



Livelihood Sovereignty and Village Wellbeing H'rê People and the Spiritual Ecosystem

An Approach to Biological Human Ecology Theory

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Tran thi Lanh



Flower in Belem National Park, Amazon River.
Photo by Tran thi Lanh, World Social Forum 2009

*‘Well-being is your own gift to yourself, from your own values and behaviour.
If you consciously nurture this gift, at any moment in your life,
it will return to you the happiness that is yours. Thereafter,
your sovereignty of freedom and creativeness will not desert you’!*

Not only do ‘many nation-state system co-exist with elements of earlier tribal and imperial polities’ (Ryan, Comparative Political System ANTH 520, 2013).

But also ‘The H’rê (tribe) people in Violak village, with their own customary laws and system of voluntarism, de facto functions to maintain their society culture, politics and Ecological territorial sovereignty independently, as a nation-state without a bureaucracy’ (Tran thi Lanh 2015).



Figure 1: Where is our Ancestral Land at World Social Forum, Belem, Amazon, 2009. Photo by Tran Thi Lanh

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MOTIVATION

On the occasion of the International Conference on Gross National Happiness (GNH) held in Thimphu, Bhutan from 3rd to 6th November 2015, the Livelihood Sovereignty Network (LISO) publishes the book “Livelihood Identity and Village Wellbeing: A study of the H’re ethnic minority people in Violak village”. This publication is an expression of deep reverence and respect to His Majesty The Fourth King of the Kingdom of Bhutan. His Majesty, who turns 60 years on 11 November 2015, had promulgated happiness of the citizens as central for any development activity to be meaningfully assessed.

GNH of the Kingdom of Bhutan, initiated in 1972 by His Majesty, is now being reflected and looked upon as an alternative goal to increase in Gross National Product (GNP) which has been the cherished goal of most nations for the last decades of the 20th century. In the time since 1972, Bhutan has turned ‘impossibility’ into ‘possibility’ and converted ‘suspicion’ into ‘admiration’.

In 2008, Kingdom of Bhutan ‘transformed itself’ from a Monarchy to a Constitutional Democracy. At the same time, when His Majesty turned 53 a historic turning point marked the annals of Bhutan’s monarchy handing over the reins to his son, the current King.

Until 2015, actual life, images and ideological values of the Kingdom of Bhutan, or, overall, its GNH, has been mindfully studying if GNP should be the ultimate goal of ‘development’ for 43 years. The Kingdom’s value system, social norms, and philosophy are all aligned to the supremacy of the traditional definition of the human and nature relationship and interconnectedness.

It is through this imperative that His Majesty the Fourth King’s re-definition of development has given birth to an authentic culture and wonderful civilization, a philosophy, a value system and norms, which are firmly stable in competitive interaction with the temporary, shiny and natural resource-wasting GNP settings. On the other hand, His Majesty the Fourth King had been living in confidence – a happy life in harmony with nature in the Great Himalayas.

We wish His Majesty the Fourth King good health and long life for boldly questioning the relevance of GNP in the face of many catastrophe as climate change that the world is witnessing and continue to guide the world for it to be a safer place to live in for generations to come.

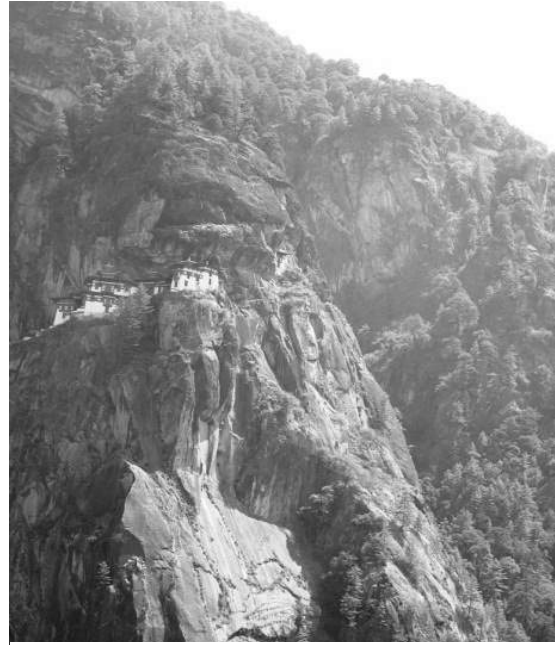


Figure 1. TaKtshang, Paro. Photo by Tran thi Lanh, 2012

FOREWORD

It is indeed a big challenge for the author who is not an indigenous H're person of Violak village -who is very different from them in her perceptions of values, in her practice of civilized norms towards the surrounding natural landscape, and in consciousness and civil responsibility toward the village and its individuals and above all the context of the primary spiritual ecological space of Violak village - to write a true book about the H're people. It also is not simple or easy for those who would like to enter into the world of the H're in Violak village while still embedded in prejudice against this ethnic minority group.

In journeying to deeply and thoroughly understand, and write the book about a system of respectful and grateful behaviors towards Heaven–Earth, day and night, through Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Harvest, under Moon, Sun, stars, and the Da Tree and Inta bird that have been flourishing in Violak village with its very unique way of governing the spiritual and material life and its responsible livelihood sovereignty toward the natural resources and future generations, mistakes will have inevitably been made, despite attempts to give an emic perspectives as much as possible.

This book focuses on describing the process of exercising livelihood sovereignty and identity on the basis of numerous factors and indicators in terms of happiness and wellbeing of the H're people in Violak village that have constituted their village customary law, which is practiced in a self-governance manner by the villagers in order to nurture the ethnic identity of the H're in Violak village. The sharing of this study is dedicated to our esteemed readers who share eternal bonding with Nature so as to leave behind enough share of resources for our future generations.

INTRODUCTION

LIVELIHOOD SOVEREIGNTY

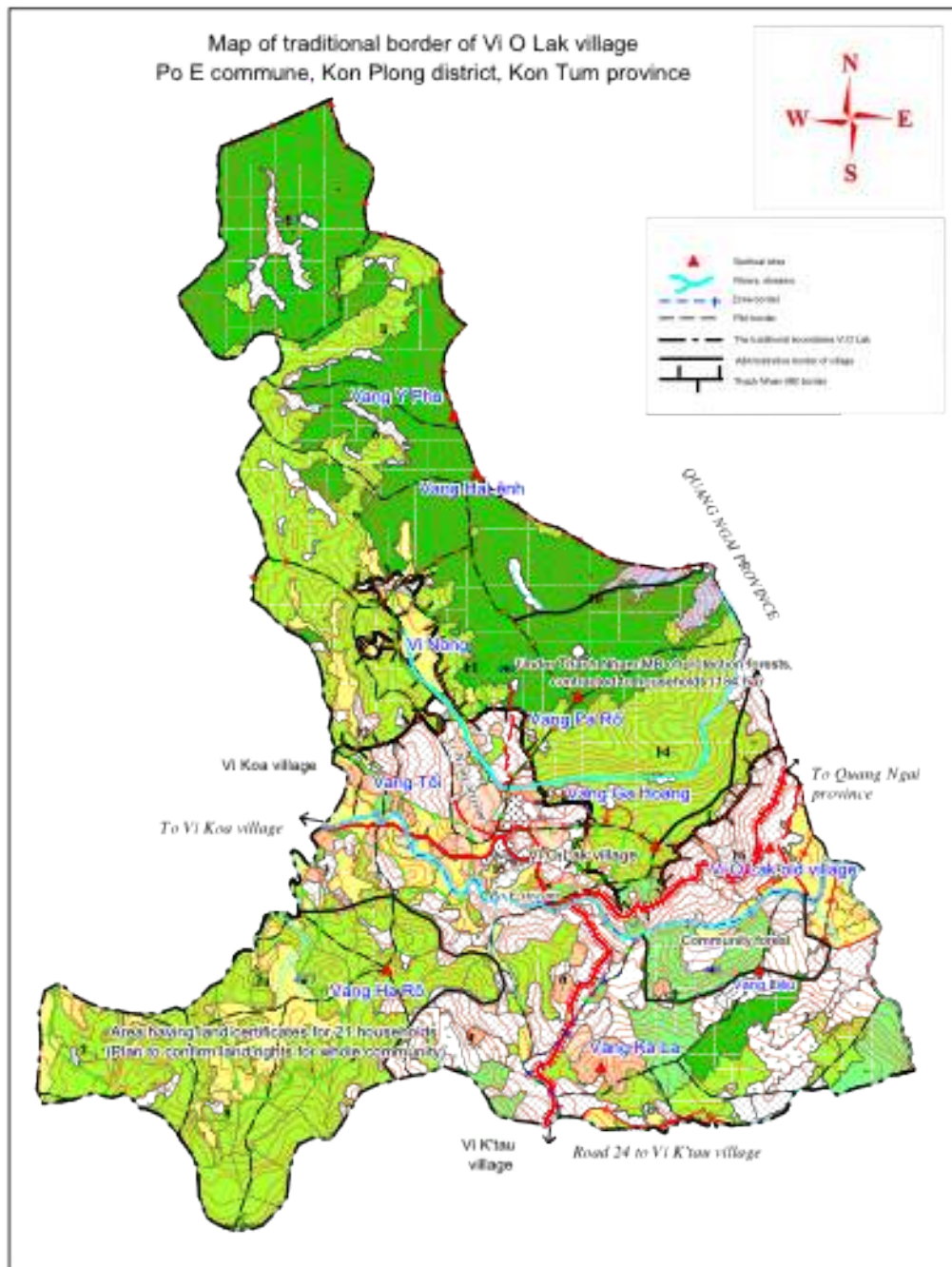
In the Mekong region of Southeast Asia, staff of the Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI), have for over 20 years been living and working with indigenous ethnic minority communities, learning the meaning of wellbeing and happiness as understood by those communities, as practiced according to their own wisdom, and as expressed through their own customary laws. In the process SPERI has come to understand the circumstances and the consequences of their losing their natural spaces of forest, land, rivers and mountains in which they have for hundreds of years had the freedom of creating and enjoying their own wellbeing and happiness generation after generation. Alongside indigenous traditional healers, spirit leaders and ordinary people, SPERI has promoted intensive networking at all levels, individually, communally and regionally, promoting and supporting bottom-up participatory learning and action for the sharing and enriching in order to empower grassroots democratization and self-determination. In the process SPERI has learnt about the aspirations of indigenous minority people for ‘Livelihood Sovereignty’.

Taking inspiration from the indigenous ethnic minority people themselves, SPERI has defined ‘Livelihood Sovereignty’ in terms of five inter-related livelihood rights that indigenous ethnic minority people see as necessary if they are having control over their own futures: 1) The right to land, forest and water, clean air and natural landscape (*basic*); 2) The right to maintain one’s own religion (*unique*); 3) The right to live according to one’s own way of life and values of happiness and wellbeing within one’s own natural environment (*practice*); 4) The right to operate according to one’s own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on one’s own land; (*holistic*); and 5) The right to co-manage or co-govern natural resources with neighboring communities and local authorities (*strategic*). (SPERI, 2009).

‘Livelihood Sovereignty’ is defined by SPERI as ‘a holistic ethical alternative solution’ that needs to be daily exercised, voluntarily and legally, at individual, communal, national and international levels in order to consolidate the sharing of the responsibility towards all living things, for today as well as for the generations of tomorrow. With the achievement of ‘Livelihood Sovereignty’, all organisms, human and non-human, will be living in harmony with each other, enjoying happiness and wellbeing, in interdependent self-determination’ (SPERI, 2009).

