic groups were rarely decorated with motifs except for some wooden sculptures on the stairs and on the main beam (as in the case of the double beams separated the long house of the Rahde into 2 parts: Ôk and Gah). Particularly for the Bahnar, they decorated all of those architectures with decorative patterns, usually on knitted bamboo. The colors of those decorative patterns on architectures included only red on a white background or a light grey background of a non-dyed bamboo material (Figs.

2-4).



Fig. 4 A community house in Kong Chro district, Gia Lai province, Vietnam; Photo: Nguyen Viet Tan (2018)

As we could see in the three examples of architectural decoration in Figs. 2-4, the star/sun was the main motif shown in the center, surrounded by triangular stripes which were inspired by the shape of some types of leaves that Tu Chi sorted in the fourth group. Triangular and straight line patterns were most commonly used in all three types of architecture. However, it could be clearly seen that the level of decorative details increased from dwelling-houses to community houses and much more in the tomb-houses. In addition to the walls, the community houses were also decorated on top of the roof, stairs, front yard, and the frames of the doors. Decoration in the tomb-houses included the surrounding statues and other kinds of sculpture, there are mainly vegetable motifs, animal horns and geometric motifs. They were also added by colorful drawings after carving (Fig. 5).

As mentioned in the overview, the geometry shapes in the Bahnar's decorative patterns might have been the consequence of knitting techniques. But later, it might have led them to choose geometry shapes as favorite options even in sculpture or painting although they are no longer dependent on knitting techniques (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5 (a) The shape of the vegetable *Don* (b) Buffalo horns, Ya Ma Commune, Kong Chro district, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam; Photo: Nguyen Viet Tan (2018)



(a)



(b)

Fig. 6 (a) A tomb-house, Dak Po district; (b) a pedestal ritual, Kong Chro district, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam. Photo: Nguyen Thi Kim Van

Whether being applied in bamboo knitting, drawing or sculpting, the popular motifs identified by Tu Chi helped us a lot in distinguish between the meaningful shapes and the background in each decoration of the Bahnar. From that point of view, based on the combination of this previous study [19] and our field works recently, we pointed out the rule of using colors in decorative patterns by the Bahnar people.

B. The Difference in Color Schemes between the Bahnar and Other Groups of People (Case Study: The Jrai and the M'ngong)



Fig. 7 The Bahnar's decorative patterns in brocade, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam; Photo: Thanh Nga & Huyen Ly

Similar to the familiar decoration of the architecture analyzed above, we found that this rule also took place in the Bahnar's brocade. The difference was due to the texture of the yarns on the brocade allowed, the dotted lines on both sides of the main texture was much more detailed than the decoration of the architecture (Fig. 7). It is significant to notice that brocade was woven by women, more patient and meticulous than men. On the other hand, men usually took responsibility for harder job - bamboo knitting.

Almost all ethnic groups of Vietnam begin their process of creating brocade patterns by completing a sheet of fabric from white cotton. In order to make patterns, they cover intended position of the decorative patterns by beeswax, and then dye indigo several times before drying them. Finally, they boil the brocade in boiling water. High temperature melts beeswax to reveal the pattern on the brocade surface with the blue indigo background. Nonetheless, the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, including the Bahnar, created patterns in a different way. They envisioned the result that must be achieved but without drawing any sketches. They dyed the cotton yarns/bamboo splits before weaving/knitting [20]. During the process of making products, the decorative patterns gradually appeared, so the color of each part in the decorative patterns can be flexibly selected by the makers. They usually choose the red for the meaningful shapes, and let the parts of materials (cotton or bamboo) not dyed as background or negative spaces. This was also similar for the case of rattan baskets, in which the red color was ignored, they chose black for the meaningful spaces and let the color of the normal rattan

become background (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 A rattan basket for keeping clothes of the Bahnar, Gia Lai province, Vietnam [4]

Comparing the color schemes of the Bahnar, Jrai and M'ngong people through some samples of brocade (Figs. 7, 9, 10), it was easy to see that the number of colors used was increasing, however, the richness of shape and size was decreasing.



