

THE TYPES OF AUTHORITY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE K’HO AND MNÔNG COMMUNITIES IN THE SOUTH-CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The article is grounded in Weber’s perspective on three societal authority types (traditional authority, rational-legal authority, and charismatic authority) and analyses social control within the K’ho and Mnông communities in the South-Central Highlands of Vietnam according to these types of authority. By collecting data through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires, the article provides a comprehensive review of the three types of authority involved in the community management and control of the K’ho and Mnông in this region. The findings reveal that, depending on the historical period, a particular type of authority tends to rise to prominence, exerting significant influence over the

community. Another type may occupy an intermediate position, while the remaining type gradually loses its sway, becoming more of a traditional symbol rather than playing an active role in managing the community.

Keywords: Traditional authority, rational-legal authority, charismatic authority, South-Central Highlands, K'ho and Mnông communities

INTRODUCTION

Authority is the power vested in an individual or a group of individuals over a community of people, and this power is acknowledged and accepted by the members of that community. Such authority is typically derived from the framework of a political institution, a religious organisation, or the customary laws of the community (Lachs 1999). The practice of authority is a continual and widespread occurrence in society, playing a fundamental role in maintaining social order. It extends beyond politics and is evident in various domains, including organisations and associations (Cline 2012). As Weber (1958) opined:

Authority means the probability that a specific command will be obeyed. Such obedience may feed on diverse motives. It may be determined by sheer interest situation, hence by the compliant actor's calculation of expediency; by mere custom, that is the actor's inarticulate habituation to routine behaviour; or by mere affect, that is purely personal devotion of the governed (1).

Weber (1958) also introduced three fundamental types of authority in society such as traditional authority, rational-legal authority, and charismatic authority. These three types of power can be explained as follows: (1) Traditional authority is established on age-old traditions and derives its legitimacy from customary law and, as such, the ruler's authority is rooted in "unwritten law" and often carries a sacred significance within the community; (2) rational-legal authority is grounded in legality and can be enshrined in a Constitution, and this type of authority is recognised as the legal authority that represents the governing system and is marked by rational organisation within the social community; and (3) charismatic authority arises from exceptional or even supernatural qualities. Charismatic figures possess unique talents, provide revelations, or are said to possess supernatural powers, as acknowledged by the community. They can attract and captivate the community and are embraced and esteemed by the community (Blau 1963; Huỳnh 2016, 2017).

Depending on the political context of ethnic communities, as well as the specific circumstances within each social organisation, group, or religious entity, various types of authority occupy distinct roles in control and management. For instance, there exists a form of authority that may suit a particular historical period within a given political context. When transposed to a different political context, this authority loses its influence over the community and is supplanted by a more suitable authority. Another example is the type of authority that signifies the significance of a particular group of individuals within a specific domain. Nevertheless, continual adjustments and actions are made to assert control and governance over the broader community, as is evident in the case of religious authority. Although Weber did not explicitly address this issue, our research in local ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands (vùng Nam Tây Nguyên) of Vietnam such as the K'ho (Coho) and Mnông communities, clearly illustrates these dynamics. The concepts used in this article, such as community and community management, help to represent a group of people living in a specific area (which could be a village, a hamlet, or a settlement) and are governed by one or more types of authority during a certain period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The South-Central Highlands of Vietnam encompasses three provinces: Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, and Lâm Đồng (see Figure 1). This region has a rich history of habitation by various ethnic minorities, including the Mnông and K'ho. According to the General Statistics Office, the combined population of these two ethnic groups was 285,575 individuals in 2020. Within these figures, Đắk Lắk province was home to 48,505 Mnông people and 180 K'ho people; Đắk Nông province housed 50,718 Mnông people and 124 K'ho people. In Lâm Đồng province, there were 10,517 Mnông people and 179,531 K'ho people. Consequently, the primary areas of residence for the Mnông people are Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông provinces, while Lâm Đồng province predominantly accommodates the K'ho community.

The K'ho and Mnông communities have been the subject of research by numerous social sciences and humanities scholars. Specifically, the research by Ngô and Huỳnh (2017) demonstrated that the two ethnic groups, K'ho and Mnông, are local inhabitants of the South-Central Highlands region. This is because they underwent an early settlement process in this area and have constructed and melded their cultural identity in association

with the local ecological environment (Ngô and Huỳnh 2017). In particular, during their extended settlement period, the K'ho and Mnông people engaged in interactions involving various aspects of ethnic relations, including cohabitation, intermarriage, cultural exchange, acculturation, a similar economic environment, and commonalities in social organisation. Consequently, a sense of ethnic cohesion has developed between the two ethnic groups. In certain instances, local subgroups of the Mnông ethnic group, such as the Chil (Cil) and Lat communities, have even integrated into the K'ho ethnic group (Phan 1977, 2005; Mạc 1983). In addition, research conducted by Dournes (1977), Hickey (1982), and Honda (2009) focused on addressing authority dynamics among the Jörai (Gia Rai) people, as well as the socio-historical aspects of ethnic groups such as the Bahnar (Ba Na), Jörai, Sedang (Xơ Đăng), and the social and ritual transformations among the K'ho-Chil people in the Central Highlands (Tây Nguyên) region in general, and specifically in the South-Central Highlands region. Additionally, the National Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities (Vietnam) has gathered numerous articles on the Central Highlands and published two books titled *Contemporary Social Issues in the Development of the Central Highlands* (1989) and *Some Socio-economic Development Issues of Highland Ethnic Villages* (2002), which have content related to economic and religious issues of ethnic minorities in the region. In these papers, contributions by Vương Xuân Tình and Khổng Diễn highlight the challenges that local minority communities face in their traditional economic activities, such as challenges in the context of mixing with other migrant ethnic groups such as Việt (*Kinh* people), Mông, Dao, Tày, and Thái. Local minority communities consistently experience a “pressure” stemming from land-sharing, the advancement of science and technology, and the market economy. If they fail to adapt, the consequences may be that they become marginalised or “indebted” and forced to work as labourers on their own land. Nguyễn’s research (2003) also reveals that land cultivation issues and land allocation policies for local ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands have altered the traditional economic, cultural, and social activities of the inhabitants in the region. Additionally, studies by Phạm (2009, 2011, 2013, 2014), Honda and Pham (2016), and Ngô and Huỳnh (2017) analyse issues related to economic, cultural, and social transformations among the local minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region, with an emphasis on the economic and social changes within the K'ho and Mnông communities in the context of the renewal policies in Vietnam since 1986. Also of note, research by Ngọc et al. (2013), Nguyễn (2014), Mai (2015), and Salemink (2003, 2015) focuses on

issues of propagation and development of Christianity (including Catholicism and Protestantism) within the local ethnic minority communities in the region. Their studies also examine the impact of Christianity on the transformation of their cultural and social structures in recent times.