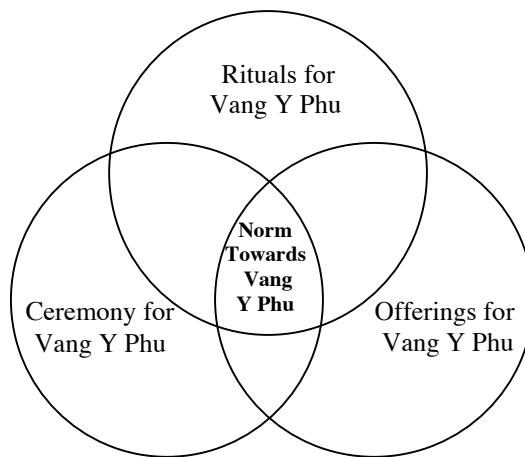
Similar to the Bhutanese concepts of Well-Being and Happiness, the Mekong indigenous minority people's concept of 'Livelihood Sovereignty' entails a deep spiritual commitment to nature and cultural identity. In their worshiping of nature, and in their traditional forms of leadership, they are confident in governing their own people and preserving their natural surroundings from generation to generation by their own customary laws, balancing their material and spiritual needs without abusing either society or nature.

In the H'rê village of Violak, SPERI has found a community which exhibits all the characteristics of 'Livelihood Sovereignty'. Accordingly, the following five parts of the publication have been arranged to illustrate how each of the five rights of 'Livelihood Sovereignty' are expressed in action. Part 1, The Spiritual Eco-system, illustrates the first right, to land, forest and water, clean air and natural landscape (*basic*); Part 2, on Rituality and Ceremony, illustrates the second right, to maintain one's own religion (*unique*); Part 3, on Village Structure, illustrates the third right, to live according to one's own way of life and values of happiness and wellbeing within one's own natural environment (*practice*); Part 4, on Village Law, illustrates the fourth right, to operate according to one's own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on one's own land (*holistic*). Part 5, Intervention and Responses, illustrates the fifth right, to co-manage or co-govern natural resources with neighboring communities and local authorities (*strategic*). The Conclusion discusses how the confidence and strength of character that is inherent in people enjoying the five rights of 'Livelihood Sovereignty' empowers them to peacefully and assuredly resist the imposition of ideas and practices that are antithetical and damaging to their own philosophy and practices of community solidarity and worship of nature (*Sustainer and Sustainability*).



Chapter One

The Spiritual Ecosystem



'Nurturing Nature is the belief and behaviour of a pure, traditional, civilized inter-relationship between human and nature. We can perceive its purity in the daily lives of the indigenous ethnic minority people in the Mekong sub-region. It is a religion of the indigenous minority people such as any other, and it should be viewed and understood fairly'.

BASIC HISTORY



Figure 1: Vang Ha Lenh's Stream – Gift from Y Phu.
Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 2: Spirit trees – Loong Chi Ri and Loong Preo. Photo by SPERI, March 2015

Among the 54 official ethnic groups in Vietnam, the H'rê belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. In the past the H'rê were also known as *Mọi đá vách*, *Chăm Rê*, *Mọi Lũy*, *Man Thạch Bích*, or *Mọi sơn phòng*¹ and lived in provinces of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. Another publication attributes to the H'rê other names such as *Kre*, *Thượng Ba Tơ*, *Chăm Quang Ngãi*, and *Mọi Chom*². There are 127,420 H'rê ethnic people living in Vietnam, or 0.1484%³ of the national population (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2009). Some publications mention the H'rê population as settled only in the provinces of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh⁴, but they are also found *living in Kon Tum province, particularly in Kon Plong district*. The H'rê people at the centre of this case study live in Violak villagers, which belongs to Po E commune, Kon Plong district, Kon Tum province. The villagers is 98 km from the provincial capital of Kon Tum by national road No 24.

¹http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%C3%A1c_d%C3%A2n_t%E1%BB%99c_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam

²http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%C3%A1c_d%C3%A2n_t%E1%BB%99c_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam

³http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danh_s%C3%A1ch_c%C3%A1c_d%C3%A2n_t%E1%BB%99c_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam_the_o_s%E1%BB%91_d%C3%A2n

⁴Belongs to mid-central Vietnam.

There are 72 H'rê households in Violak villagers with a total of 243 residents. The living space of the villagers⁵ is located on a river valley surrounded by hills. The highest hill overlooking the villagers is Vang Y Phu, at 1,150 meters above the sea level. The lowest point of the villagers is Po E stream at an altitude of 690 meters. The villagers has a total 1,405 hectares of natural area, of which forests cover 1,100 ha. Rice farming valleys is 42 ha included Vi Nong is 12 ha and Vi Olak is 30 ha, stream is 7.5 ha and 9.4 ha is used for gardening and residential area.

According to elder A Xi, Violak is the given name for the villagers. In H'rê language 'Vi' means people and 'Olak' is the name of a stream below the mountain pass. 'Violak' therefore means 'people living along the Olak stream and mountain pass.' This name reflects the people's attachment to the forests, streams and natural environment where they have settled and now live close to nature. According to elder A Xi, the H'rê are very loyal to their villagers name as it reflects their attachment to and belief toward the local ecological sites. For example, in Violak villagers, there is "Y Phu Spirit – Mother Mountain", an important spiritual site for the H'rê people. And since they have been living below the Olak mountain pass, every year they make a pilgrimage to Vang Y Phu (Y Phu Mountain) in their traditional clothes and with offerings (set by Villagers Customary Law) to worship the Mother Mountain Spirit. The pilgrimage starts from the Olak mountain pass, crossing the valley and going along the Olak stream to Vang Y Phu, reflecting the spiritual commitment of the "people living along Olak stream – Violak".

THE SPIRITUAL ECOSYSTEM AND NORMS

The Spirit of Y Phu

The H'rê people in Violak believe that Vang Y Phu, the highest mountain in the villagers landscape, with a height of 1,155 meters and a total area of 190 ha, is the place where the most powerful Mountain Spirit resides. It is considered the spiritual cradle of the entire ecosystem of the villagers, hence the name Vang Y Phu 'Mother Mountain' ('Y' means Mother, 'Phu' means Mountain). In the Mother Mountain, the Spirit resides in two big old trees - Cây Đa (Loong Chi Ri) and Cây Chò Chỉ (Loong Preo).

The Inta bird sings from these trees and the beautiful voice of the bird can be heard beyond the mountain. It is said that the H'rê can only listen to Inta and are not allowed to sing along. If someone intentionally violates that rule, it means that he or she has hurt the Mother Mountain, which in turn makes him or her feel uncomfortable. In this situation, they have to share their discomfort with other villagers from the community, and receive both

⁵The ecosystem of the villagers consists of forests, hills, streams, fields on slope land, wet rice fields, and residential area.

criticism and advice from them. Such rules later came to constitute the villagers's customary law. Every year, the villagers visit the Mother Mountain to worship and express their admiration, and to pray to the Mountain Spirit for a peaceful, healthy and happy life - full of love with other members of the community.

Table 1: Two different Views & Ways to behave toward Vang Y Phu

Value	Belief		Institutional Base		Norm		Social Relation	
	H'rê	State WMB ⁶	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB
Types								
Loong Chi Ri & Loong Preo Cây Đa (<i>Ficus elastica</i>) and Cây Chò Chỉ (<i>Parashorea chinensis</i>) on the Y Phu mountain	Trees are the sanctuaries of Spirits, so they are invaluable	No Spirits exist with trees. Those trees are classified into the fourth grade of timber, and their price can be calculated	Spiritual Ecosystem is nurtured voluntarily by all Violak villagers	Four officials of the Thach Nham WMB who reside in Violak villagers use state subsidized budget to offer labor contracts for forest protection.	Express people's gratitude to nature Spirits via rituals in cultivation, in provision and use of natural products, which are considered as a Gift from Yang or 'Yang' God	Financial norms for labor contract calculated on the basis of protected forest areas per year	Every H'rê villagers member (women and men) are equal to nurture Vang Y Phu via ritual ceremonies and contribution of offerings as well.	Thach Nham WMB is the manager of land. H'rê people nurture forests within the legal framework controlled by Thach Nham WMB

⁶ State WMB = State Watershed Management Board



Figure 5. Vang Ha Lenh. Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 6. The Sacred Water from Vang Y Phu. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

FINDING 1

The customary law of Violak villagers of paying respect and worshipping Vang Y Phu Spirit has become a tradition that is embedded in the people's daily belief and inspiring every member of the villagers in their behavior towards nature and amongst themselves. For H'rê people, Vang Y Phu is a region where Super-Spirit of Nature (Yang, or equivalent to Sky Spirit) resides. It is a special sacred place. But from the government approach, Vang Y Phu is an area of highly valued genetic resources (i.e. forests and biodiversity species) that should be protected on the basis of law enforcement by a Government agency according to bureaucratic State forest classifications. The H'rê people have a different perception and approach to forest protection. They view Vang Y Phu as a place of sacredness where only God of Nature could reside. This view has continued to persist and has become an indispensable part of the daily cultural and spiritual lives of the H'rê people.

However, at present, Vang Y Phu is under the control and management of the Thach Nham Watershed Management Board, where it is known on the WMB map as Sub-zone 436, plots 1 and 4. This is in contradiction with what H'rê people in Violak villagers believe and how they define the area. This issue should be discussed in details at the policy and practical levels in terms of land and forest use planning and management/protection for the H'rê community in the Central Highland region.

The spirit of Ha Lenh

Vang Ha Lenh is the second highest hill at 1,070 meters and with a total area of 105 ha. The combination of Vang Ha Lenh and Vang Y Phu creates a beautiful landscape which inspires the villagers, nature lovers, and enriches their imagination with the image of a strong and muscled man happily drinking fresh and pure water – the gift from Vang Y Phu - while passionately enjoying the romantic ecological landscape at the sunset. The beautiful soul and unlimited love for nature of the H'rê has long been rooted and nurtured by this mountain, stream, and song of the Inta bird. Elders A Xi, A Dang, Y Huong, Y Nam and other prestigious people from Violak villagers call the Ha Lenh stream the “Gift” from the Vang Y Phu the ‘Mother Mountain’.

Every year in spring, all the villagers go together to the “Gift stream – Vang Ha Lenh” for the ceremony of collecting water. This ceremony is big event for every family in the villagers. They wear their traditional clothes and believe that on this special occasion, couples should behave very correctly toward one another with politeness and respect.

Table 2: Two different Views & Ways to behave toward Vang Ha Lenh

Value	Belief		Institutional Base		Norm		Social Relation	
	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB
Types								
Ha Lenh stream takes water source from Y Phu mountain	Streams are sanctuaries of Spirits which affect the physical and Spiritual life of Violak villagers	Not mentioned in the WMB policies	Rituals and festivals for taking water to sacred room held in every February	Only interested in labor contracts for the protected forest areas and do not mention Ha Lenh stream	Ritual ceremony for worshipping water Spirits of the Ha Lenh stream held every February. A water container should be hung on the sacred pillar in the sacred room for 12 months per year	Do not mention Ha Lenh stream in the mechanism of subsidized budget for forest protection	Community members (women and men) are equal in worshipping natural Spirits of Ha Lenh stream	Do not mention Ha Lenh stream in the mechanism of subsidized budget for forest protection



Figure 4: Vi Olak-Rice Farming. Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 3: Traditional Irrigation Dam for Vi Nong Rice-Farming area. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

FINDING 2

The local ecological knowledge of the H'rê people and their understanding of the patterns and principles of nature is embedded in their livelihood as the very 'breath' of their daily life. The H'rê people have formed customary rules and norms to govern their nature for long term uses and management. Many beliefs and practices are now a part of their present livelihood identity, spiritually and materialistically. This however contradicts with government perceptions of land and forest use and management, and this contradiction needs to be discussed and analyzed. In particular, it needs to be addressed with regard to the development policy on 'Cultural Villagers' in the formal planning of tourism development of Kon Plong district passed by Decision 298 of the government. At present the criteria for 'Cultural Villagers' is given without consideration of local ecological knowledge and cultural identity of the H'rê people, and must be reconsidered!

