

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PRACTICES OF ETHNIC KNOWLEDGE IN FOREST LIVES**

In the previous chapter, I have pointed out that the socialist state of Vietnam, with its power and knowledge, has regarded its ethnic peoples and their society as “primitive”, their cultures as “superstitious”, and their mode of production as “backward”. Hence, there is the need, from the point of view of the State, to instruct the ethnic peoples in order to bring them to “scientific knowledge” and to exclude them from the resources within their territories. These two ideas have been the key activities to deal with ethnic peoples.

Many anthropologists have documented how small-scale ethnic societies possess local knowledge that is demonstrably more advanced than “modern knowledge” and is highly appropriate to local context. Studies by scholars, such as, Walker (2003) and Howell (1984), have stated that the ethnic peoples in small-scale societies have their own system of knowledge which plays a very important role in the organization of their village, the regulation social relations and activities of people, and the use of natural resources. Yos (2003) argues that local knowledge is constructed by complex perceptions of human and nature within a particular locality and ecosystem. It is also learnt, accumulated and transferred from generation to generation. Local knowledge is a basis upon which the ethnic peoples construct their harmonious lives.

Taking cues from such studies, this chapter will focus on several issues that relate to ethnic knowledge from their livelihood in forest and in their everyday lives, which have been misconceptualized in the justification of development policies and programs of the socialist state as well as in studies done by Vietnamese social scientists. By focusing on the Bahnar, I will explain how their knowledge is structured and how such ethnic knowledge is applied to their livelihood, village organization and social regulation. To achieve this task, the first part of this chapter will provide a brief description of the Bahnar people in the Central Highlands in general. The second

part will explore their worldview and the practice of ethnic knowledge in forest livelihood. In the third part, I will examine how such ethnic knowledge affects the social organization and regulations of the Bahnar. The final part will be a summary of the discussion within the chapter.

#### **4.1 The Bahnar People in the Central Highlands**

The Bahnar is an indigenous ethnic group in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. There is no historical document providing data about the arrival of the Bahnar people to the Central Highlands. Some modern studies postulate that the ancestors of the Bahnar used to live along coastal area in Central Vietnam (see for example: Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, 1934; Dang Nghiem Van, 1981). Afterwards, the Bahnar had moved to the upland areas, which are now known as the Central Highlands. Currently, the living area of the Bahnar people stretches from 13°00' to 15°00' northern latitude and from 107°40' to 109°00' eastern longitude (Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006). In geopolitical terms, this means there are Bahnar people living in the localities of four provinces: Binh Dinh, Gia Lai, Phu Yen and Kon Tum.

The Bahnar speak an Austroasiatic language referred to by linguists as Mon-Khmer and it is primarily on this ethno-linguistic criterion that they are officially classified by ethnologists and are designated as belonging to the Mon-Khmer group. Currently, the Bahnar is the largest ethnic group of the Mon-Khmer speaking family in Vietnam, and the third largest ethnic group among the forty-six minority ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. It has been recorded that there are around 202,000 Bahnar living in four provinces, in which Gia Lai province has 137,000 people, Kon Tum province has 45,000 people, Binh Dinh has 15,000 people and Phu Yen has around 4,000 people (Tay Nguyen Steering Committee, 2006; Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006).

The Bahnar can be divided into several subgroups. An early document about the Bahnar written by Gaul Guilleminet, the chief envoy of Kontum province during 1950s, distinguishes seven local Bahnar subgroups, including Bahnar Alokong, Bahnar Toco, Bahnar Bonom, Bahnar Golar, Bahnar Jolong, Bahnar Kon Tum and Bahnar Rongao. Meanwhile, Dang Nghiem Van (1981), Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son and Luu Hung (2000), Luu Hung (1996), Bui Minh Dao *et al.* (2006) state that