Accordingly, the ongoing discussion centres on the fact that both the K'ho and Mnông communities, belonging to the *Môn-Khmer* language group, have a deep-rooted history of settlement in the South-Central Highlands region, and are influenced by sociopolitical dynamics, and have the same religion (each community encompasses two religious practices: Catholicism and Protestantism). However, the management of these communities by various authorities remains largely unexplored and unresolved in the current body of research literature. While recent research by Huỳnh (2017) has touched on this issue, it primarily focuses on a small group of Protestant adherents (K'ho-Chil) within the Lang Biang Biosphere Reserve in Lâm Đồng Province.

To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of community governance within the K'ho and Mnông communities, each within its specific sociopolitical context in the South-Central Highlands region, this article applies Weber's view for analysing types of authority. Although Weber's types of authority continue to be a subject of debate, as evidenced by research conducted by Marcson (1960), Blau and Scott (1962), Willer (1967), and Satow (1975), we still find that Weber's perspective remains a trusted and applied framework in recent studies of community management, such as those by Vanagunas (1989), Riesebrodt (1999), Adair-Toteff (2005), and Houghton (2010). Therefore, we also employ this perspective for the article but emphasise the process of role transformation for each type of authority within the unique socio-political context of the K'ho and Mnông local minority communities.

BACKGROUND OF THE K'HO AND MNÔNG COMMUNITIES

The K'ho and Mnông people are two of the thirty-five ethnic minorities in Vietnam today. These two ethnic communities, along with others like the Mạ, Êđê, and Churu, are considered local residents in the South-Central Highlands region of Vietnam (Ngô and Huỳnh 2017), because of their long history of settlement in this region. These two ethnic groups, along with other local communities, have a tradition of subsistence farming. They grow crops such as rice, maize, and beans on their cultivated land. Additionally, they engage in raising livestock like buffalos, pigs, chickens, and more for use as offerings in rituals. The traditional crafts of these two ethnic groups, such

as making farming implements, brocade weaving, and making stem liquor (*ruou cần*), are also quite renowned in the South-Central Highlands (Huỳnh 2022). Currently, their economic activities have undergone significant changes, including the integration of mechanisation in agriculture, the use of fertilisers and pesticides in farming, and a shift away from traditional crops. The prevalent cultivation is of cash crops such as coffee, cacao, cashews, and fruit trees (Tôn and Huỳnh 2020; Huỳnh 2022).

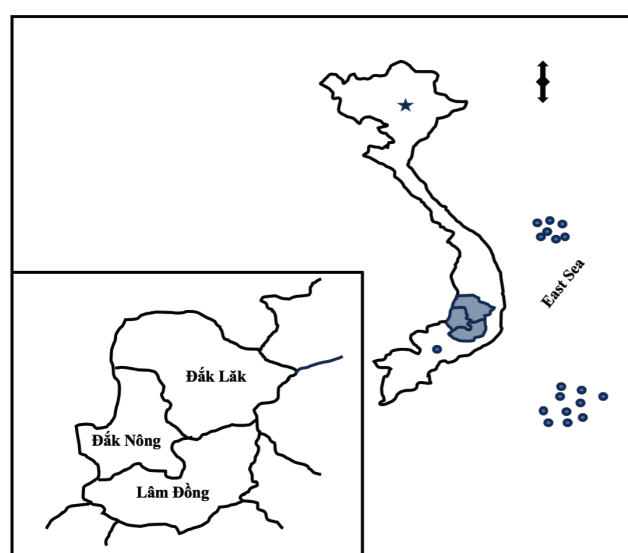


Figure 1: Map of the South-Central Highlands region, Vietnam.

Source: Adapted from Thanh Tien (2019).

The changes in their economic activities have also led to cultural transformations in various aspects of their lives, such as clothing, cuisine, and housing, which have adopted the style of the Việt people. Particularly, their traditional beliefs and rituals have not remained intact as they used to be, primarily due to the influence of cultural exchange between different ethnic groups, economic changes, and most importantly, the fact that both ethnic groups converted to Catholicism and Protestantism in the early decades of the twentieth century (Mai 2019).

This transformation has also strongly affected the community governance of these two ethnic groups. The K'ho and Mnông people belong to the *Môn-Khmer* language group, and their family structure follows a matrilineal system (Tôn and Huỳnh 2020). The most influential figure in the family is the eldest woman. However, community management falls under the authority of men, particularly the village elders (*già làng*). In traditional society, the village elder was the individual selected from among the men as the head of their lineages within the village. The village elder played a role in community governance through customary practices. Alongside the village elder, shamans (*thầy*

cúng) also hold an important position in the community. While the village elder manages the social aspects of the community, the shaman oversees the spiritual and ritual aspects (Huỳnh 2020). These were two types of authority within the community management (the people management in the residence area) of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in general and the K’ho and Mnông communities in particular in tradition.

However, over time and in adaptation to changed political contexts in the region, the status of these types of authority can be replaced by each other. When one type of authority is replaced, it does not necessarily lead to its disappearance from the ethnic community; instead, it may transform into another role, such as serving as a spiritual symbol within the community or contributing to enhancing the status of another type of authority.