The spirit of Vang Ha Ro

Next to Vang Ha Lenh is Vang Ha Ro at 1,060 meters and with a total area of 300 ha. According the H'rê, this is the place where various Spirits reside in order to protect the Spirit of the Vi Olak rice field, a gift from Vang Ha Ro. Before 2007, Vang Ha Ro was under the management of the Thach Nham Watershed Management Board under the name '437 sub-zone', but after the review of forest types, Vang Ha Ro was classified as 'production forest' under the management of the Kon Plong District People's Committee. But the H'rê believe that Vang Ha Ro and Vang Ha Lenh protect the spirit to Vi Olak and Vi Nong rice fields supplying nutrients all year round.

A series of rituals, starting from building the banks of the rice fields in January, through to planting young rice in March, replanting seedlings in April, taking care of the rice in May, harvesting the first ripened rice in July, until finishing the crop and offering a holiday to Vi Olak and Vi Nong from August to February of the following year express the people's gratitude to the spirits that reside in Vang Y Phu, Vang Ha Ro, Vang Ha Lenh, Vang Pa Ro. They also express their gratitude through their "co-governing" of the forests. "If I haven't visited the forest for several days, I will miss it", one of the villagers, A Pan shared. That partly explains why each individual in the villagers, from their emotional/spiritual attachment with the forest, can contribute each to the overall governance of entire forest for the villagers. In addition, each villagersr thinks that "*Villagers customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the Law for each member*". This is the value of life that the H'rê have been respecting and nurturing in Violak villagers.

Table 3: Two different Views & Ways to behave toward Vang Ha Ro

Value	Belief		Institutional Base		Norm		Social Relation	
Type	H'rê	State law	H'rê	State law	H'rê	State Law	H'rê	State law
Vang Ha Ro	Vi Nong and Vi Olak forests have Spirits which nurture rice fields	Production forests	Norms in the villagers customary law and villagers' knowledge of ecosystem are expressed via rituals and community methods for co-management of Vang Ha Ro	Allocate production forestland to households and individuals for 50 years according to Land Law in order to promote economy	Make individual holders of 21 land certificates become 21 group leaders for Vang Ha Ro forest protection according to villagers customary laws, norms and local code of behavioral conduct	Grant land certificates to 21 individuals or households to use 174 ha of Vang Ha Ro forestland for 50 years. That forest area is inherently nurturing the Vi Nong rice field according to Violak customary laws and code of behavioral conduct of the local H'rê	All members of Violak villagers are equal in nurturing and protecting forests in Vang Ha Ro	District authorities are representatives for land ownership and 21 households are renters in using 174 ha of forestland for production for 50 years

FINDING 3

The issue of concern here and which should be discussed at the policy level is that, in order to ensure effective and sustainable cultural and socio-economic development and political security in the Central Highlands, the implementation of forest and land allocation programs of the government should be conducted in line with the culture and customs of the local people, and must not ignore the local ecological situation and local leadership structure of the villagers.

The spirit of Vi Nong and Violak Rice Field

These fields produce sticky rice species such as Hroa and Mao Nu, and the non-sticky rice species Jring which are used for making the ‘Ghe wine’ which is used as an offering to the spirits in all rituals. Through their worship of the spirits of these rice species, each villagersr is able to link to the whole universe. For instance, as they worship the rice Spirit, they worship the rice field, and also Vang Ha Ro and Vang Ha Lenh that provides water to the field; they also worship Vang Y Phu and Da and Cho Chi trees and finally the Inta bird. Their relations with the spiritual ecosystem form a coherent cosmological vision which generates the motivation and goals running through the spiritual and material life of the villagers. “Rice is a Gem given by the ‘Yang’”, said Elder A Xi, and the H’rê show their deep gratitude for this “Gem” through practicing a ritual each year in which the Ghe wine is hung on the sacred pillar in the sacred room of the house as an offering all year round for the worship of Yang.

Ceremonies associated with the rice field - for building banks, making a bamboo Neu in the beginning of the year, offerings of rice cakes to the natural Spirits - are very important for each Violak villagersr. Each individual or each couple will select their first sticky rice cakes and bring them to the fields to start the ceremony. This custom has long been exciting generations of H’rê as the manifestation of their long-lasting philosophy “*Villagers customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the law for each member*”.

The spirit of Teak Don and Pa Ro

Vang Pa Ro and Vang Teak Don, at 980 meters above sea level, have the total area of 195 ha of forest. They are considered the “granary” for food, materials and spices used in the daily life of the Violak villagers. According to the research results, the H’rê collect 43 different types of products from these forests annually for their daily livelihood. There is also a “reconciliation” tree in the forest which is used, according to Y Buong and Y Nam, to prevent people from losing their temper at the rituals and ceremonies when they get drunk.

Elder A Xi described Vang Teak Don and Vang Pa Ro as a food store given by the ‘Yang’ that, because of its diversity, nurtures and enriches the H’rê initiatives in their daily livelihood. In return, it is used, nurtured and governed by the H’rê according to their biological, ecological and spiritual knowledge.

The desire of villagers to voluntarily follow villagers customary laws and taboos with regard to these forests in order to protect the forest supplies has become as important to the H’rê of Violak as maintaining their own breath. Vang Teak Don and Vang Pa Ro are dynamic civil spaces for H’rê to exercise their wisdom and experience in the cultivation and collection of food, and exchanging between the villagers.

Table 4: Two different Views & Ways to behave toward Vang Teak Don and Vang Pa Ro

Value	Belief		Institutional Base		Norm		Social Relation	
Type	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB	H'rê	State WMB
Vang Teak Don and Vang Pa Rô	Multi-Spirit forests provide people with daily food	Protection forests	Co-protection of 43 species of forest vegetables and insects for daily food	Use state budget for labor contract with individual households. Each contract is legally valid for two years. An individual household who holds a contract gets VND 200,000 per ha per year	Whenever collect forest products people should ask or pray to forest Spirits to make sure that they will support regeneration of forests	Use budget from higher rank for making labor contract with individual households. Calculate income and payment according to forest area (hectares per year)	All Violak members protect forests together according to their traditional customs and daily use	State WMB is the forestland owner and local people are labor who can be paid on the basis of their yearly contributed labor and protected forest areas

FINDING 4

Vang Teak Don and Vang Pa Ro are the 'field school' sites for practicing seasonal livelihood practices of the H'rê in Violak villagers according to their spiritual-ecological knowledge. However, these multi-spirit areas are also under the bureaucratic control and management of the Thach Nham WMB under state budget. This issue needs to be discussed and analyzed in terms of the extent to which State management mechanism could affect the social, ecological, cultural and educational traditions of the H'rê villagers in Violak villagers.

Vang Go Hoang and Vang Ka La

Vang Go Hoang has the total area of 140 ha at an altitude of 900 meters above sea level. This area also nurtures and creates the dynamic daily activities of the H'rê as they collect products from this forest according to their norms of behaviour. But the forest is currently under the control and management of the Thach Nham Watershed Management Board and this paradox must be reviewed and adjusted so that 'Livelihood Sovereignty' can be returned to the H'rê.

Vang Ka La has the total area of 170 ha, 56 ha of which has already been returned to the H'rê for co-governance under the forest and land allocation program of LISO Alliance⁷. The Red Books (land titles) were happily welcomed by the villagers and local authorities at all levels at the granting ceremony held on January 30, 2015, providing a strong foundation for the villagers to facilitate their responsibility to co-govern the forest according to their religion, belief and practice toward Vang Ka La.

⁷LISO Alliance consists of SPERI, CODE and CIRUM toward 'Livelihood Sovereignty' and community well-being in 2015-2015-2020.

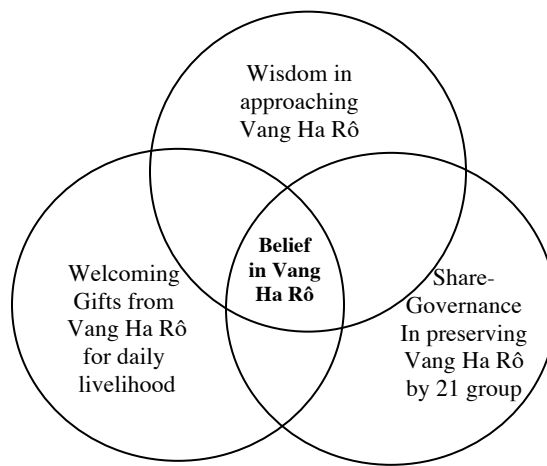
Table 5: Violak villagers ecosystem in relation with the state

Rationality of the H'rê people in co-governance on the basis of villagers customary laws				State rationality in centralized governance on the basis of subsidized budget			Area (ha)	Note
1	Vang Y Phu	Núi Mẹ (Mother mountain)	Villagers customary laws regulate ritual ceremonies	Sub-zone 434	Plots 1,4	Offer labor contract to individuals and use subsidized budget to pay them	190 ha	
2	Ha Lenh	Suối Mẹ (Mother stream)	Villagers customary laws require the entire villagers involve in ritual ceremony and keep the sacred water bottle for 12 months per year	Sub-zone 434	Plots 9, 12	Offer labor contract to individuals and use subsidized budget to pay them	105 ha	
3	Teak Đon	Spiritual water source	Villagers customary laws have provisions on how to collect forest products which result from co-governance by groups of households	Sub-zone 434	Plot 10	Offer labor contract to individuals and use subsidized budget to pay them	100 ha	
4	Pa Rô	Forest Spirits	Villagers customary laws regulate the way to collect forest products which result from co-governance by groups of households	Sub-zone 434	Plot 11	Offer labor contract to individuals and use subsidized budget to pay them	95 ha	
5	Gỗ Hoang	Forest Spirits	Villagers customary laws regulate the way to collect forest products	Sub-zone 434	Plot 14	Offer labor contract to individuals and use subsidized budget to pay	140 ha	