there are eight Bahnar subgroups, namely Ba Na Rơ ngao, Ba Na Jơ long, Ba Na Tơ lô, Ba Na Krem, Ba Na Vân Canh, Ba Na Gơ Lar, Ba Na Thồ lồ and Ba Na Kon Tum. The Bahnar living in Kong Plong and the Kon Tum town of Kon Tum province are called Ba Na Rengao, Ba Na Jolong and Ba Na Kon Tum, while the Bahnar in Gia Lai and Binh Dinh province are locally known as Ba Na Tolo, Ba Na Krem, Ba Na Jolong and Ba Na Golar. Although they recognize that there are several Bahnar subgroups, those researchers have not provided evidence to explain how the subgroups of the Bahnar people are different from each other. In his attempt to define how the subgroups of the Bahnar are different, Dang Nghiem Van, in his much cited book, *Các Dân Tộc Tỉnh Gia Lai-Kon Tum* (Ethnic Groups in Gai Lai - Kon Tum Province), make a conclusion that “names of the subgroups of the Bahnar are in fact the names of their living locations, and that there is no *difference* except in some of their communities that have long been living closely to other different ethnic groups” (Dang Nghiem Van *et al.*, 1981: 105, emphasis is added).

During my fieldwork in the Central Highlands, I asked a number of Bahnar people about what sub-group they belong to. I was told that there were no Bahnar subgroups. When I told them about the classifications of previous ethnologists and anthropologists, all of them told me that such classifications were not theirs. People usually say that there are differences ritual practices or social regulations between different Bahnar villages, but they are all Bahnar people. A ninety-five-year-old man explained: “What we follow are Bahnar customs, what we do are the Bahnar ways of doing things”.

Vietnamese ethnographic studies about the Bahnar people before the arrival of development policies and programs of the socialist state generally describe these people as swidden cultivators engaging in gathering minor forest products and hunting. Their villages were space of backwardness. They claim that organization of Bahnar villages was still in the lowest level of evolution. Villagers had to follow village regulations and customs, which had been irrationally constructed. None of the Bahnar villages had clear territory. Natural resources in the settlement areas of a village were common property that everyone could take as much as they wanted. This way of living had caused the Bahnar people to be imprisoned in unstable lives and poverty (for more understanding see analysis in chapter II).

After thirty years living under the development policies and programs of the socialist state, the Bahnar are no longer swidden cultivators, although they are still living in the forest. They now grow cash crops, such as, coffee and maize. Although most of the Bahnar live in forest villages, settlement patterns, house style and cultural practices vary considerably, as do aspects of the organization and regulation within the village. From the point of view of the socialist state, its development workers and policy makers, these changes reflect the great benefits that the development policies and programs have brought to the Bahnar people and their villages. Bui Minh Dao, for instance, has described the changes of the Bahnar people as follows:

“In comparison with the picture taken twenty years ago, there is a progressive development of the Bahnar people in the Central Highlands. The shifting cultivators, whose life based on technical skills passing by the ancient ancestors, depended on the nature and tied with regulations of their village, have been changes into people who can make decisions on their own works and apply scientific knowledge into their production... (Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006: 297)

Practically speaking, this observation does not reflect the actual lives and current problems of the Bahnar. Fifty percent of the Bahnar people in the Central Highlands, instead of being ‘developed’ after receiving many state-sponsor-development projects, are now living under the national poverty line (the income per capita is least than 6 US\$/month). Meanwhile many others are finding themselves under increasing pressures of resource scarcity for earning their livelihoods, as well as resource conflicts related to the land and forests (Nguyen Ngoc, 2002). Within a village, the development policies and programs have also seriously destroyed the traditional village regulations and customary practices. In many villages, the Bahnar have been brought to misery as they are now vulnerable and dependent on the domination by outsiders who have caused them to lose lives and change their traditional way of life. Ten thousand Bahnar households have recently moved to the very remote areas in order to maintain their social organization and regulations, and to practice their traditional way of making a living (Khong Dien, 2002; Dang Nghiem Van, 2002). For these Bahnar, the traditional village organization, social regulations and way of making a living are actually the means upon which they construct their harmonious life (Nguyen Ngoc, 2002).