METHODS

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolving authority structures in K’ho and Mnông community management in their residence area across various political contexts, we selected villages (referred to as *bons*) with a significant number of families from these two ethnic groups for field research throughout 2022. Among these villages, those inhabited by the K’ho people were all located in Lâm Đồng province, while the Mnông villages were situated in Đắk Song district, Đắk Nông province. The names and specific locations of these *bons* are as follows:

1. K’ho Catholic *bons* include B’dor (in Lộc An Commune, Bảo Lâm District), B’nor A, Đăng Gia, Đăng Kia, Đung 1-2, and Đung K’noh (in Lạc Dương Town, Lạc Dương District).
2. K’ho Protestant *bons* include B’ko (in Lộc An Commune, Bảo Lâm District), Đăng Gia Dệt B, and Đung 2 (in Lạc Dương Town, Lạc Dương District).
3. Mnông Catholic *bons* include Ding Plei (in Xuân Trường Commune) and Nirang Lu (in Đắk N’drung Commune).
4. Mnông Protestant *bons* include Ding Plei (in Xuân Trường Commune) and Bu Boang (in Đắk N’drung Commune).

To directly obtain information from the community (people living in *bon*) during the fieldwork, we used data collection methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews with key interviewees, and informal

conversations with numerous community members. Additionally, we administered questionnaire surveys to obtain comprehensive quantitative data across both ethnic communities. In terms of participant observation, our team and collaborators stayed with respected individuals within the community, such as village elders and Protestant pastors. During participant observation, we paid particular attention to various issues, including the roles and positions of village elders, pastors, deacons, priests, and local officials, such as village heads, police officers, and commune presidents. These observations focused on their involvement in addressing social management matters, such as disputes, conflict resolution within ethnic communities, religious affairs, and issues related to theft. Data collected through this method were documented in fieldwork diaries and subsequently synthesised and analysed in the article.

Regarding in-depth interviews, we selected ten key interviewees or “informants” from the two communities, with three individuals considered particularly significant. These key informants included one clergyman (pastor/deacon or priest, depending on the community’s religion), one village elder, and one local official. The age range of these informants spanned from 52 to 65 years old. All key informants were male. Additionally, we engaged in discussions with numerous other community members (both male and female). These individuals are aged between 40 and 55 years old. They are heads of nuclear families within the community. The in-depth interviews we conducted primarily focused on the perspectives, operational methods, and problem-solving approaches of individuals holding authority in society. The interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language, with the assistance of local translators (community collaborators) when informants encountered language difficulties. Each interview typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Depending on the information provided by each informant, one to two additional interviews were conducted with the same individuals to supplement the data. These supplementary interviews also spanned 60 to 90 minutes. In total, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with the ten key informants. All interviews were conducted at the informants’ residences and recorded using smartphones with their consent. The recorded interviews were later transcribed and used for analysis in the article.

Conversations with community members were typically brief, lasting from 15 to 30 minutes per individual, and were conducted in various settings, including their homes, and fields during work, before attending religious rites or masses at churches or chapels, and at local community cafes. These conversations generally revolved around personal life histories, life experiences, past conflicts that required the involvement of community leaders

for resolution, and the informants' perspectives on the effectiveness of these leaders in resolving community issues. These conversations were conducted in Vietnamese and were noted down in fieldwork notebooks. This data source was employed to analyse the community context and assess the efficacy of the existing forms of authority within these ethnic minority communities today.

Furthermore, a survey made via questionnaires was conducted, totalling 200 household surveys. One hundred questionnaire sheets were administered to each ethnic group following the snowball sampling method. The content of the questionnaire was presented through thirty closed questions related to management in the social community, the role of different authority types in conflict resolution, the economic issues, and religious problems in the community. In addition to the data collected from the community, we also referenced secondary data sources from research, books, and journal articles by authors in Vietnam and abroad who have explored this topic.

The results discovered are the types of authority mentioned by Weber (1958), which can be found in the management and social control of the ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region of Vietnam. Nonetheless, contingent upon the sociopolitical context of the community during specific historical phases, various forms of authority emerge. Some assert a clear central leadership role within the community, while others are compelled to step aside and assume a symbolic function within the community. Another type of authority assumes a neutral role, neither losing its power entirely nor playing a central role in community management. This is specifically demonstrated through the research results and discussion in this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Authority in the Context of Traditional Society

The concept of traditional society is used in the article to refer to the time when the society of local ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region had not yet been subject to interference from the political institution of the State, which is determined to be before the 1960s of the twentieth century. During this time, they were still living a closed life in the *bon* and were self-sufficient in the community (Huỳnh 2022). There were usually about 5–10 long houses in the *bon* of local ethnic minority communities, and each house corresponded to a family unit. The long houses were usually located close to

each other and created a *bon*. The *bon* lived in isolation and had land for its own cultivation.

The social structure within the *bons* was characterised by a closed nature and was governed by different forms of authority at various levels. When considering the family level, the K'ho and Mnông ethnic groups adhere to a matrilineal system, making the role of the eldest woman in the family highly important. In the traditional families of the K'ho and Mnông people, which were large extended families with multiple nuclear families and generations living together in one long house, the eldest woman typically assumed the position of household head. She held the highest authority in making important decisions such as property division, education, and marriage among the family members (Huỳnh 2022). However, there were many activities like organising rituals, establishing new relationships with the outside community, clearing land for farming, for which this woman still also had to discuss with other members of the family, especially her husband, to come up with a unified opinion. This woman's husband could be considered less powerful than his wife in handling family affairs but is the one who communicates with other members outside the family on behalf of family members. This principle is still maintained in the K'ho and Mnông communities in the South-Central Highlands region to this day.

When it comes to community management, the village elder was regarded as the most important one (Phạm 2014; Huỳnh 2022). He was an elder, demonstrated an understanding of the community's customs and practices, and had a reputation that surpassed others, and was trusted by the community. Therefore, at that time, the village elder could be considered as the holder of traditional authority in the society of the local ethnic minorities, because he knew the customary law, and as the most prestigious person, was trusted and obeyed his words by the community. Important issues in the community were decided by the village elders on the principle of customary law (field data 2022). This was a form of authority that was accepted by the community on the traditional conventions (customary law) of the community and this authority was seen as a symbol in the traditional society of the local ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region.