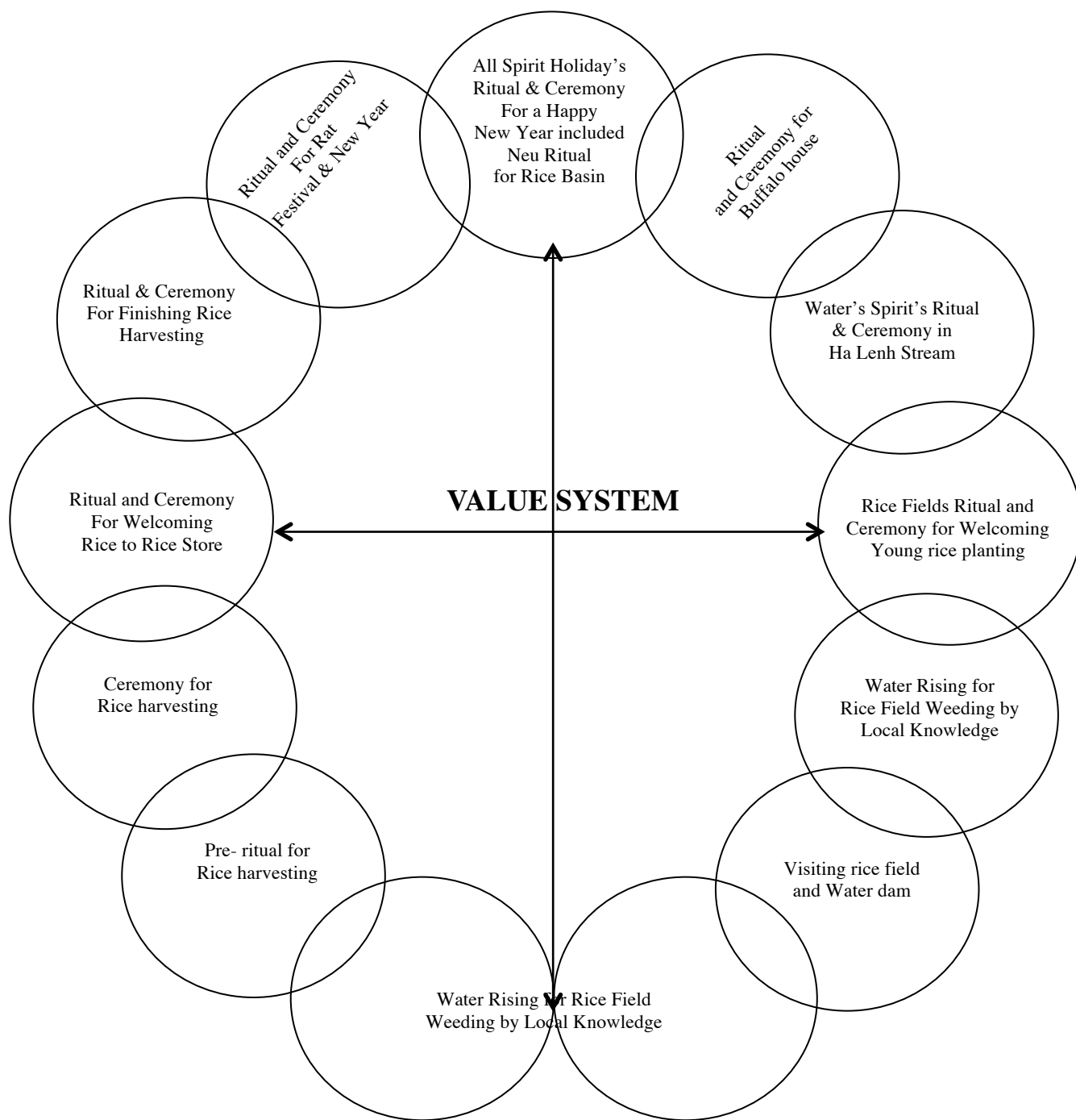
Rationality of the H'rê people in co-governance on the basis of villagers customary laws				State rationality in centralized governance on the basis of subsidized budget			Area (ha)	Note
			which result from co-governance by group of households			them		
6	Ha Rô	Forest Spirits	Villagers customary laws regulate the way to collect forest products which result from co-governance by 21 groups of households	Sub-zone 437	Plots 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9	Allocate 174 ha of production forestland and grant land certificates to 21 individual households in Violak villagers	300 ha	
7	Ka La	Forest Spirits	Villagers customary laws regulate the way to collect forest products which result from co-governance by groups of households	Sub-zone 439	Plots 1 and 2	Community co-governance of protected forests is advised by LISO. On 30 January 2015, Violak villagers were granted with a community land use certificate on 56 ha	170 ha	
Total							1,100 ha	

Chapter Two

Rituality and Ceremony



At different times of the year, the H'rê organise different rituals and ceremonies to offer different kinds of material to worship the various spirits of nature surrounding the village. These ritual and ceremonies occur as part of the annual round of agricultural activities and will be presented below in the order in which they occur. The most important ritual is the buffalo sacrifice, but as this occurs only rarely in special circumstances it will be described separately.



H'rê annual rituality and ceremony calender

BUFFALO HOUSE CEREMONY

This ritual reflects the importance of the buffalo in H'rê society. The buffalo is not only an important farm animal, it can also represent a human. Whenever H'rê violate Yang and the spirit of nature is angry, the buffalo can replace the human in a propitiatory sacrifice to Yang. Therefore, every February (Lunar calendar), before planting rice, the H'rê people organize the cleaning and repairing of the buffalo houses in order to indicate to Yang that they are taking care of the buffalo. The whole village participates in this ritual. The H'rê also believe that the buffalo cannot be raised individually; it needs to be raised communally. Therefore, a group of three or five households will, according to their location in the village, make one buffalo house together, and whenever the buffalo is out of its house, different families within the group rotate their labor every three days to taking care of the buffalo – which they describe as “walking in the footsteps of the buffalo”. Maintaining the buffalo house and caring for the buffalo every day is an important communal responsibility.

WATER SPIRIT CEREMONY

In Violak, the most important activity for daily livelihood is wet-rice growing in terraced rice fields. They grow rice for only six month of the year, and as this provides them with enough rice for two years, the other six month they respect as holiday for the rice field. The rice fields are watered via a series of mini-dams, 53 in total that are built from stone and arranged in a tiered fish-bone pattern. Water levels are adjusted in the rice fields by removing stones from the dam walls. The dams are jointly managed by groups of five or so households, similar to how buffalos are also jointly managed. Different members of these household groupings will visit the dams regularly, and while checking on their own dams will also make repairs to the dams of other household groupings, informing them of the condition of their dams when they return to the village.

Apart from land, the most important resource for wet-rice farming is water, and hence every March, once the elder council has decided on the day for planting rice, every husband and wife from every household, wearing their traditional clothing and carrying traditional baskets on their backs, goes as a community to Vang Ha Lenh.

The wife brings with her a container for collecting water and she queues along with other wives to collect it as it drips from a special bamboo pipe embedded in the side of Vang Ha Lenh.



Figure 9. H're women go to Vang Ha Lenh collect the Sacred water. Photo by SPERI, March 2015



Figure 10. Sacred Water in Ha Lenh Stream. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

When the container is full she will hand it to her husband who seals it and places it in her basket. The husband then climbs the mountain above the stream and digs a special herbal root known for their perfume and puts them in his basket. He also gathers crabs from the stream while his wife picks leaves from two sides of the streams. Once they have finished, they return home along with the whole community, back along the Teak Nong stream to the village. When they left the village for Vang Ha Lenh, the husband walked in front clearing the way for his wife. When returning to the village, the husband walks behind so he can ensure the safety of the water container in his wife's basket.

At the village, each married couple, before they enter their respective houses, worships before the Neu in front of the door to their sacred room by offering a live chicken to the spirit. The husband then climbs up into the sacred room followed by his wife. They pray before the wooden mortar and hang the herb root and the container of water on the sacred stick above the wine jar. The husband then puts the crabs that he has gathered from the stream into the traditional wine jar and they pray again. The water and the herb root stay hanging on the sacred stick until the next March. It is believed that the water in the bamboo container will be listening to everything that happens in the house, and, from the stick, it will send the message via the Neu to the spirits of nature. It reminds the people to always behave properly inside the house. The herb root releases into the sacred room and into the whole house a pleasant perfume that makes for healthy breathing.



Figure 11. Young rice planting.. Photo by SPERI, March 2015



Figure 12. Rituality for Young Rice Planting. Photo by SPERI, March 2015

The H'rê believe that when the water container with other living things picked up along the stream are hung on a sacred pillar in the sacred room of their house, their family and their village will be blessed by the Spirits through the year. When the ceremony for water spirit is held in the sacred room of the house, each couple becomes a pair of the spiritual leaders. Unlike the other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, and in the Mekong sub-zone generally, each member of the H'rê community in Violak village is a spiritual leader. "*We can talk for ourselves*" – said Y Hien, wife of the village head A Pan. It means that everyone can communicate directly with Yang during the ritual ceremony for worshipping Nature. Therefore, it can be said that the people's belief in the spirit of forest and mountain in Violak village has become the 'breath' of each individual.

After praying in the house, the married couple will kill the chicken and wipe its blood on the Neu. After that they bring the chicken to worship at one of the five sacred trees that stand in the village. These are special trees that when they their drop their leaves it means that it is the time for preparing the land for planting rice, and when the tree begins to sprout it is time to let water into the rice field. When the sprouts turn from green to a yellow-red color you have to plant the rice immediately. If you do not, then you should not plant at all, because the crop will fail. On the day of this ritual all the villages feel very happy. It is the biggest traditional ceremony of the year and its only change over time has been that today the people do not have many traditional clothes to wear. Instead they wear their best new clothes, for they believe it to be the most important day of the year.

RICE PLANTING AND RICE HARVESTING CEREMONIES

After the ceremony of bringing the water into the sacred room of the house, the H'rê have another ceremony to bring rice to the field for planting. The most prestigious

elder will advise which day in March they are to open the rice stores. They will then tie two white strings on each side of the ladder leading from the ground up to the door of the rice store. They will bring selected bundles of rice down these two lines of string and take them to the Neu outside the sacred room of the house, in through the door, over the wooden mortar, and to the wine jar and stick. After this ritual, the rice is brought to the field for planting. When the rice has grown into small plants, they have another ceremony to replant the seedling. And in June they have another ceremony to pray for the rice to grow healthily.

In August when the rice is harvested and welcomed from the field to the village, there are two times for praying. The first time is at the rice store; the second time in the sacred room of the house. At these praying times it is taboo to use a white chicken. They only use a chicken that has no white color. It is the same in February for the buffalo house ritual, and in March for the rice planting ritual. During the ceremony of the rice, the H'rê burn one very special wood like incense in the rice store, and also in the sacred room of the house. This incense is an offering to the rice spirit living in the rice store and living in the sacred room, and it flies into the fields taking the message that H'rê people believe in the rice spirit. During these rituals, the H'rê tie one kind of green leaf onto the Neu by the main door of the house and to the Neu by the door to the sacred room to warn outsiders. It tells the outsider that it is forbidden to enter the house during the period of the ritual. If you come as an outsider and you see the leaf you should go away and not interfere, because during the time of praying the rice spirit needs to be quiet, very sacred; there cannot be any interference during the worshipping.

To respect the rice, the H'rê repair the rice stores annually. Like building the new rice store, the repair is carried out very carefully including choosing the good time and materials. "The moment to repair or build new rice stores is as important as waiting for the newborn" said Elder A Xi.

RICE STORE CEREMONY AND RITUALITY

In August, when the rice has begun to ripen, the elder council will choose a day to have a ritual to welcome the rice from the rice field into the rice store. The rice store itself is a small wooden building with a number of design features that symbolize different spirits of nature. On the two sides of the roof are carvings representing the spirits of nature surrounding the rice fields, and supplying them with water and nutrients. The roof of the rice store represents different animals which interact with the rice field but do not destroy the rice seed. A third feature is the ladder leading up to the door of the rice store. When rice is being taken into or out of the rice store, two rails of white string

are attached from the ground to the door. These act as a bridge for the rice seed to pass up or down.

There are two ceremonies governing how to behave toward the rice store. One is in March when they move the rice bundles out from the rice store to plant rice seed for sprouting. The second is in August once the rice has ripened, and when they bring new rice bundles from the field back into the rice store. At that time, the H'rê women, wearing their traditional clothes and carrying their traditional baskets, go to the rice field and pick by hand, using only their thumb and forefinger, the nicest rice plants. They make these into bundles which they bring back to the rice store. On the way the bundles are carried along a spiritual road from the rice field to the village, across the different streams that bring water to the field, and across the river on an imaginary bridge made of two white strings. At the rice store a live chicken is brought to worship at the Neu. After worshipping, the chicken is killed and its blood smeared on the Neu. Two lines of white string are then tied each side of the ladder leading up to the door of the rice store and the rice bundles are carried into the store and placed against the back wall. The people then pray that the rat will not come to eat the rice (although there are wooden discs on the posts of the rice stores to prevent rats from climbing up). In the March ceremony, when the rice is brought out of the rice store for planting, they also use the two white strings.

In H'rê villages, rice stores do not stand alone, there are many rice stores clustered together in areas separate from, but nearby, the houses; located part way between the village and the rice fields. When you enter a rice store area you need to worship before the Neu of the rice store 'community' - a bigger Neu than those outside the main door and spirit door of the houses. When building a rice store the decision to build is taken by the community as a whole. The individuals wanting the new rice store must submit their proposal first to the elders of their own housing group, and these elders will talk about the need for a new rice store to the elders of other groups in the village. They will then submit the proposal to the most prestigious elder, a man who is very knowledgeable of the nature spirits and the people's practices. He will talk with all the elders together and decide on the day for building the rice store. On that day all the people of the village will build the rice store together and provide food and materials for the opening ceremony. According to H'rê, the rice store is metaphorically like a mother's breast from which they can feed whenever they need. From 6 months' farming they can produce two years' worth of rice. In the symbolism of the rice store is reflected the interrelation between the different nature spirits, from the very high primary forest of Vang Y Phu from which nutrition flows down to the lower Vang Ha Lenh, and from Vang Ha Lenh to the stream feeding the rice field.