Fig. 9 The color of Jrai ethnic group, Gia Lai province (North Central Highlands of Vietnam); Photo: Thanh Nga & Huyen Ly

It could be seen that the Jrai people might set up an analogous color scheme (yellow and red) besides a monochromatic color scheme (white and red/green/blue), they could also set up a complementary color scheme (green and red; blue and orange) in the same sheet of brocade. Instead of using only 3 colors of black, white, red as in the Bahnar's brocade, when added three colors of green, blue and yellow, the Jrai had more means to enrich their brocade, but not so much to make the viewers confused. They still maintained a large difference between the main part and minor stripes, and also selected meaningful and exotic patterns for the main texture (e.g. pistil, bird's eye, and mountain ranges...), while in the stripes on either sides of the main pattern there were just straight lines, dots, dashes, or geometric repetitions.

Observing the example for using colors in brocade of the M'ngong (Fig. 10), we could see in addition to the three colors of black, red, white that were greatly reduced in compared to brocade of the Bahnar and the Jrai, there were the presence of green and orange with different shades of color (light, dark),

pink, and more colors in other examples. M'ong people could be said to have a variety of colors in their brocade to set up a lot of colorful combinations, so they might have selected the same shape and size in decorative patterns to avoid messing up the work. In decorative patterns of M'ong's handicrafts, the main part and the side stripes were distinguished by main colors using in each part (pink and green), but their shape, size and details were set up similarly.



Fig. 10 The color of M'ong ethnic group, Dak Nong province (South Central Highlands of Vietnam); Photo: Nguyen Thi Kim Van

The preference for red and choosing it for the main color in decorative patterns could be seen in a series of other products in the Bahnar's living space until nowadays. One explanation for this was confirmed by some Bahnar people when we interviewed them at field trips, that they used to have products made at festivals, such as masks (Fig. 11), with red from the blood of the sacrificed animals and the black of charcoal. Later, although a lot of modern materials are imported from the outside, such as oil paints, they still chose the red and black to paint on the mask and many other things in the festivals.



Fig. 11 Bahnar masks, K'Bang district, Gia Lai Province, Vietnam; Photo: Nguyen Thi Kim Van

During the cultural exchanges and acculturation until now, the Bahnar people added a few colors to their decorative patterns but not many and at an extremely low rate. For example, the brocade we used here actually had some yellow lines but was almost impossible to spot from a distance. In the other words, the Bahnar, which was considered to be the most

conservative of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, has retained their identity quite well to this day, with a stable color scheme in their decorative patterns.

VI. CONCLUSION

The colors in decoration of the Bahnar people were more selective than that of other ethnic groups living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, with three basic colors: black, white and red, in which red was used to make meaningful shapes (positive shapes) that we usually call decorative patterns, the other two colors belonged to monochromatic color scheme that alternately exchanged their roles in being the background and the negative space.

Sometimes people could see that the Bahnar also used indigo blue on brocade, but it only replaced black color as the background, never been used for meaningful shapes. In some special cases of funeral architectures and clothing baskets, the red color was even ignored, the Bahnar could still use only black and white to create attractive decorative patterns, in which the color black was usually used for meaningful shapes, and the white would become background.

In general, the simplicity in using colors was a fundamental difference in identifying Bahnar patterns among the colorful patterns of other ethnic groups that included some more colors such as yellow, green, and blue. The color schemes of the Bahnar people were warmer because they rejected the cold of green and blue, or in other words, there was no contrast between hot and cold colors in traditional Bahnar decoration. Therefore, the contrast in their decoration came only from the contrast of shape and the size of parts, or the contrast between the meaningful shapes (red) and the background (colorless).

Although rejecting the diversity of colors, the Bahnar people focused on the rather complex composition of the patterns. Normally, in an overall layout, people could see that the main pattern was highlighted in red in the largest size. There were decorative strips at the two sides of the main pattern with the size usually so small that it needed to see very close to find out their meaning.

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