Besides the village elder, the shaman was also an influential person in the community in a traditional society. He considered himself to have the "supernatural ability", to be able to contact the gods and to convey the wishes of the people in the *bon* by performing rituals. He also had the ability to heal diseases by praying to the gods.

In the past, when there was no medical facility, people still believed in healing by worshiping, they believed that illness was caused by the devil. They had to prepare offerings [depending on the shaman's request] and invited the shaman to perform an offering ceremony to ward off evil and pray for the client to recover from illness. (interview with a Mnông male, 60 years old, 23 July 2022)

In addition to ritual healing, the shaman also undertook additional tasks such as making sacrifices and offering thanks to the gods. People in the community, if they committed acts such as trespassing on sacred forests, polluting water sources, getting pregnant before marriage, or committing incest, and thus negatively affected community life, would be “rebuked” by the gods, and such person would need to make sacrifices to repent. The underlying principles, as well as the sacrifices and punishments, were set by the village elders and the shaman. They were based on the customary law of the community and the requirements of the gods (transmitted by the shaman) to give the number and value of sacrifices required to repent. Usually, sacrifices were always of great value, sometimes they had to kill buffalo or a few pigs, along with chickens, [or contribute] a few jars of stem liquor. There were cases in which subjects were expelled from the community such as incest or pregnancy before marriage. With such a great value of sacrifices, residents always tried to comply with the community's principles and customary law (Huỳnh 2020). In fact, in the interviewing process of elderly people (over 65 years old) in the community, we rarely encountered any cases that had ever actually been punished. They related their understandings based on the code of conduct and customary law of the community as they knew it. However, worshiping and giving thanks to the gods were recorded in many cases that had happened. Thereby showing that, in addition to the role of the village elder, the role of the shaman was also very important in traditional society, because of his ability to contact the “supernatural” world. Therefore, it can be seen that the shaman is the holder of charismatic authority because he is the representative of the supernatural force, capable of contacting the supernatural to make requests of the gods. Additionally, the shaman's life was also different from ordinary people's. One interviewee related that:

He used to stay in the sacred forest, if anyone had a sick person in the house, he was invited to come and make offerings to cure the disease. He often asked to kill pigs or buffalos for offerings. He also had the ability to contact the gods, so the people often feared him. (interview with a K'ho female, 62 years old, 17 August 2022)

Therefore, within the traditional society of local ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region such as K'ho and Mnông communities, family authority is vested in the eldest woman. However, this authority is nearly non-existent at the community level. Community management at the macro level was under the control of two types of authority: traditional authority and charismatic authority, embodied by village elders and shamans. The authority of these individuals was acknowledged by the community, and communities consistently adhered to their directives. Nevertheless, with the changing dynamics of society, the roles of these figures have also transformed. This transformation has become particularly evident since 1960.

Authority in the Community Under the Republic of Vietnam

After 1960, the escalation of the US war in Vietnam witnessed the implementation of various military strategies, including localised war, and Vietnamisation (Vietnamisation of the war).¹ Notably, the governments of the Republic of Vietnam (1954–1975) and the US executed the “Staley-Taylor plan”, conducting comprehensive sweeps and relocating people to live in strategic hamlets (Walli 1973; Phạm 2015). Specifically, the ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region, especially the K'ho and Mnông communities, were compelled to abandon their traditional *bons* and resettle in strategic hamlets. The relocation aimed to exert control over the entirety of local ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region to prevent the emergence of revolutionary forces by the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from North Vietnam. Consequently, these hamlets were positioned along transportation routes, facilitating easy control by the military and government of the Republic of Vietnam (Phạm 2014).

The strategic hamlet became a melting pot of people from various *bons*, surrounded by deep trenches, spike traps, and barbed wire fences, with guarded entry points operating on a specified schedule. The houses within these hamlets were constructed from bamboo, trees, planks, and corrugated iron roofing. The hamlet was subdivided into zones, each housing individuals from the same previous *bons* or clan (field data 2022). To administer these strategic hamlets, the government appointed a hamlet head and assistants, including deputy hamlet heads and policemen. These officials, often ethnic military veterans, were required to be literate. Consequently, the ways of management and social control adopted in strategic hamlets diverged from the traditional management of ethnic communities in previous *bons*.

Also, during this period, Catholic and Protestant missionaries did not have to venture into remote areas of traditional *bons* to spread their religion. They focused on evangelising in strategic hamlets through activities such as preaching the doctrine of God and providing food relief, medical assistance, including medicine, medical examinations, and treatments. As a result, many people living in these hamlets converted to Catholicism or Protestantism. This transformation led to significant changes in the community management authority of the K’ho and Mnông people, as well as other ethnic minorities living in strategic hamlets in general. The change was manifested by the emergence of different types of authority within the same social community, such as rational-legal authority (held by government officials such as hamlet chiefs, deputy hamlet chiefs, and policemen), charismatic authority (held by religious dignitaries such as Catholic priests, pastors, and deacons), and traditional authority (held by village elders). However, the role and position of each type of authority were expressed differently in the management of ethnic communities in strategic hamlets at that time.

Specifically, for the local ethnic minority groups in the South-Central Highlands region, the emergence of rational-legal authority with a role in tightly managing the community is a novel concept for them. This is because, in the traditional society within the *bons*, despite the Vietnam State apparatus of that time (specifically the Nguyen dynasty and the French colonial administration) regarded the Central Highlands as being under their jurisdiction, but government officials seldom took part in overseeing the affairs of the local ethnic minority communities in this region (Nur 1966; Cừu and Toan 1974; Phan and Lâm 2001). They still delegated managerial authority to the village elders, so the level of autonomy within the *bons* was very high. When these communities were compelled to leave their traditional *bons* to reside in strategic hamlets and come under the direct, stringent management of government officials through rational-legal authority, they felt discomfort due to the loss of the inherent autonomy they once had.