THE RAT CEREMONY

In October there is another ritual to worship and make an offering to the rice field. Having finished the harvest, it is time for the rice field to be quiet and to have a holiday. At this time the rat population increases rapidly. From eating rice the rats become very healthy and in November all the people, men and women, go to the fields to catch rats. They also catch the Nhim (porcupine), another animal of the rodent family. Because at this time the rat population increases rapidly, at this time the H'rê need to catch them to balance the population, leaving only a small population for the next year. So in November they have a new-year ceremony which they call the Rat New Year. The elder council selects the day and every family goes to the fields to catch rats. They bring them home, clean them and hang them to dry over the fire in the kitchen of the room next to the sacred room. The rat meat is then minced and put in the centre of a cake made from sticky-rice pounded to flour in the wooden mortar. The cake is wrapped in a special forest leaf and steamed in a wooden pot, then put in the Neu of the sacred door.

The process of catching the rats and preparing the rat cake takes about three weeks. First they have to harvest a special native species of sticky rice. This is one native species of sticky-rice that will never be lost because it is necessary for the rat ceremony. They take one plate (made of woven bamboo) of cakes to the field as an offering to the rice field where they make a new bamboo Neu and put the cake on it. They then build and repair the banks of the rice terraces. This Neu is a larger size than those outside the houses and the rice stores. The ceremony is for the completion of the rice season after clearing the rice field after harvesting. They leave the cake everywhere, in the cave in the mountain and in the rice field for the spirit of the rat to enter into the sacred room and to the wine jar and the sacred stick. It means the rat spirit is engaged with the human life. The H'rê believe that if they worship the rat they will be abundant like the rat. The rat ceremony is an important time for young men to court young women in preparation for marriage.

THE RITUAL OF GHE WINE

The wine also reflects the H'rê people's connection to their surrounding spirits of nature. It is made from two special species of rice. One is a species of glutinous rice named Hroa that is grown in the field which receives its water from Vang Ha Lenh. This species of rice is used only for making wine. The other species of rice is a non-glutinous variety called Jring. It is farmed in another rice field fed by water from Vang Ha Ro and is regarded as a gift from the spirit of the forest of Vang Ha Ro. To make the wine, the two species of rice are mixed together at a certain ratio. Both species of rice can be harvested only by picking with thumb and forefinger, not by cutting with a knife. The

rice seed is then dried in the sun and processed by hand using the wooden mortar and pestle, it cannot be processed by machine. The rice is then cooked in a traditional pot (you cannot use just any pot) using water from Vang Ha Lenh. It is then dried in a hand-make bamboo basket. Finally it is mixed with a leaf to provide the enzyme to start the fermentation process. The leaf is called Blo and harvested for Vang Y Phu.

In making the wine, one species of rice cannot be substituted for another; nor can you substitute one source of water for another. Each ingredient is unique in its relationship to a specific spirit. You have to respect this relationship and not change or distort the process. Each of the material ingredients used in making the wine symbolize a specific the connection of H'rê to significant surrounding natural landscape features and their respective nature spirits. The wine itself also has a spirit, and the sacred wine jar will be opened at only in February at the time of the buffalo house ritual and when villagers go to Vang Ha Lenh to collect special materials that are kept throughout the year in the sacred room. While many jars of wine are made, only one jar is called sacred; that which is kept in the sacred room.

In front of the sacred stick and the sacred wine jar, in line with the door of the sacred room, there is a wooden mortar and pestle used to process the rice for the wine. The mortar is made from a particular species of wood found in the forest. The stick, wine jar and mortar are aligned with the door of the sacred room and with the Neu outside the door. From the Neu the spirits of nature can fly into the sacred room through the door, over the mortar and pestle, to the wine jar and sacred stick; then out again into the surrounding natural landscape. Every instrument found in the sacred room, and every ingredient used in making the wine is connected with different spirits of nature.

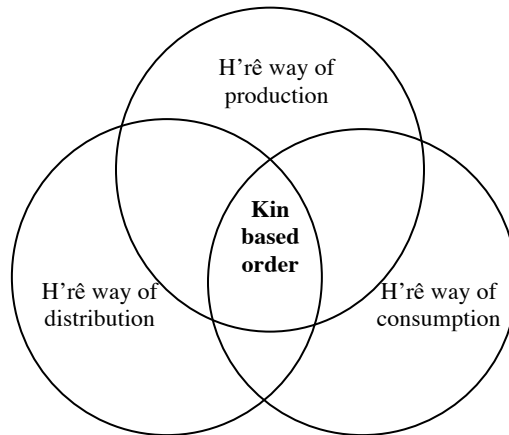
BUFFALO SACRIFICE

The buffalo sacrifice is the most important ritual in H'rê society. According to the H'rê the buffalo is a very sacred animal, given to them by Yang, the sky spirit, and it is only under very rare and certain circumstances that a buffalo sacrifice is performed. If someone in H'rê society receives a signal from Yang, through feeling unwell, or in a dream, that they or someone else has acted not properly toward their own people or toward surrounding nature, then they will inform to their descent group elders that they are feeling unhappy or unwell, mentally or physically. And if the feeling stays for a long time, then they believe that perhaps Yang is unhappy, not necessarily only with the sufferer, but because people in the village have not been behaving properly. When the discussion reaches the elder council they may decide that what the village needs is a buffalo sacrifice in order to make an offering to Yang. The buffalo is like a spirit animal standing between humans and nature as a communicator bringing the message of

happiness or unhappiness to or from the nature spirit. That is why the H'rê behave toward the buffalo in a very special way. The buffalo is always raised by a group of people, not by individuals, and every year in February every family has to ceremonially clean and repair the buffalo house. This is a very big and very emotional ceremony in which the people act together cooperatively. And they raise the buffalo cooperatively with different groups of households rotating every three days the duty of caring for the buffalo in the fields. They call this work 'walking in the footsteps of the buffalo.' By doing so they bring a message to Yang, the highest spirit of nature, that H'rê are taking care of the buffalo. But when the people are feeling unhappy, and they think that it is a signal that the spirit of nature is unhappy, they need to sacrifice a buffalo. And when they do sacrifice a buffalo it is a very big event – the most important in their lives. If you are behaving not properly toward the spirit, or toward the environment, and you are feeling unhappy, you talk to the people, and they talk together and they discuss and discuss, and eventually the elders sit together and they will decide to sacrifice a buffalo. It may take a year for the decision to be made for it is not an easy decision to make. Then when the decision is made - all the villagers in Violak and in all the H'rê in surrounding. H'rê villages will know that a buffalo sacrifice is to be made. The whole area will know about it. Agreement to hold a buffalo sacrifice means forgiveness for the person who is feeling unwell. If one person is feeling unhappy, then the whole area is feeling unhappy. It means that everyone has responsibility for every person's unhappiness. That is the message of the buffalo sacrifice; that everyone shares. If you have sticky rice you share that; if you have Ghe wine or chicken or rat meat you share that. Anything you have you can share voluntarily as a gift, not because you have to, but because you want to. They will then follow the instructions from the elder council and the highest leader will decide the time and day and month of the buffalo sacrifice, and all villagers, and all those from the surrounding area follow. They prepare everything very nicely, very sacredly, very respectfully, and every villager is emotionally looking forward to the buffalo sacrifice. Then for about two nights before the day of the sacrifice, the person who is feeling unwell will sit all night with the buffalo and reveal to the buffalo that you die for me; that it is my mistake, but you die for me. And he keeps telling the buffalo this for the whole night, and massages the buffalo's face and cheek and mouth. And the spirit leaders also come and talk to the buffalo and talk to the man or woman who is feeling guilty. They make sure of the message that the buffalo will die for the person who is unwell so that the feeling of being unwell will disappear. And after that they specify the exact hour to start the action. They create a big area with a Neu in the middle so the buffalo can run around happily in order to tell to the people that it is a nature spirit animal and it brings the message that you are all unhappy, but today I will die for you as a sacrifice to Yang, and then all the unhappiness will disappear, and I am happy to do this, but from now on you have to behave properly.

Chapter Three

Village Organization



‘Every ‘Livelihood’ has its own identity. ‘Livelihood Identity’ defines a holistic system of social identity which reflects an interaction of living things within a relationship between human and nature for maintaining its own characteristics culturally, socio-civilly, ecologically and economically’

VILLAGE AND ECOSYSTEM

The H'rê think of their village living space and its surrounding natural ecosystem as arranged by Yang, who guides them to make decisions, such as: In what direction the village should face in relation to Vang Y Phu and Vang Ha Lenh? How houses should be arranged in relation to the sacred room of the grandparent's house, in relation to the Mother Mountain, Mother Stream, Field Spirits, Land Spirits, Village Spirits and other Spirits residing in the sacred trees, according to the yin & yang and fang sui philosophy? Where to build the buffalo house? Everything in this ecosystem, including buffalo and buffalo house, sacred tree, location of sacred room and location of Neu standing in front of the house, and the structure of groups of households living in the village is covered by yin and yang. Yin implies the ownership by the natural Spirits living around the village, i.e. Yang, while yang implies the material gifts from Yang to successive village generations for their daily livelihood. This view and consciousness is nurtured and exercised by the village on the daily basis. Each Vang has its own story about the area in which the village practice certain ritual ceremonies. Each ritual ceremony is practiced consistently in terms of procedures of worshipping based on the norms of behavior of all village in compliance with the philosophy: *“Village customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the law for each member”*.



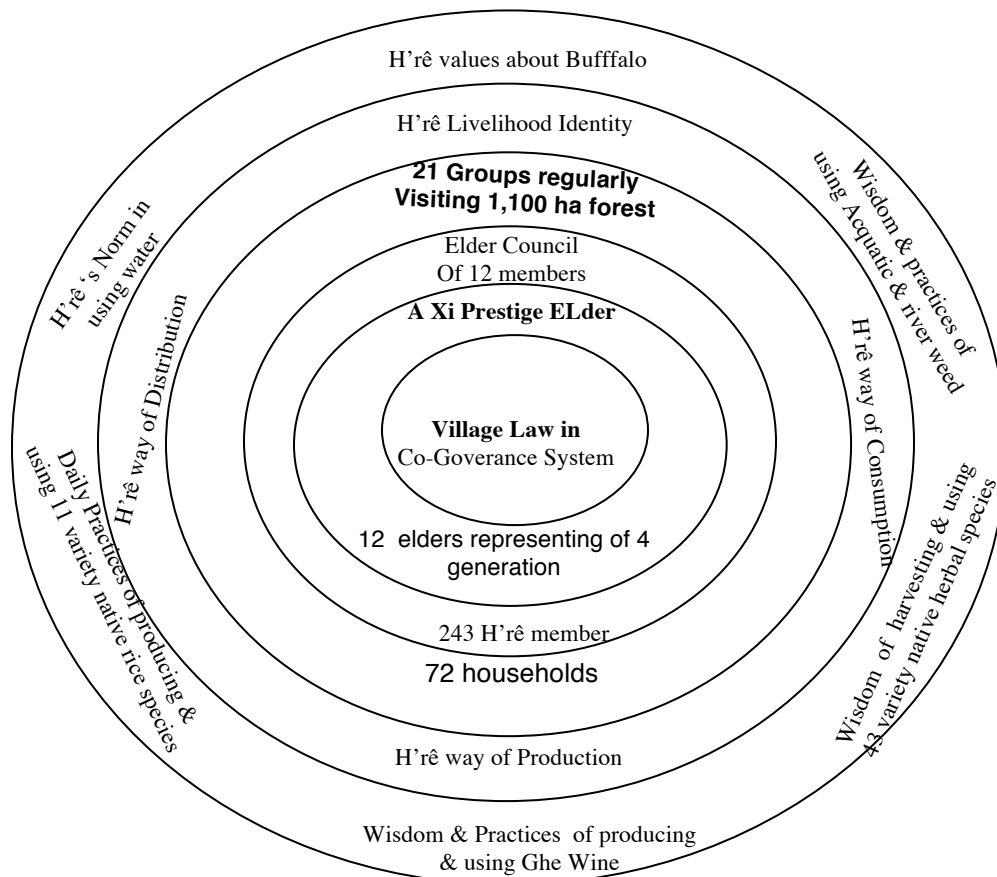
Figure 13. Vi Nong Rice Field. Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 14. Violak Village. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES

The H'rê do not have surnames. The letter A proceeding the first name indicates male, while Y indicates female. For instance, A Pan means Mr. Pan, or Y Buong means Ms/Mrs. Buong. The only exception is 3 village elders carrying the surname Dinh - elder Dinh Tung, elder Dinh Cong Dut and elder Dinh Cuong. That surname was given to them by the military during their service in the army during the American War to enable better management of the servicemen.