How and why do the traditional village organization, social regulations and way of making a living help the Bahnar people construct harmonious lives? In the following parts, I will point out that Bahnar, like other ethnic people all over the world, have their own system of knowledge. Upon the basis of that system, they are able to organize their village and family, regulate activities of their people, and create their harmonious life with the natural environment.

#### **4.2 The Worldview of the Bahnar and Forest Livelihood**

The Bahnar believe that universe is divided into three parts, namely “*Plêi plênh*”, “*Plêi teh*” and “*Plêi atou*” or “*Măng lung*”. *Plêi plênh* is the living world of yang (spirits); *Plêi teh* is the living world of people and other biological entities; and *Plêi atou* is the living world of the death. As I have learnt from previous studies and through my interviews with key informants, the Bahnar have very clear ideas about those three worlds, as is evident either in their language or thought, and all activities in their everyday life are based on this worldview, as we shall see in the following sections.

##### **4.2.1 The *Plêi Plênh***

The *Plêi plênh* is perceived as a bowl placed upon the *Plêi teh* and its inhabitants are a number of spirit or, in Bahnar terms, *yang*. There are male spirits and female spirits. Male spirits are called politely “*bok*” (grandfather), while female are called “*ya*” (grandmother), for instance, *bok Kêi Dêi* (male creator-divinity), *Ya Kuh Kêt* (female creator-divinity), *Bok Glaih* (lightning spirit). But, there are spirits, whose gender is not clear, for instance *Yang Dak Ba* (water spirit of Ba River) or *Yang Long* (tree spirit). I have attempted to classify the various Bahnar spirits according to certain categories, such as “good spirits” and “bad spirits”, or “guardian spirits” and “malicious spirits”. This attempt at categorization, as later I found through reading documents, has been an imposed rationale from the outside, rather than an indigenous classification. For the Bahnar themselves, so far as I have heard, if they are forced to classify at all, they talk about what kind of activities are accepted or not accepted by the spirits.



My informants at Buon Luoi told me stories that *Bok Kêi Dêi* is a male creator-divinity, who has created the sky, sun, moon and stars. He created and taught human beings how to make fire, how to cook the food and so on. He also divided up the different ethnic groups and taught each one their own writing. *Bok Kêi Dêi* is imagined as an old man with white hair and a beard who resides in the highest place of *plêi plênh*. He appears rarely and manages the universe through lower ranking spirits: *Bok Glaih*, *Yang Măt Anẵr* (the Sun spirit), *Yang Măt Khêi* (the Moon spirit) and so on. Although *Bok Kêi Dêi* is the most respected spirit, the Bahnar have never called his name in their ritual ceremonies. Instead, they just call the lower ranking spirits and let those spirits report to *Bok Kêi Dêi*. *Ya Kuh Két* is a female creator-divinity and the spouse of *Bok Kêi Dêi*, who has created the earth and other living things on the earth. Similar to their respect for *Bok Kêi Dêi*, people have also never called her name in ritual ceremonies.

A lower ranking spirit, who stands just below the creator-divinities, is *Bok Glaih* or the lightning spirit. *Bok Glaih* is a spirit who has duties to control all activities of people in *Plêi Teh*. He is the most feared spirit, since it is believed that he is capable of bringing retribution to people who have committed serious crimes. Similar to the Bahnar living in other places of the Central Highlands who had been studied by some other ethnologists (Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, 1934), villagers in Buon Luoi believe that:

“*Bok Glaih* sleeps during dry season and he wakes up at the beginning of raining season, then he goes to inspect all corners of the earth. Anyone who has no crime and offerings for him, will receive his supports. On the contrary, anyone who has contemptuousness of spirits will be punished. Therefore, *Bok Glaih* is the most feared spirit and his name appears in every ritual ceremony of the Bahnar”. (Interview with old villagers in Buon Luoi, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2005)