My father recounted that during that time, people suffered a lot. They had no cultivated land and could not freely enter the forest to forage because of strict management. Everywhere they went required approval from the government officers. Although rations were provided for survival in the strategic hamlets, it was not enough to eat, so people often went hungry. (interview with a K’ho male, 69 years old, 22 August 2022)

Accordingly, from that time, rational-legal authority became the predominant form of official power, replacing other types of authority in managing ethnic minority communities in strategic hamlets. This type of authority was established by the government and imposed on the community, which was obliged to comply. For the K'ho and Mnông, this was a new type of authority that they could not reject because it was sponsored by the government and enforced by an armed and strictly regulated cadre in the strategic hamlets. In this regard, one interviewee related as follows:

If anyone does not comply with this authority, they will be arrested, tortured, and may face execution, as they are accused of revolutionary activities based on the model of liberation forces in North Vietnam.
(interview with a Mnông male, 65 years old, 13 December 2022)

In traditional society, charismatic authority could be seen as a type of authority held by shamans. These individuals relied on spiritual power to manage the spiritual life of the community. However, when living in strategic hamlets, most of the people here had converted to Catholicism or Protestantism. The adoption of these two religions was explained by the community as a response to the difficulties faced while living in strategic hamlets such as lack of food, healthcare, and living conditions. Missionaries called for religious organisations from outside to provide support for them. Followers of these two religions are often prioritised for assistance. Therefore, to ensure a stable life, most of the people in strategic hamlets had to convert to these two religions (field data 2022). Consequently, during this period, the statistics show a significant increase in the number of Catholic and Protestant followers in the K'ho and Mnông communities as well as among local ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region (Đỗ 1995; Trần 1999; Phạm 2003; Lê 2010; Mai 2015, 2019; Salemink 2015). When people converted to these two religions, belief in traditional deities (polytheistic belief) was no longer present in their consciousness. They only believed in the Holy Trinity and the teachings of Catholic priests or the Pastors of Protestantism. Consequently, charismatic authority shifted its role from shamans to religious dignitaries. These religious dignitaries come in two forms. First, in Catholicism, the priests are often Việt people who undergo rigorous training according to Catholic regulations. They are sent by the Church to evangelise, preach the faith, and guide the religious activities of the community according to the doctrine and laws of Catholicism. They are proficient in the language and understand the culture, customs, and traditions of the local ethnic minorities, where they are

tasked with developing followers for their religion. Second, for Protestantism, in addition to Western missionaries, the pastor or deacon frequently emerges from the local minority community. Western Missionaries focused on training local pastors, using them to evangelise, develop, and guide believers in the community following the doctrines of Protestantism (Đỗ 1995; Lê 2010; Mai 2015; 2019).

Religious dignitaries are always esteemed individuals in the community. When the K'ho or Mnông community became followers of Catholicism or Protestantism, they were always aware of their religious dignitaries as significant individuals, assisting them not only spiritually but also in material aspects.

Therefore, the K'ho and Mnông, as well as other ethnic minorities living in strategic hamlets, hold a deep respect for their religious dignitaries. This stands in stark contrast to government officials. While minorities may fear government officials, religious dignitaries are viewed as benefactors who consistently support them in both material and spiritual aspects of life. However, religious dignitaries do not have the authority to govern and manage the community based on administrative principles. They only play a supportive role based on religious factors. Thus, charismatic authority remains in a neutral position in community management, with the real prominence and power lying in the rational legal authority of the government at that time.

During this period also, the K'ho and Mnông communities were separated from their *bons* and traditional farming lands. Those living in strategic hamlets came from various *bons* and were tightly controlled by rational-legal authority, diminishing the managerial role of village elders over people in their respective *bons*. The village elders only played a role to be consulted by government officials in case of disputes between families in strategic hamlets. Alternatively, they could also convey the people's requests to the government for resolution (field data 2022). Consequently, it can be said that during the time living in strategic hamlets, the traditional authority of the village elders faded. To maintain their significant role in the community, some village elders converted to Protestantism and endeavour to leverage their traditional credibility to become religious leaders, as a pastor or deacon. In our survey conducted within the K'ho community in Lâm Đồng, we found that about five village elders had transitioned to become pastors while residing in strategic hamlets. As pastors, these village elders had strengthened their position in the community and were respected by the community. In terms of management, they still retained a certain role in leading and advising the community.

Thus, under the government of the Republic of Vietnam, the management of the K'ho and Mnông communities, as well as other local ethnic minority groups in the South-Central Highlands region, underwent significant changes. Notably, the emergence of rational legal authority became a prominent form of governance within these communities residing in strategic hamlets. Charismatic authority experienced a shift in the role of its holders. In traditional contexts, shamans wielded this authority. However, as communities shifted away from traditional agricultural territories and forests, embracing Catholicism or Protestantism, Catholic priests or Protestant pastors and deacons assumed this responsibility. Consequently, the position of charismatic authority became neutral, primarily guiding the community's spiritual activities, and could not accompany another type of authority in the direct management of the community, as it had previously cooperated with traditional authority in the period before 1960. The role of traditional authority in community management was greatly reduced. It can be said that at this time, village elders with the role of holding traditional authority were only a symbol of the community and were used to consult when people or government officials needed to. Village elders did not have any important official decision-making power for the community.

Authority in Society Since 1975

After 1975, the regime of the Republic of Vietnam collapsed, and Vietnam was reunified, entering a period of transition to socialism. The strategic hamlets have since ceased to exist. Some local ethnic minority communities returned to their old *bons* to settle down and clear their old lands for cultivation. From 1976 to 1985, the form of the collective economy as the form of a “cooperative” (*Hợp tác xã*) was widely deployed in Vietnam and the South-Central Highlands region (Huỳnh 2007, 2022). At that time, the *bons* of local ethnic minorities were planned into *thôn*s (a self-governing organisation of residents in a commune). There were *thôn*s that coincided with the boundaries of a traditional *bon* (if it is a large *bon*), but there were also *thôn*s that were a collection of two or three different *bon* (if it is a small *bon*). When the *bon* became *thôn*, the management of *thôn* came under the purview of the State. The responsibility for managing societal affairs in *thôn* rests on full-time staff, known as *thôn* leaders (*Trưởng thôn*), elected by the community for a term of two and a half years. Candidates for *thôn* leadership typically require a certain level of education (at least proficiency in reading and writing Vietnamese), possess the ability to communicate effectively with the government, and fall

within the age range of 35 to 55 years old. Besides the leaders of *thôn*, there are other state officials such as *thôn* police, women's union officials, and youth union officials. They implement the State's social policies under the Board of People's Committees of Communes, Districts, Provinces' direction. Therefore, the authority in managing the community of ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region, including the K'ho and Mnông people, has undergone significant changes. These changes are reflected in the positions and roles of the holders of each type of authority (including rational-legal authority, charismatic authority, and traditional authority) in the management of the K'ho and Mnông communities today.