Daily Livelihood Governance of the H'rê in Vioalak

The village is organized into 10 groups of households, each of which consists of 3 or 4 generations of the same extended family. When a boy and girl get married, depending on the specific circumstance of each family, the couple will make the decision of which family to live with. The final decision should be reached by mutual understanding and consensus of the

both sides. Son and son-in-law, daughter and daughter-in-law, are equal because they are all seen as gifts from Yang. This is the distinctive cultural feature of the H'rê in Violak village.

Furthermore, there is no status distinction between men and women. Men are respected as much as women and there is no concern about having either boy or girl children. Therefore, it can be said of Violak that, in terms of gender equality, it is a civilized society that goes beyond all other so-called civilized societies in the world. While many nations over the world are currently struggling with the gender equality related issues, the concept of “gender equality” has always existed in Violak village. This is the beauty in H'rê characteristics and lifestyle that have been maintained from generation to generation.

Within the wider extended families (i.e. groups of households), every member lives peacefully and happily and takes care of the others. All the generations living in this group share one sacred room, which is regarded as the ‘lecture hall’ for learning the rituals and ceremonies. Through the various ceremonies, the younger generations witness and understand how their grandparents behave toward the natural Spirits living around them. This is the unique method of education that nurtures the philosophy “*Village customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member, and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the law for each member*”.

TRADITIONAL HOUSE

Traditionally, the H'rê lived in long houses housing four or five generations. But since 1975 there has been a gradual reduction in house size. Up to 1975, almost all houses were nine sections long, but after 1975 most houses were reduced to seven sections, and then in the 1990, to five sections. Today, most houses are three sections long.



Figure 15. Housing Style. Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 16. Music Instrument. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

Every house has three doors. There is a door at each end of the house which makes it possible to see through the house from one end to the other. For the H'rê, this means that the house is always open to any spirit of nature to enter. On entering the house through the main door, the first section is for the grandparents; the second is for the parents; the third for the son; and the fourth is for the daughter. Next to the daughter's room is the room for the daughter-in-law and the son when he marries. Each section has a living space and a kitchen, and inside the house you should not sit with your back to the kitchen, you should always sit facing it. Facing the kitchen, the main door is on the right and to the left, at the other end of the house, is the sacred room. The sacred room has no kitchen. Instead, against the wall, in place of the kitchen hearth is a stick and a jar of rice wine. In the centre of the room is a wooden mortar. The sacred room has its own door on the side of the house opposite the stick and wine jar. This door is for spirits to enter at different times of the year when there is a special ceremony and ritual. Outside the door, in line with the stick, the wine jar, and the wooden mortar is a Neu to welcome the spirits into the room. Another Neu stands outside the main door of the house to welcome outsiders.

There are many rituals associated with building a house. Before building, the spirit is asked to choose the location for the house, and before a tree is cut the H'rê worship in order to get permission from the spirit of nature. After cutting a tree they worship again, praying to the root of the tree saying sorry for cutting its body. They then

put a stone on the stump to reveal to the spirits, if they come to the tree and ask where it is, that H'rê have cut it and have prayed. Yang will then not be angry at them for having taken the tree.

GHE WINE IN SACRED ROOM

Inside the sacred room of the house there are three interconnected sets of equipment. First there is the 'sacred pillar' made from the Long Paro tree (Cho Chi in Vietnamese). The Long Paro tree is one of two big trees found on Vang Y Phu that are regarded as housing spirits of nature. This sacred pillar acts as a link between the spirits of nature and the daily life of the H'rê people. It links to the door of the sacred room and to the Neu outside the door, and from there to the nature surrounding the village. On the floor of the sacred room in front of the pillar is the traditional pottery jar used for producing Ghe wine.

FAMILIES IN THE SPIRITUAL ECOSYSTEM

The unique feature of the H'rê in Violak village is that each group of households behaves toward the other groups in a family manner. They stay together in happiness and sorrow. The close link between the spiritual ecosystem, village customary law and village leadership is such that when something wrong happens, the households inform each other first for mutual understanding, then report to the grandparents/great-grandparents of the group. The issue is discussed between the households and in cases where the issue involves other groups of households the grandparents/great-grandparents will sit down for discussions and come up with a solution. All the people share the common energy, will, voice, and solution within the view that *"Village customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member, and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the law for each member"*. This is one of the factors that inform the villager's courage to protect the village spiritual ecosystem from the external interventions.

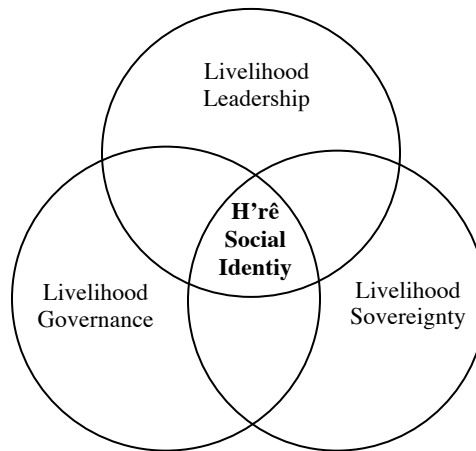
It can be said that the daily behaviors between women and men, between various generations in the same group of households, between the families, and between each H'rê individual and their surrounding spiritual ecosystem, have formed the current Violak village, the unique H'rê ethnic group that in the past and present has been living in deep loyalty and gratitude toward the nature. The researchers gained the feeling of the quiet but dynamic life running through in this village with a philosophy and wisdom of love and gratitude toward nature that has been forgotten or driven away in other places by a century of ambitious dreams to dominate nature.

The H'rê in Violak manifest the 5 basic interrelated rights¹ of 'Livelihood Sovereignty' aiming at creating the truly meaningful life that any person in the world should be aware of in order to nurture self happiness and wellbeing in nature, but which most people in the world have been deprived of by an insatiable thirsting after increases in Gross National Product – with consequence which almost all indigenous nations in the world have to struggle with.

¹ The five (05) interrelated rights of '**Livelihood Sovereignty**' (**LISO**) which defined as '*a holistic ethical alternative solution*' which consists of five inter-relative rights: 1) *The right to land, forest and water, clean air and natural landscape (basic)*; 2) *The right to maintain one's own religion (unique)*; 3) *The right to live according to one's own way of life and values of happiness and wellbeing within one's own natural environment (practice)*; 4) *The right to operate according to one's own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on one's own land; (holistic)*; and 5) *The right to co-manage or co-govern natural resources with neighboring communities and local authorities (strategic)*. It needs to be daily exercised, voluntarily and legally, at individual, communal, national and international levels in order to consolidate the sharing of the responsibility towards all living things, for today as well as for the generations of tomorrow. With the achievement of 'Livelihood Sovereignty', all organisms, human and non-human, will be living in harmony with each other, enjoying happiness and wellbeing, in interdependent/self-determination'.

Chapter Four

Village Law



‘Village customary law toward the Natural Spirits is the moral values of each community member and the moral and behavioral norms of the village toward the Natural Spirits is the law for each member’.

VILLAGE GOVERNANCE

Social governance among the H'rê of Violak can best be described as flowing from an inherent desire on the part of Violak people to be in a 'state of grace' toward the spirits nature, and by extension, given the reverence within which all members of the community hold those spirit, in harmony with each other. From this spiritual basis, social governance in Violak is exercised through each member's feeling of self-responsibility for nurturing the harmony they seek between both people and nature, and people and people, such that any action that would interfere with or upset that harmony would be unthinkable. Hence the moral norms of personal behavior, commonly shared, constitute the norms of the village, and the norms or 'law' of the village becomes the means for uphold the personal moral responsibility that each person has to the spirits of nature and their fellow community members. In other words, all members of Violak village are at one in upholding their own personal and joint responsibilities toward nature and toward each other in their ritual and daily practices, such that this becomes the joy of their existence. They would not want, would not dream of, and would not see any sense in doing otherwise. From this there flows the power to resist all unwelcome outside interventions that is the *primary indicator of their 'Livelihood Sovereignty' and strong livelihood identity*.

At another level, Village law in Violak is exercised, particularly with respect to relationships with outsiders, through a council of elders made up of the heads (grandmothers and grandfathers) of extended family groupings in their capacity of final decision makers. The qualification for being an elder in H'rê society is knowledge of the natural and spiritual landscape, and whoever is most knowledgeable in this area will become the highest decision maker. In Violak village there is an elder council of 10 members and it has several important functions.

VILLAGE LOCATION

The first important function is deciding whether and where to move the village. This is a very important decision because whenever H'rê people move it means changing their relationship to the landscape that nature has offered to them. This is not something that can be done easily. The elder has to explain his decision to the H'rê people according to the H'rê belief system, H'rê customary laws, and according to the norms of behavior toward the nature spirits. An example of this type of decision making occurred in 1987 after the village suffered from a landslide. The government of Kon Tum province decided to move the H'rê people of Violak to the Violak Pass area, but the council of elders decided to move it elsewhere - up stream to its present site in order to be closer to Vang Y Phu and Vang Ha Lenh, their two most important spirit sites.

BUFFALO SACRIFICE

The second important function is deciding when to hold a buffalo sacrifice. This process, as described above, involves the coordination not just of the whole village but neighboring H'rê villages as well. And it occurs only in very special circumstances requiring the careful discernment of those who are most wise in these matters.

WATER GOVERNANCE

The third function is deciding on which day in March the important water spirit ritual will be held. This is a community event involving every household.

USE OF FARMING LAND

The fourth function is to decide what to do if someone misuses farming land. This is a very serious thing because if you misuse farming land you are reordering the landscape that nature has given to you; you are interfering into what the spirit has offered. This, in fact, rarely occurs, especially since the village was relocated upstream in 1987 away from the road to Quang Ngai. Previously the village was located closer to the road and outsiders often entered the village. *The sanctions for misuse of land exist therefore mainly for outsiders.*

PROTECTION OF KY DA ANIMAL AND DA TREE

The fifth function of the elder council is to encourage people not to touch the Ky Da animal or Da Tree and to punish those who do. According to H'rê the Ky Da is a sacred animal and it should not be hurt. It is one among several animals that are important to the H'rê and which are imagined as standing one upon the other. The buffalo is the foundation of H'rê life, both spiritually and materially, and standing (figuratively) on the buffalo is the Ky Da. Standing on the Ky Da is the Nhim. Standing on the Nhim is the Rat, and on the rat the Rooster. These five animals rest upon each other with the buffalo as the foundation. It is explained in H'rê society that without the buffalo, Ky Da, Nhim and rat, the people could not survive. The rooster is important because it has the power to call the sun, the rain and the wind from the sky into the life of the H'rê. The Da Tree is sacred as the home of the forest spirit of Vang Y Phu.

TELLING THE TRUTH

The sixth function of the elder council is to decide what to do when someone tells something that is not true about someone else. Gossip, in this sense, is very taboo in H'rê society, and lying is seen as particularly bad.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

The seventh function is to punish people who have sex together without marriage. They call this an immoral relationship, and they encourage people who have sex to marry.

NO STEALING

The eighth function is to punish people for theft and to encourage people not to steal.