Other two groups of spirits, which are also feared among the Bahnar, are *Yang Dak* or water spirit(s) and *Yang Kong* or mountain spirit(s). The former resides and controls water resources, such as streams or river systems, while the latter occupies the tops of high mountains and manages the land and forests in the surrounding areas. These spirits usually appear during periods of heavy rain and strong wind. The water spirits appear in three forms: *Konang grai* (dragon), *nhâk* (snake) and *tolung* (grinder). The mountain spirits appear as very old men.

Of all the water and mountain spirits, which are of the greatest importance to most Bahnar communities, are the spirits of a particular river and mountain (area spirits) on which their village and farming land is allocated. For instance, the most important mountainous spirit of the Bahnar in Buon Luoi is *Yang Kong Hơ Nùng*, a mountain spirit who inhabits Kong Ho Nung mountain, located about fifteen kilometers to the north of Buon Luoi. There is a pervasive belief in the importance of these 'area spirits'. It is said that if the 'area spirits' are maligned or neglected, wantonly or by accident, people will be harmed. On the other hand, through appropriate propitiation, the 'area spirits' will become the guardian spirits of those who honor them. For example, the spirits of Kong Doi and Kong K'Lang located close to Buon Luoi may, through special propitiation, become the guardian spirits of the villagers who live and farm, herd and gather, hunt and fish in this locality. In the part, whenever a Bahnar village wished to occupy a piece of land for a village, a swidden, a permanent field, make use of natural materials (water, trees and so on) or organize hunting games, special care is taken to seek an approval from the supernatural owners of the place - 'area spirits'. People also make offering rite to those area spirits when they have a good harvest or good hunting. Elder villagers in Buon Luoi told me that offering rites for a good harvest of a plantation used to be organized every three years with a buffalo sacrifice ritual (*sa kopô*) at the traditional communal men's house. Meanwhile, offering rites for good hunting had to be organized in the forest before hunters bring all their hunting products to their village. Importantly, some forests were defined as sacred places for the residence of spirits, and nobody were permitted to fell a tree, cut grass or in anyway disturb the natural vegetative cover there. And, in whatever ritual ceremony, the specific name of the 'area spirits' was very carefully called after a general mention of *Yang Dak*, and *Yang Kong*.

Besides the feared spirits, there are more benevolent spirits called *Ya Pom* and *Yang Xori* (paddy spirit). *Ya Pom* is the eldest daughter of *Bok Kêi Dêi* and *Ya Kuh két* who lives inside the moon. It is believed that a black spot inside the moon is the silhouette of *Ya Pom*. For the Bahnar, *Ya Pom* is a charitable spirit and ready for helping poor people. Different from *Ya Pom* in terms of living place, *Yang Xori* resides in upland rice fields. *Yang Xori* is the most important supporter of the Bahnar

as she protects paddy field and rice barn for the Bahnar. In other words, the Bahnar perceive that results of their cultivation are created by *Ya Pom* and *Yang Xori*. Therefore, whenever the Bahnar cultivate their upland rice and harvest the crop, they make rituals to these two spirits.