Currently, rational-legal authority in the K'ho and Mnông communities is vested in individuals employed within state agencies tasked with community management. They are assigned specific roles, with their duties geared towards supporting and advancing the community's stability and development. For example, the responsibilities of the *thôn* head include: (1) convening and chairing meetings in the *thôn*; (2) mobilising and organising residents to participate in grassroots democracy and adhere to the customs and conventions of the *thôn*; (3) gathering, reflecting, and proposing to the local government to resolve legitimate requests and wishes of the people in the *thôn*; (4) promptly reporting to the Commune People's Committee about legal violations in the *thôn*; and (5) coordinating with the Fatherland Front Committee and political-social organisations in the *thôn* to mobilise residents to participate in various movements (Bộ 2012, 2018). The duties of the village police encompass the following: (1) disseminating and advocating for principles, policies, and laws related to security, order, and social safety within the community; (2) guiding, inspecting, and urging organisations and individuals to comply with legal provisions on security, order, and social safety within the jurisdiction; (3) taking charge and coordinating with other agencies, organisations, and forces to prevent, detect, and combat crime and social evils by the law; (4) protecting security, order, and social safety; and (5) safeguarding the lives and property of individuals, organisations, and institutions within the *thôn* (ACC 2020). This is very different from those holding rational-legal authority in strategic hamlets because they focus on supporting community development rather than closely monitoring the community's freedom.

Till today, charismatic authority continues to be held by Catholic and Protestant dignitaries, albeit with variations. A notable development was the emergence of the *Front Uni de Lute des Races Opprimees* (FULRO)² movement in the Central Highlands after 1975, aimed at opposing the Vietnamese State. This movement rallied a force of up to 10,000 people

(McLeod 1999) and at times included the participation of religious leaders and Christian ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. However, due to the unwavering efforts to safeguard the revolutionary achievements and territorial unity of the Vietnamese State and its people, this movement gradually waned in the Central Highlands by the end of 1979 and eventually concluded in the mid-1990s (Jones et al. 2002). But, precisely because of the appearance of this movement, it had significantly affected the activities of the two religions, Catholicism and Protestantism, in the Central Highlands, in general, and the South-Central Highlands region, in particular. During this period, the activities of both religions were restricted, and religious dignitaries found it challenging to fulfil their roles as charismatic authorities. From 1986 with Vietnam's open-door policy, especially after Resolution No. 24 - NQ/TW on Strengthening the state's regulation of religion in the new situation issued by the Politburo on 16 October 1990, religious activities in general, Protestantism and Catholicism in particular, began flourishing again (Bô 1990). In 2001, the Vietnam Southern Protestant Church received recognition from the State (previously, in 1958, the Vietnam Northern Protestant Church was recognised by the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Concurrently, following a series of Joint Letters (*Thư chung*) issued by the Vietnam Catholic Council (initiated in 1980), Catholic religious activities became more liberal. Since then, Catholic and Protestant dignitaries in the South-Central Highlands region, and the Central Highlands region at large, have fully demonstrated their charismatic authority.

Like the period spent in strategic hamlets, depending on each religion, charismatic authority is held by different ethnicity dignitaries, such as Catholic dignitary roles are often held by Việt people, and Protestant dignitary roles are often held by ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, our survey data indicates that religious dignitaries, whether Việt or ethnic minority, are highly respected within the community of believers due to their strong moral character. They are individuals who adhere to God's command to preach the good news of God and guide believers in following the path of God (field data 2022).

Currently, traditional authority is still held by village elders. However, these village elders are not necessarily the oldest members of the community, nor do they necessarily need to have an in-depth understanding of the community's traditional customs. Instead, they are individuals knowledgeable about state regulations. These village elders typically have an average age of around 55, hold educational qualifications (from secondary school level and

above), and often assume positions such as *thôn* chief or religious leaders in the community. They tend to handle community affairs based on state or religious regulations, rarely relying on traditional customary norms.

However, as previously mentioned, in the local ethnic minority community as well as the K’ho and Mnông communities in the South-Central Highlands region, there exist village elder councils established by the state. This council consists of nine to thirteen members, who are elderly individuals with credibility, and who are selected from different *thôn*s. The function of this council is to advise on the implementation of state policies that align with the community’s cultural traditions. They also provide guidance to state officials in resolving disputes and conflicts within the community, combining state principles with the customs to avoid overly strict enforcement of existing legal regulations. Thus, traditional authority is expressed in a modest manner within this village elder council.

At present, with the three types of authority mentioned above, the status of each type of authority in the perception of the K’ho and Mnông people, as well as in other local ethnic minority communities varies. This became evident when we included the question, “Who is the most prestigious person in the community?” on the survey questionnaire distributed in these communities. The analysis of responses to this question revealed that religious leaders (pastors/deacons/priests) are regarded as the most prestigious individuals (constituting 67% of the responses), followed by those employed in government agencies (*thôn* heads, policemen, and other officials), village elders, and clan leaders (Figure 2).

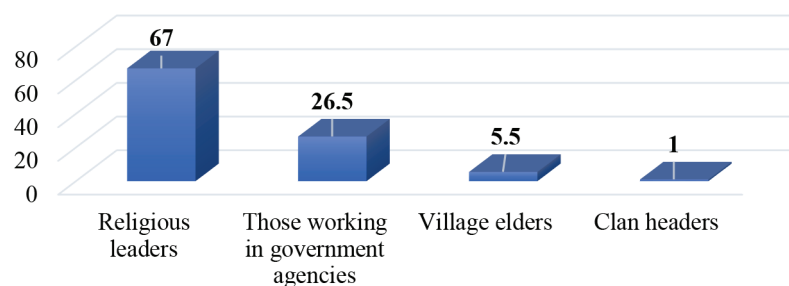


Figure 2: The most reputable person in the community.