These several functions of the elder council are aimed at governing the behavior between humans and nature, and between humans and humans. The elder council is in a final decision making position with regard to social governance issues, many of these would be settled at the household or extended family level and would not need to reach the elder council. Furthermore, the elder council does not deal directly with issues of rituality, as these are the responsibility of each H'rê individual in Violak, except that the elder council decides on the exact date on which particular communal rituals or ceremonies should be held. The many cases this will be the decision of the man who is highest in prestige in the elder council because of his deep ecological and spiritual knowledge. He you might say, is the final, final, decision maker.

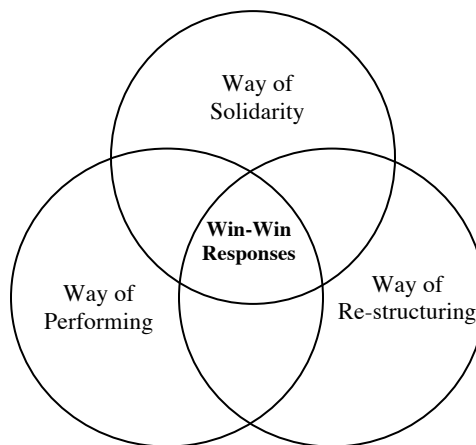
DEALING WITH OUTSIDE INTERVENTIONS

The ninth function of the elder council is to make the final decision whether or not to accept any intervention from outside, particularly where there is a concern that it that might threaten to hurt any spirit of nature in the surrounding landscape, or any relationship between H'rê and those spirits. Examples of such decisions are described in the next Chapter.

Chapter Five

Intervention and Responses

Those who love freedom and are looking for its real expression, as are the H'rê in Violak village, are people who respect and listen to nature, live in harmony with it and protect it from outside interventions. Freedom and well-being is given equally to everyone by nature. This gift, however, can only be enjoyed and preserved forever by persistent and loyal people like the H'rê in Violak village'.



H'rê Natural Resistance to overcome intervention that threatening and damaging to their own philosophy and Identity.

NAMING THE VILLAGE

‘After the Vietnam victory over the American invaders in 1975’, elder A Xi shared, ‘the Kinh Vietnamese officials went to Violak to work and renamed the village ‘Group 14’ of Hieu commune, which made us very confused. Then from 1997 to 2007, they named us ‘Village 7’ of Po E commune, which we didn’t understand, either. From 2008 to 2012, we saw the name ‘Village 7 of Violak’ shown on the papers, which made us confused again. We just simply call ourselves the H’rê in Violak village’.

In H’rê language, Vi mean ‘human’ and Olak means ‘a stream of water’. The name of the village therefore means ‘people living along the water stream’. This is a meaningful name for a village and the village had this name in 1957. In 1975, however, the government changed it to ‘Corporation No. 14’ and after 1997 to ‘Group No. 7’. Then in 2008 the village was renamed ‘Group 7 (Violak)’. It is easy to imagine how the people of Violak, with their close spiritual relation to their natural surroundings would find it difficult to identify with such alienating technocratic labels and the people of Violak did not do so. Instead, they stuck with their original name, and through their steadfast identification with their original name, the official name for the village returned to ‘Violak’ in 2012.

IMPOSED HYBRID RICE SPECIES

Five or seven years ago, the District Agricultural Extension Department began a movement for the introduction new hybrid rice species in Kon Plong district. They came to Violak village but the villagers said no. Because for H’rê rice has a spirit and they cannot betray that spirit, they need to nurture it for their own spiritual and material survival. That is why they have a rice spirit ritual, a rice store ritual, a water spirit ritual and a forest spirit ritual governing how they should behave toward their rice. Rice supports them, not only as food, but also as the principal ingredient for the Ghe wine which is used in offerings to the spirits of nature. It is understandable therefore that they would refuse the introduction of something that would disturb their whole spiritual ecology. They didn’t even have to think about it. It wouldn’t have deserved a moment’s consideration. But this doesn’t mean that the H’rê are resistant to anything new. Thirty years ago they welcomed two new species of rice that had been given to them as a gift by H’rê people from a different area, and they now name those two new species of rice after those people. For the H’rê, in terms of the H’rê way of life, it was meaningful to accept such a gift. But the introduction of hybrid species of rice with no spirit could only offend the water spirit, the spirit of rice, the spirit of the wine and so on. In other words it would offend everything they believed in.

TOP-DOWN STANDARDIZATION OF CULTURE

In 2012, the Prime Minister of Vietnam passed decree No. 298 saying that Kon Plong district, with about 80% of primary forest cover, should become a centre for eco-tourism. Immediately Kon Tum province arranged a survey to decide which beautiful and traditional villages in Kon Plong district should become ‘Culture Villages’ for the entertainment of tourists. Violak was chosen as a top priority. Being a Culture Village means that you have to satisfy 17 criteria set by the government, not just for the Central Highland, but for the whole of Vietnam, regardless of differences of culture and environment. According to H’rê, however, culture is about the interaction between a people and their natural and spiritual landscape, and for Violak it is about interacting with the natural and spiritual landscape that surrounds Violak. In this respect they have a number of cultural criteria that they have to fulfill – or taboos that they have to avoid – such as not hurting the Ky Da animal, not telling lies about other people, not betraying one’s wife or husband, not encroaching on another’s farm, not stealing, not marrying inside three generations. These taboos are what Violak see as their culture and they bear no relation to the government’s 17 criteria. There is a complete miss-match between the government’s abstract criteria for what constitutes ‘culture’ and how the H’rê relate culturally to their environment, such that the only way that Violak could be turned into a Culture Village is by destroying its culture and imposing a set of criteria unsuited to their environment. It is not surprising then that such an imposition would be strongly resisted.

BUFFALO SACRIFICE FOR PERFORMANCE PURPOSES

Three years ago, the Culture Department of Kon Tum province wanted to give Violak village one buffalo and 50 million VND for them to perform a buffalo sacrifice. The reason was that Kon Plong district in which Violak is located is very famous for its beautiful landscape and forest cover, and the Prime Minister of Vietnam had decided that Kon Plong district should become an eco-tourism district, and that the country should



Figure 17. Village discussion. Photo by SPERI, October 2014



Figure 18. Ha Lenh Stream. Photo by SPERI, October 2014

build there a second Da Lat, given that the first Da Lat in Lam Dong province of the Central Highlands was already damaged by over exploitation. The district authorities saw Violak, with its beautiful village, beautiful people, and beautiful landscape, as a good candidate for becoming a ‘Culture Village’ for attracting tourists in the future. That is why the local authority wanted Violak village to perform a buffalo sacrifice, so that they report to the provincial authorities that in Violak they still had the buffalo sacrifice and therefore Kon Plong district was an ideal site for eco-tourism development.

When this message came to the Po E Commune, the Party Leader and the Commune President, who are both Vietnamese Kinh, welcomed the proposal. Only the Vice-President of Po E Commune who is H'rê was opposed to it, but he could not go against the Party Leader and the President. So he brought the message to the village that they were going to give them one buffalo and 50 million VND to perform the buffalo sacrifice. The elder council sat together to discuss the proposal and they said that the buffalo did not come from Violak, and that the decision to kill the buffalo was not made by Yang, the sky spirit as would be normal for a buffalo sacrifice, it was made by the provincial authorities, and not for the normal reason a buffalo sacrifice would be held. So they said no to the commune authorities, they would not receive the buffalo or the 50

million VND. But the commune authorities were not confident to reply negatively to the district and the province, so negotiations continued until the elder council submitted the issue to the most prestigious elder in Violak, Mr. A Xi, in order to get a final decision. And Mr. A Xi said no, then all the H'rê people, including the Vice-president of the Commune then said no also, and the Kon Tum Culture Department had to accept the decision.

Given the importance of the buffalo sacrifice in H'rê life in resolving the disconnection between human life and the spirit of nature, with the buffalo standing in for the human in a propitiatory sacrifice to Yang (see description of buffalo sacrifice above), it is not difficult to understand why the elder council could not agree to the provincial authorities' attempt to contrive a sacrifice for publicity purposes. They simply have more respect for the integrity of their beliefs and practices.

PRIVATIZED LAND RIGHT TITLES

In 2012, the Kon Plong district People's Committee, following criticism from the central government about the Central Highlands that almost all the forest and forest land in the Province had been taken from the indigenous people and handed over to State Forest Enterprises and Army companies for commercial exploitation, took the initiative of return to the H'rê people of Violak 174 ha of forest which had been administratively assigned to the control of Watershed Management Board of Thach Nam. To do so, they selected 21 progressive and knowledgeable young farmers whom they thought would be capable of taking control of the land and exploiting it commercially under the 'Production Forest' category of the government'. When these 21 young H'rê farmers returned to the village after receiving the land titles (Red Books) from the Kon Plong People's Committee they were feeling very strange in their hearts. They felt confused. Having been given exclusive land right titles by the Province they felt that something was not right.

Their first action on returning to the village was to reveal their feelings to the elders. The elders subsequently called a meeting for the whole village to try and find a way of overcoming the 21 young farmers' feelings of crisis, and they came up with the solution of moving the 21 title holders to becoming 21 leaders of 21 teams to manage the whole 300 ha of Vang Ha Ro, not just the 174 ha that had been converted into 21 land titles. Each of the 21 team leaders would then lead a group of households selected from among their own residential group, and together all 21 teams would manage the whole of Vang Ha Ro together.

From the H'rê perspective, Vang Ha Ro does not exist in isolation. It is indivisibly connected to Vang Y Phu and Vang Ha Lenh in supplying nutrition to the rice

fields as a gift from the spirit of nature to which they have to answer by nurturing the land and worshipping its spirit, for fear of punishment if they misuse it. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why the 21 recipients of the government's individualized land titles felt uncomfortable - they had been made *victims* of the government's policy of distributing privatized land use titles and put in the invidious position of being differentiated from the rest of the community.

They were being made complicit in the government's dismemberment of nature and severing of the community's relation to Vang Ha Ro. Naturally they were worried about the social and spiritual consequences for this for them and for the whole community. The solution of moving the 21 young title holders to become 21 team leaders for the whole community to manage the whole of Vang Pa Ro (not just the 174 ha) was to reunify the community and nature by distributing the responsibility for Vang Ha Ro equally among the community and incorporating the 174 ha back into the whole of Vang Ha Ro.

INDIVIDUALIZED FOREST PROTECTION CONTRACTS

One day the village leader returned from a meeting of the Commune and District authorities and reported to the elders that the district and commune will contract with seven households in the village to receive money in return for protecting the forest on Vang Pa Ro. The elders' response was to call a meeting of all 72 households of Violak where it was decided that it will be the village who decides who receives the money, not the government.

They were concerned that if seven people selected by the government were to receive money for protecting Vang Pa Ro, what affect would that have on the villagers' beliefs and customs of sharing responsibility for Vang Pa Ro and on the daily livelihoods of the villagers who obtained fuel wood and 43 species of edible vegetable from the forest surrounding Violak. And if those 7 were to have sole responsibility for managing Vang Pa Ro, how will the other 65 households fulfill their spiritual responsibility toward Vang Pa Ro? These were the questions that concerned the villagers and elders.

So they decided that they would choose the seven recipients of the contract money, and they would choose them on the basis of who needs money right now, for example for building a house, and those recipients would not receive that money each year for ever. Once they have solved their money problem, the contract money would be moved to another set of households who had a need for money. Hence, the contract money would be circulated on the basis of who was in need.

Meanwhile responsibility for protecting Vang Pa Ro would remain the joint responsibility of all 72 households, not just those seven temporarily receiving the contract

money, for how else would the other households be able to satisfy their yearning to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities toward Vang Pa Ro? To please the government, the village accepted the seven contracts for forest protection and the money that went along with it, but they distributed the money and the responsibilities for forest protection in their own way, consistent with their own view of joint community responsibility toward each other and toward nature. By doing so, as with the case of the 21 land titles, they resisted the social differentiating and nature dismembering consequences of government interventions.