There are three important annual rituals for *Ya Pom* and *Yang Xoris* that are connected to upland rice cultivation. The first is *smah chôi ba* or the planting ritual. Previously, this planting ritual included two parts. The first part was the village planting ritual that was organized at the traditional communal house with normally a pig sacrifice ritual, while the second part was organized by each family at their cultivation field. The second important ritual for *Ya Pom* and *Yang Xori* is called *sa mok* or eating new rice, which was organized by each family before they harvest upland rice. The third is *smah tec mang h'nam ba* or a ritual for closing the door of the paddy storehouse. This ritual is organized after all planted rice was harvested and brought into the family's rice barn. In the previous time, the ritual for closing the door of the rice barn was divided into two parts: The first part was organized separately in the families, and the second part was organized at traditional communal men's house. The scale of this ritual depended on the results of the rice harvest. In a good year, the ritual period could last three or four days. During these days, one main ritual ceremony was organized at the traditional communal house. All of the villagers were required to participate in the ritual and to prepare activities. The most important officiant of the ritual was a woman, who was assigned the role as *Rice Mother*. This woman was carefully selected by the villagers with some critical criteria, such as whether she was a good-natured woman and if she had children and nephews, and whether or not she had a good knowledge of the ritual activities and prayers. On the day of the main ritual ceremony, people wore beautiful clothes and went to traditional communal house to attend the ritual. Neighboring villagers and kindred in other villages were also invited to join this ritual. After the ritual for the *Rice Mother*, an open party with food and drink from the ritual were organized for all villagers and guests.

Other natural spirits, such as *Yang Măt Anăr* (sun spirit), *Yang Măt Khêi* (moon spirit), are also perceived as supportive spirits for human beings as *Yang Măt Anăr* creates the daylight for working, and *Yang Măt Khêi* creates light at night for



playing. *Yang Măt Anăr* and *Yang Măt Khêi* also remind the Bahnar about the timetable for carrying out their work, their cultivation cycle and so on. Traditionally, the Bahnar had their own timing system and calendar for arranging their daily work and agricultural cultivation (for classification of yearly seasons and the calendar of the Bahnar, see Table 4.1 below).

Table 4.1 Yearly seasons and calendar of Bahnar people

Yearly season	Yearly calendar of Bahnar people	Lunar calendar of Kinh people	Calendar of western people
Khêi iao (balm-cricket season)	Khêi minh (1 <sup>st</sup> month)	Tháng hai	March
	Khêi bar (2 <sup>nd</sup> month)	Tháng Ba	April
Khêi chôi (planting season)	Khêi pêng (3 <sup>rd</sup> month)	Tháng tư	May
	Khêi puôn (4 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng năm	June
Khêi kăt nhet (weeding season)	Khêi pơđăm (5 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng sáu	July
	Khêi todrou (6 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng bảy	August
Khêi ba huot (rice flowering season)	Khêi topoh (7 <sup>th</sup> moth)	Tháng tám	September
	Khêi toham (8 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng chín	October
Khêi kăt ba (harvesting rice season)	Khêi torin (9 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng mười	November
	Khêi minh jit (10 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng mười một	December
Khêi ning nong (playing season)	Khêi ning nong (11 <sup>th</sup> month)	Tháng mười hai	January
		Tháng một	February

(Source: Discussion with the elder people in Buon Luoi, May 2005)

There are other spirits, for example *Yang Long* (tree spirit), *Yang Uynh* (fire spirit). But, because I could not get a clear explanation from my informants, I do not have a detailed description. I had attempted many times to talk to my informants about those spirits. However, what they said was: “I do not know. If you want to know more, go and ask our ancestors”. I also asked some my informants to write out their prayers in order to understand how such natural spirits are categorized and function. They all refused and said that they could not read or write out without causing offence and without offerings. However, there is a clear understanding among the Bahnar people of what spirits they need to invoke, when they have an offence. In other words, each spirit has its own power, and if someone has an offence with a particular spirit, one cannot obtain support from other spirits to help appease the spirit.

Many Bahnar people believe that supernatural beings can see all of the activities of human beings, and that they will punish the person who makes an

offence, or punish all the people in the village, if the offence is not found out and given a punishment by the village. In other words, an offence by any villager is not simply a problem between this person and the supernatural beings alone, but also a problem between the village and all villagers with the supernatural beings. Thus, activities in everyday life of the Bahnar are carefully monitored in order to avoid the offending of and punishments from the supernatural beings. For the Bahnar, the most serious offences are incest, theft and the sabotaging of properties of other people, land invasions, especially paddy stealing or rice planting sabotaging, fighting (including fighting among members a family), adultery and committing suicide and even the over-exploitation of natural resources (such as, killing young animals or destroying a water source). People who make these offences are judged openly at the men's traditional communal house. For people inside the village, the harshest punishment given to villagers who have committed these offences are to be expelled from the village along with a compensation fee of ten buffalos, goats, pigs and chickens in order to make the apologetic rituals by the village. For people outside the village, punishment will be decided by all insiders.