Explaining the reason, a person in the community stated as follows:

Religious dignitaries like pastors, for example, are deeply concerned about the lives of people in the community. He often encourages us to engage in positive activities, such as striving in our work, abstaining

from alcohol, and smoking, and avoiding laziness. Through such advice, our lives become more prosperous. He even goes house to house to conduct ceremonies for important events like housewarmings, weddings, and funerals. He also urges everyone to support our children financially so that they can attend school. Therefore, we hold great respect for him. (interview with a Mnông male, 47 years old, 20 December 2022)

Another example is the priest serving at Đung K'noh church, whom the K'ho community deeply respects. They shared with us their sentiments about this priest:

The parish priest has served here for over fifteen years and become an integral part of the community. Remarkably, the parish priest has a deep understanding of the ethnic minority language, making him akin to one of the community members. He often takes on the role of an educator, teaching the younger parishioners as if they were his children. Consequently, the people hold great affection and respect for him. After each mass, he consistently announces that those needing of clothing, food, medicine, and other essentials can go to the church warehouse to receive them free of charge. These necessities were provided by benefactors in Lâm Đồng. The parish priest always ensures that these contributions reach the deserving individuals in our community. (field data 2022)

Hence, religious dignitaries hold an esteemed position and are consistently regarded as the most prestigious people within the community. Likewise, individuals employed in state agencies also earn respect for their roles in social management, security, and the promotion of community stability and development. Village elders who do not hold religious positions but are members of the village elder council also garner respect from the community. However, their influence may not be as substantial as that of village elders with religious affiliations. Because, in certain *thôn*s, village elders also assume roles as Protestant pastors or deacons. This distinction arises from their dual role of guiding the community spiritually and assisting the local government in resolving disputes.

We tried to rely on the religious factors within the K'ho and Mnông communities to compare their views on the reputation of those who have a role in managing the community. The results indicate varying levels of perception of prestige (see Table 1).

Table 1: The most prestigious person in the community

| The prestigious person in the community | Religion | |
|--|-------------|---------------|
| | Catholicism | Protestantism |
| Village elders and village elder council | 6.0 | 5.0 |
| Religious leaders | 51.0 | 83.0 |
| Those working in government agencies | 41.0 | 12.0 |
| Clan headers | 2.0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Specifically, the credibility ratings given for religious leaders and local officials of Catholic followers did not differ significantly (10% higher for religious leaders). However, the opinions of Protestant followers showed a substantial gap (70% higher for their religious dignitaries). In the case of village elders and village elder council, as well as clan leaders (*Trưởng dòng họ*), followers of both religions did not hold them in high regard, particularly Protestant followers.

Explaining the issue, our field data in 2022 showed that Protestant followers in the K’ho and Mnông communities believe that pastors and deacons are members of the community, sharing the same ethnicity, language, and culture, making it easier to connect with and seek assistance from when facing difficulties. Therefore, in difficult situations, pastors and deacons are the first individuals they turn to for help. As for the members of the village elder council, despite sharing the same ethnicity and culture, they lack the authority that the community can rely on to solve difficult problems in life. As for government officials, they typically handle tasks according to state regulations, causing reluctance among the minority Protestant followers to engage with them directly. People often turn to pastors or deacons for help by having them communicate with government officials when necessary and important matters arise. In contrast, the Catholic followers of K’ho and Mnông communities only seek direct intervention from their priests to reconcile minor conflicts within the family or community or to assist with educational or health-related difficulties. They rarely rely on priests to communicate with the government about macro-level community issues such as land disputes, resettlement, or compensation. This is because priests are often not local residents and do not belong to the same ethnic group as the followers in the region. Priests are typically individuals of the Việt ethnicity transferred from other areas and lack a comprehensive understanding of the community’s specific issues, which hinders their ability to provide effective

assistance. Consequently, these communities usually communicate directly with government officials to request solutions. These Catholic individuals also require less assistance from village elders and the village elder council, as well as clan leaders, for reasons like those stated by Protestant followers.

Therefore, when we posed the question “Who do people in communities typically approach to resolve conflicts within families and communities?” on the questionnaire sheets distributed to residents in these communities, the survey responses revealed that the majority favoured local officials (52.0%), followed by religious dignitaries (33.5%), while village elders and the village elder council were the least commonly selected option (9.5%) (Figure 3).

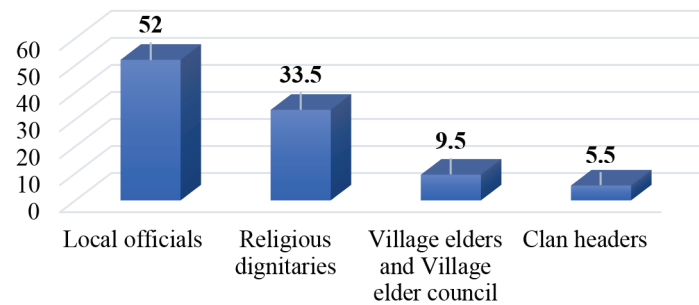


Figure 3: People who are asked to resolve disputes in the community.

Explaining these issues, the K'ho and Mnông communities said that, depending on the content of the issue, they seek assistance from individuals with specific roles to resolve it. For instance, conflicts such as land disputes, theft, and physical altercations are typically entrusted to those employed in state agencies (local officials) due to their involvement with legal matters. Concerning disputes involving relationships within the community, family, or clan, people often turn to religious leaders for mediation. This choice is grounded in the leaders' reputable standing, which lends credibility to their counsel, convincing community members to comply. While there are instances when people seek the involvement of individuals in the village elders and village elder council, this is rare, as there is a perception that these figures may not impartially resolve conflicts and may show favouritism.