FINANCING HOUSING SUPPORT

Another well intentioned action of the government was to build a house for one of the households that was too poor to build one themselves, and they provide 20 million VND for the purpose. But the house would have been of government design with none of the cultural features of the traditional H'rê houses that specifically connect them to the spiritual landscape. To overcome this threat to the village's cultural integrity, the elders agreed to receiving the money, but they told the government that they would build the house themselves, which they did. And now the poorest household in the village lives in the finest house. And this makes everyone in the village happy.



Figure 19: Violak Windy Road. Photo by SPERI, Oct 2014



Figure 20: Violak stream snails. Photo by SPERI, Oct 2014

MOVING THE VILLAGE

Before 1987, the village of Violak was located closer to the border with Quang Ngai province, but in 1987 a landslide damaged several houses and killed some animals. The government of Kon Tum province decided to move the H'rê people of Violak out of

the area, but the council of elders decided instead to move the village further up stream to its present site in order to be closer to Vang Y Phu and Vang Ha Lenh, their two most important spiritual sites.

They could not accept to be moved elsewhere. Moving a village is a very important decision, for whenever H'rê people move it means them changing their relationship to the landscape that nature has offered to them and this is not something that they can do easily. Deciding when and where to move the village is a function of the elder council and the elders need to explain their decision to the H'rê people according to the H'rê belief system, H'rê customary laws and the norms of behavior toward the nature spirits.

UNDERSTANDING VILLAGE RESISTANCE AND LEADERSHIP



Figure 21: Nêu spirit. Photo by SPERI, March 2015



Figure 22: Kitchen impliments. Photo by SPERI, Oct 2014

The key to understanding the resistance of Violak village to outside interventions lies in the relationship of each individual to the spirits of nature in the landscape surrounding the village.

This relationship is expressed through a series of rituals and ceremonies that are entered into as persons, as households, and as groups of households related through

descendants of the same grandparent. Through these rituals, belief in spirits dwelling in every corner of the natural environment is nurtured and sustained, and transferred into the daily behavior of every individual as voluntary acts of worship. These shared beliefs and behaviors constitute the cement that connects different generations, different individuals, different families, and different groups of families together, jointly and singularly to the natural landscape, which is itself spiritually and physically interconnected – from the highest point of Vang Y Phu to Vang Ha Lenh (Stream Spirit) to Vang Ha Ro (Forest Spirit) , to Vang Pa Ro to Vi Nong Sticky Rice Farming and Vi Olak Rice Farming - through the natural flow of water and nutrition, understood by the people of Violak as gifts from the spirit of nature, gifts that themselves also have a spirit.

There are different ceremonies throughout the year for each individual landscape spirit – for Vang Y Phu, Vang Ha Lenh, Vang Ha Rô, Vang Pa Rô, Vi Nong Sticky Rice Farming and Violak Rice Farming area, etc. Compare this to the system of governance by the Thach Nam WMB that brings together *the whole 1,100 hectares under one undifferentiated land title*, and then contracts with selected individuals to protect or exploit arbitrarily excised segments of the whole. The institutional mode in operation here is entirely without connection to the spirits of nature, and *without recognition of the spiritual responsibility of humans toward nature*.

The strength of Violak in resisting such aberrations comes from the *inner reward* that each individual experiences as singular or joint actors acting with reverence toward a landscape of great natural and spiritual diversity. Through heartfelt acts of generosity toward each other and toward the various spirits of nature, the H'rê people believe their own life will bear many 'sprouts' – a suitably naturalist H'rê concept that might be likened to the Buddhist concept of 'merit'. The point is that there is an inherent desire on the part of each H'rê individual to do well toward nature and well toward one's neighbors for the intrinsic reward of the wellbeing that it brings to everyone.

From this philosophical and ethical outlook how were H'rê to respond to the local government authorities selecting a few of their number and assigning to them the exclusive responsibility of administering a section of the natural and spiritual landscape bureaucratically excised as 'production forest'. They responded in terms of their own understanding. They *disregarded their newly acquired individually held land-use titles and redefined themselves as team leaders* in a joint community effort to nurture the whole forest area, and not just the segment bureaucratically marked off for them by the Watershed Management Board. The same redefinition of the government's intentions was made with respect to the seven contracts to protect the 184 hectares of Vang Pa Ro. The same philosophical and ethical outlook also explains why industrially produced species of rice were kept out of the environment through fear of offending the spirit of the traditional rice species gifted to them by nature.

But what enabled them to resist these impositions, especially in the Central Highland where the government has ruled for decades with a mind set of control without understanding, participation and encouragement? It is not easy for powerless and officially denigrated ethnic minorities to resist the power of the state – especially in the Central Highland. And yet the H'rê people of Violak village have done so quietly, assuredly, with no expression of conflict. Has it something to do with the characteristics of leadership in their community? Do they have a strong inflexible leader? No, what has enabled them to resist government interventions is the general character of their community. All the villagers are one, with the same beliefs, the same behaviors and the same norms toward the natural landscape surrounding them. The leadership characteristic of Violak village is the leadership of each individual living in harmony with each other individual under the one customary law which is also the law of each individual. Such a form of leadership cannot be centralized in one person or even into one group of elders who might then be bought by corruption to violate their beliefs. *It is embedded in each individual following their own desire for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of all.*

CONCLUSION

This research of Violak village is presented as a living example of ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’ – a condition in which “human and nature live in harmony with each other, enjoying happiness and wellbeing in interdependent self-determination” which is “daily exercised, voluntarily and legally at individual and communal levels in order to consolidate the sharing of responsibilities toward all living things, for today as well as for the generations of tomorrow” (SPERI, *Re-gaining Livelihood Sovereignty*, 2009).

What is striking about the ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’ of Violak village is that it is built upon an inherent desire on the part of every Violak person to be living in a ‘state of grace’ toward the spirits of the natural landscape that is surrounding them, and, by extension, to live in a state of harmony with every other member of their community. It is from each member’s feeling of self-responsibility for nurturing nature and their own community that Violak village draws its strength and its identity and the basis for its ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’.

What is also striking about the Violak case is how so many government interventions have threatened to undermine this basis for ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’. From attempting to rename Violak village ‘Corporation No 14’ or ‘Group No. 7’, to promoting the introduction of hybrid rice species, imposing inauthentic criteria for Violak to become a ‘culture village’ and seeking to commercialize their sacred buffalo sacrifice, privatizing land-use rights and forest protection contracts, stereotyping housing support, and proposing to move the village away from its spiritual landscape – each of these government interventions has threatened to strike at the heart of Violak sociality by disrupting their spiritual relationship to their environment and their solidarity with each other, by de-socializing the environment and introducing processes of privatization, individualization and social differentiation.

And what is equally, or even more striking about Violak village is how the people have been able to peacefully, quietly, and determinedly resist these interventions. What is it that has empowered them to do so? The H’rê people of Violak have been able to preserve their ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’ against threatening interventions because of their assuredness as the recipients and custodians of the gifts of nature, such that any action that threatens to violate that relationship is simply unthinkable.

The result is that today Violak is a village of abundance, prosperity, happiness and wellbeing, and we can confirm from their example the key factors of ‘*Livelihood Sovereignty*’ - 1) right to land; 2) rights to religion; 3) the right to customary law; 4) the right to decide one’s own actions; and 5) the right to co-govern – and the indicators of village wellbeing – 1) self-determination; 2) self-responsibility; 3) self-confidence; 4) small, 5) slow, 6) smart and 7) sustainability in nurturing and continuing their way of life. Like Bhutan, with its triple foundation in Buddhism, the Monarchy and Constitutional Democratic

Government upholding indicators of National Happiness at the level of the Nation in a volatile environment of Nation States intent upon maximizing production for economic growth, so Violak, a village of only 243 people in 72 households belonging to 10 family groupings, but surrounded by a larger society intent on chasing after money and commodities in a market led drive for increases in GNP, it is standing firm after over 50 years of resisting any outside intervention that does not fit with its own norms, its own laws, and its own values toward nature.

OPEN DISCUSSION

From this example of Violak we would like to call upon any individual, organization, community, or nation to contemplate and critically consider what are the factors and indicators of wellbeing and happiness?

According to your understanding, how do they relate to the situation of natural resource management? From your values, how do you value natural resources – as resources to be exploited for profit making, or as people like H'rê do, as sacred and spiritual?

And what would you choose, small-scale farming for families and communities, self-sufficient and self-reliant, living well and feeling confident in grace with nature, listening to nature, understanding nature, following nature and worshipping nature in all its diversity, or would you follow the model of mono-culture and hybridity, commodity production and consumption?

These are questions that confront indigenous ethnic minority communities in the Mekong region daily, and other indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. The individuals from these communities who encourage other members of their community to voluntarily maintain loyal relations with nature, and who show full responsibility for their society within the context of national laws, we call 'Community Entrepreneurs'. They are prestigious persons who build their prestige and capability by convincingly spreading their own philosophy and identity through their daily behavior toward other community members and nature. Their capital/assets are in the form of prestige and inspiration coming from their capability of leading the community to voluntarily create additional cultural and material values on the basis of the fundamental values that the community worships and respects as forming the norms and customs (identity) of that community.

More simply, Community Entrepreneurs can be defined as brave and venturesome persons, who create free spaces and who are well aware that freedom nurtures the creativeness necessary in order to operate and govern the development of their own value and choices for their own philosophy and identity independently and confidently from generation one another. They have freedom in mind, self-confidence and responsibility for community decisions. Hence, they are worshipped and respected as spiritual leaders, who help the community overcome difficulties and challenges as well as personal temptations to maintain and develop traditional customary values, ethical and cultural characteristics of the community in nurturing nature for harmonious, safe and autonomous development. The non-material values created by the community entrepreneurs and their communities are towards ECOLOGY, SOCIETY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE OF ALL LIVING THINGS.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHT

The author confirms that the intellectual property right of this research belongs to the H'rê people in Violak village via the enthusiastic explanations of the village Elders' Council, key farmers at Violak village such as Mr. A Pan, Y Nam, Y Buong, Y Hien, the 21 H'rê men who handled the 21 Land Right Titles of 174 ha forest in Vang Ha Ro, A Chon, Vice Chairman of the Po E communal People's Committee, Mr. A Son, Vice Director of the Cultural Department of Kon Plong district, Ms. Y Nga, Vice Chairwoman of the Po E communal People's Council. The information relating to H'rê people, their laws and solutions and responses to overcome interventions during the previous 40 years have been recorded, video-taped and stored at the library of the Community Entrepreneur Development Institute (CENDI).

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So far there is very little research done regarding to H'rê ethnic group. Therefore, readers' critiques and comments on our work with the H'rê people in Violak village will be precious and respected.

Tran Thi Lanh



Livelihood Sovereignty and Village Wellbeing

H'rê Ethnic Minority People in Violak Village

Po E Commune, Kon Plong District, Kon Tum Province

Central Highland Vietnam

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Author: Tran thi Lanh

Co- Editor: Prof. Dr. Friedhelm Göldenboth, Office: Naturelife International , Karlstr. 7 71638
Ludwigsburg, Germany.

Private: Hauptstr. 9, 72147 Nehren, friedgoelten@gmx.de;

Dr.Keith Barber, senior lecture, Anthropologist, Waikato University, kbarber@waikato.ac.nz

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Consciousness



H'rê Village Rice Stores. Photo by Tran thi Lanh, August 2013

H'rê people Share – Responsibility and Self-Determination

'The H'rê in Violak village believe that the nature surrounding their village is a spiritual ecosystem. Therefore, the culture of worshipping nature and avoiding any behavior that may hurt the spiritual ecosystem has become the Norms of Behavior of the village as well as the Law imposed on all villagers. This philosophy of behavior toward the surrounding Nature has become the very 'breath' of daily life of the H'rê, passed on from generation to generation as the essence of a truly civilized society'.