#### **4.2.2 The *Plêi Teh***

According to a Bahnar myth, the Bahnar people are descendants of *Bok Kêi Dêi* and *Ya Kuh két*. I was told that *Bok Kêi Têi* and *Ya Kuh két*, created the universe and the earth, and afterwards gave birth to three children, two girls and one boy. One girl, *Ya Pom*, stayed in the *Plêi Plênh*, while another girl and the boy were brought to the earth. The two people came to the earth are called *Ya Tom* and *Bok Tom* (Ms. and Mr. Ancestors). At the beginning of time, there was only soil and rock on the earth, and the life of the couple was so boring. Thus, they came back and asked *Bok Kêi Dêi* and *Ya Kuh két* to create more things for a more lovely life. *Bok Kêi Dêi* gave a number of seeds and told them to sow the seeds on the earth's surface. Soon after the couple sowed the seeds on the earth, the plants and grass grew up. However, the area of plants and grass was very small, while the earth surface was very large. So the couple came back to *Bok Kêi Dêi* and *Ya Kuh két* again asking for more help. To help the couple, *Ya Kuh két* had made an exorcism, then there the animals, birds and other fauna species appeared. Those animals and birds ate fruits of the plants and brought

seeds to the fallow areas so that the plants covered the entire surface of the earth. The couple, then, gave birth to four children, two boys and two girls. The two boys were *Rok* and *Xet*, and the two girls were *Bia Cham* and *Bia Xin*. Then, *Rok* married with *Bia Cham*, and *Xet* married with *Bia Xin*. *Rok* and *Bia Cham* had three children, a son, *Todăm Hong Lăk*, and two daughters, *Bia Dul* and *Bia Man*. *Xet* and *Bia Xin* had two sons, *Gi-Ông* and *Gi-O*, and a daughter, *Bia Lui*. Those children married with each other and gave birth to more children. Like that, more and more people were born on the earth up until the present time. In other words, all people are descendants from the same ancestors. For the Bahnar, people must have to respect for one another because they were born by the same ancestors. (This story was recorded from the traditional village headman of Buon Luoi, on August 21, 2005).

The Bahnar, like many other ethnic people in Southeast Asia, for instance the Lahu people (Walker, 2003) or the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula (Benjamin, 1979; cited in Walker, 2003), believe that each individual human being is an entity made up of a physical body (*akou*) and souls (*pohngol*). In particular, each physical body has three souls, one main soul is located in the sinciput and two sub-souls are located in the brow and at the end of the sternum. The Bahnar believe that if the physical body and souls are tightly bounded together, then an individual may live safely, healthily and in accordance with the norms of everyday life. On the contrary, when the souls, especially the main soul, fly away from physical body, health is replaced by sickness and normality by abnormality. More importantly, if the souls are enticed from the physical body by malicious spirits, then the individual falls into serious sickness, meets with accidents or perhaps even death.

Some Bahnar told me about the travel of the main soul when the physical body sleeps. The two sub-souls, they said, remain with the body, while the main soul sometimes wanders away. It is said that the main soul of a body may go to play with the main souls of other bodies, sometimes it goes to *Plêi plênh* or *Plêi atou* while its physical body is asleep. In its traveling, the main soul may go far away and may not find its way to come back, or it may fall in love with another soul and does not want to come back to its physical body. One cannot see it departs, but if one falls sick, is in pain or feels very tired, then one may suspect that the main soul does not stay with its body. In this case, a person should organize a rite called the “soul-recalling rite”. The

main soul would also be captured by the spirits because the person or this person's relatives have offended supernatural power or has forgotten their promises with the spirits. In this case, a sacrifice is organized in order to avoid trouble.