If I compare the people in the village elder council and those who work in the religious organisation, I trust the people in the religious organisation more. Because the ones acting on behalf of God, should always treat God's love fairly. As for others, they are not like that, only saying “rigid words”, which sometimes irritate us. (interview with a Mnông male, 45 years old, 21 December 2022)

The above analysis reveals that, following the unification of Vietnam in 1975, the community management of K'ho and Mnông people, along with other local ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region, underwent significant changes. Gone are the days of residing in strategic hamlets under the watchful eyes and strict governance of state officers from the Vietnam Republic's government. Most people have returned to their old *bons*, enjoying the freedom to travel and engage with other ethnic groups like the Việt, Tày, Hmông, and Thái, who migrated to the area post-1975. The state administrative management structure in *thôn* level has been implemented with the introduction of *thôn* leaders, policemen, and officials from mass organisations in *thôn*s. They play a crucial role in overseeing community security, managing communal affairs, and tending to the economic, cultural, and social aspects of the community. Specifically, these officers execute state policies within the community, ensuring security, maintaining order, promoting social safety, alleviating poverty, advocating for civilised lifestyles, family planning, and encouraging adherence to existing laws. They wield rational-legal authority over the community, focusing on support and community development rather than the strict control witnessed during the strategic hamlet period. Furthermore, the management of K'ho and Mnông communities involves the active participation of religious leaders, holding charismatic authority. They are responsible for overseeing religious rituals within the community and play a direct role in resolving disputes among family members or within the community. This level of involvement was absent during the strategic hamlets. As for the village elder council, it represents a new development in the community management of K'ho and Mnông people, as well as other local ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region, since 1975. However, the role of this council is only to advise state officials, not to directly solve problems in management, so few people pay attention.

In summary, post-1975, the role of various authority structures in community management for the K'ho and Mnông people in the South-Central Highlands region has undergone specific changes. That is, rational-legal authority plays a role in supporting and helping the community develop, not being used for strict control as in the past when people lived in strategic hamlets. Charismatic authority extends beyond religious matters to resolving community conflicts. Traditional authority persists but has evolved into a collective advisory role for state officials implementing policies in local communities. These changes are influenced by shifting political institutions within these ethnic communities, reflecting broader political developments in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

Surveying and analysing data related to community management among the K'ho, Mnông, and other local ethnic minorities in the South-Central Highlands region, spanning from the past to the present, reveals three predominant types of authority, as identified by Max Weber (1958). However, the effectiveness of each authority type in governing varies, depending on the historical period of the community. For instance, during the time when these ethnic communities resided in traditional *bons*, aside from family and lineage management, the influential role of the matriarch was evident, with the authority of elderly women playing a crucial role (this tradition that persists to this day). Community management during this period was often governed by two types of authority: the traditional authority of village elders and the charismatic authority of shamans.

From the 1960s to the present, there have been significant transformations in the control and management within these ethnic communities. The role of state management, characterised by rational-legal authority, has consistently held a prominent position in the community, even during periods such as the community's residence in strategic hamlets and present-day *thôn*s. However, the objectives of control for this type of authority have evolved over two stages. During the strategic hamlet period, the Republic of Vietnam's management aimed at controlling the community to prevent their involvement in or support of the revolution. Currently, the state manages with the goal of community development, economic growth, security management, and social safety. As a result, this type of authority is valued by the community today.

The charismatic authority remains a constant presence in the community across all historical stages, serving a role related to the spiritual element of the community. However, it has undergone a transformation in terms of its bearers, specifically transitioning from traditional shamans in historical societies to religious dignitaries in contemporary society.

In the present K'ho and Mnông communities, two religions coexist: Catholicism and Protestantism. Religious dignitaries of these two religions also differ in ethnicity. Catholic dignitaries are often Việt people, while Protestant dignitaries are usually members of local ethnic minorities, resulting in variations in their authority over the community. Catholic dignitaries primarily use their authority to manage the religious community, seldom intervening in legal disputes and community lawsuits. In contrast, Protestant dignitaries, being from the same ethnic group as the community, possess a deep understanding of the challenges faced by the ethnic community. Therefore,

in addition to nurturing and developing the religious life of the community, Protestant dignitaries also assist the community in submitting petitions to local officials when requested. Consequently, the community assesses the level of trust and reputation in legal assistance differently between Catholic dignitaries and Protestant dignitaries.

As for the traditional authority held by village elders, it has long since diminished. Currently, this form of authority is expressed weakly compared to other types of authority in community management. While village elders still retain this authority, it only represents a role for local authorities, such as participating in consultations on policy implementation and conflict resolution within the community to align with local regulations, laws, and customs. This authority does not directly participate in community management at present, leading to a lack of appreciation for its existence within the community.

In short, managing the K'ho and Mnông communities as well as local ethnic minority communities in the South-Central Highlands region has undergone a change in the types of authority, from traditional authority to rational-legal authority and even charismatic authority. The reason is due to the influence of political institutions and the change of religious beliefs in the ethnic community. This is evidenced by the community's temporal progression, from the self-contained and autonomous residence in the traditional *bons* to living in strategic hamlets, and present-day *thôn*s, as well as religious conversion in the community (from traditional polytheistic religion to Catholicism and Protestantism). Through the stages, the displacement of different types of authority, such as the sharp decline of traditional authority, the emergence and growth of rational-legal authority, and the coexistence of charismatic authority is a concrete example of the influence of political institutions. When political institutions change, the authority in community management also changes. And currently, the management in the local ethnic minority community in the South-Central Highlands region is governed by rational-legal authority with the support of charismatic authority.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This study was conducted in the local minority communities in South-Central Highlands of Vietnam in 2022. The data collection was carried out according to the principle of ethnic fieldwork, agreed on by the people, and there was no conflict in the data collection process in the community.

NOTES

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- ¹ “Vietnamisation” was a strategy implemented by President Richard Nixon (the 37th president of the US, serving from 1969 to 1974) during the Vietnam War. This strategy, initiated on 3 April 1969, aimed to gradually withdraw American troops from Vietnam and shift the responsibility for combatting the military forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the Government and Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Nonetheless, it still ensured that South Vietnam and the Indochina peninsula remained under the influence of the US government.
- ² FULRO was the movement of the united front of the oppressed ethnic groups that was founded in June 1965 at the First Indochina Conference by N. Sihanouk (the King of Cambodia).

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