When a person dies, his/her physical body is brought to a burial place and the souls accompany the body. The two sub-souls may remain at the burial place for a period of time, and then they change into dew (*dak ngon* or *dak ling*), while the main soul - if it is deemed to be a "good" death - will depart for *Plêi atou* or *Mang lung*.

Death not only marks a division between the living and the dead, but it also separates the mostly benign souls of the "good death" (*lock lăng*) from the malicious souls of the "bad death" (*lock mê*). A good death is attributed to old age or sickness; a bad death is one in which life ends violently, such as the person commits suicide, dies during childbirth and so forth. People who die "good death" are mourned; their souls are propitiated with offerings and guided to *Plêi atou*; and their bodies are reverently laid to rest in a special burial place where a small house is constructed. Additionally, the one who departs with a "good death" is buried with not only his/her own assets (clothes, crossbow, mirror and etc.) but also with other assets that are shared by his/her family, such as jars, bowls, money and even pigs and buffalos, which are normally used during the time of the funeral ceremony. A small house is made above the tomb of the "good dead", which is aimed at allowing the "good dead" to spend time with the people of the living world before going to *Mang lung*.

By contrast, the bodies of those who are declared to have suffered a "bad death" are, if the death occurred in the village, quickly taken for burial at some far-off spot, and are never allowed in the regular village burial ground. If the victim dies far away from the village, the body is simply interred on the spot. There is no funeral rite and no guiding of the soul towards the land or "the world of the good dead"; rather the soul of the "bad death" must be exorcised. As I observed two funerals of people who had committed suicide at Buon Luoi, the dead were quickly tied with a mat made by leaves and buried at general cemetery of So Pai commune about 4 kilometers away from the village. The playing of drums and gongs was not allowed at the funerals. The people who attended the funerals were mainly close relatives. After the funeral, each family of those who had committed suicide organized a traditional rite (*chăng dam*) and invited all the villagers to attend. In this rite, the families had to make an apology

to the spirits, ancestors and villagers. They also had to provide food and drink to the attending villagers. Previously, according to elder people in Buon Luoi, the family of the person who committed suicide received a village's punishment that it had to move out of the living place of village for at least one year.

#### 4.2.3 The *Plêi Atou*

The *Plêi atou* seems to be conceived in much in the same image as the *plêi* of the villagers. In fact, there are two kinds of *Plêi atou*, which are the *Mang lung* for the “good dead”, and the *Plêi atou mê* for the “bad dead”. The *Mang lung* is an opposite world in comparison with the *Plêi Teh*. For instance, daytime in the *Plêi Teh* is nighttime of the *Mang lung* and vice versa; the house of the dead is upside down in comparison with human beings. More accurately, if we image the earth as a horizontal plane and the things of the *Plêi Teh* are located above the horizontal plane, then the things in the *Mang lung* are laid on the other side of the horizontal plane in the opposite direction (for a better understanding about the concept of *Plêi Teh* and *Plêi atou*, see Figure 4.1 below).

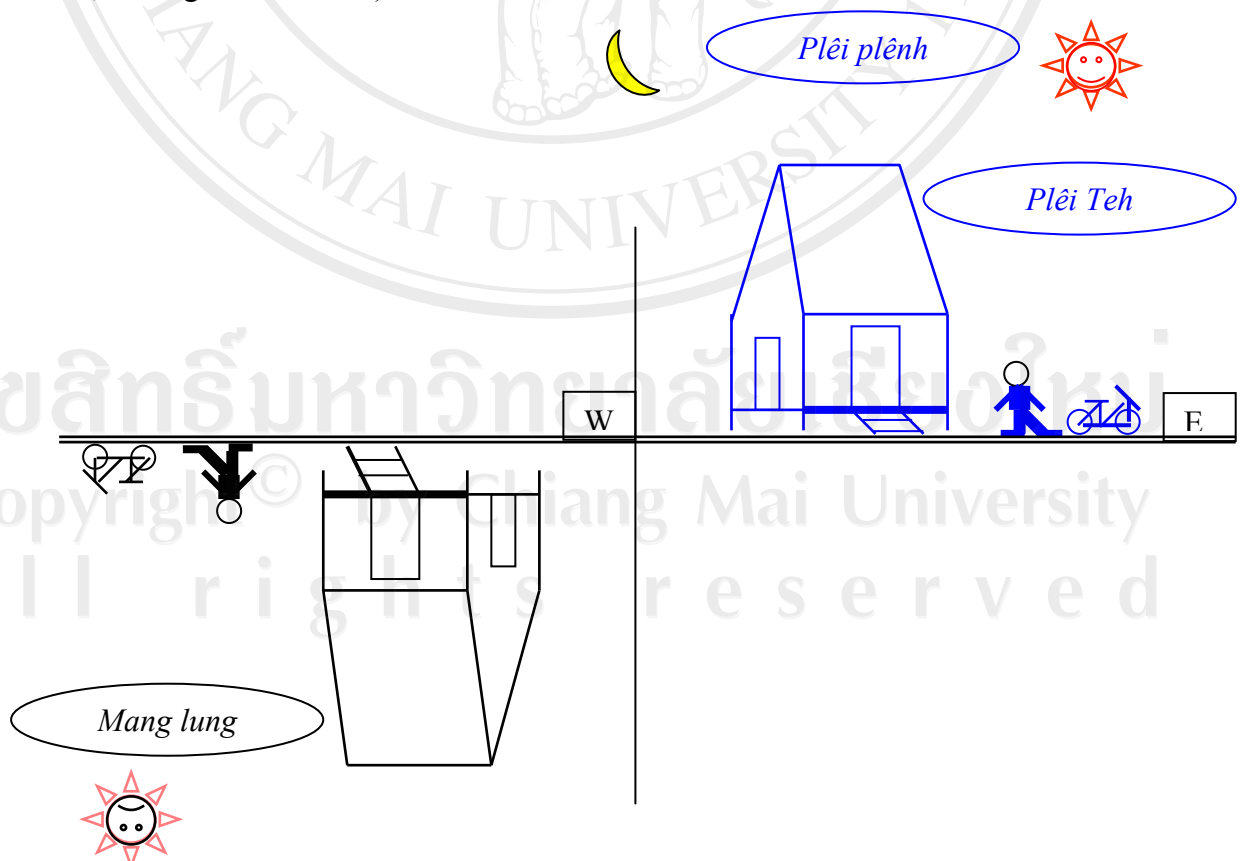


Figure 4.1 The Living world of human being and the Living world of the dead



As I have described in the previous part, only the souls of the “good dead” are allowed to go to *Mang lung*. It is said that the souls will bring their assets with them and go to a house of *Ya Diech Toh*, or an old lady with long breasts. The old lady will check carefully how the “good dead” had lived in living world. If the “good dead” had no crime, *Ya Diech Toh* will allow the soul to go to *Mang lung* immediately. If the good dead had committed crimes in the human living world, *Ya Diech Toh* will send the soul to a difficult place in order to improve one’s behavior. The period of time spent living in the difficult place of the soul is dependent on the severity of the crime that the “good dead” had committed.

The road from the house of *Ya Diech Toh* to *Mang lung* is in the dark, and it is in a very bad condition and equipped with two *hă kap* or threshing machines, one is made of rock and the other one is made of steel. After they go through *hă kap*, the souls arrive at *Mang Lung*. From that time on, the souls will live perpetually in *Mang lung*. In *Mang lung*, the souls of the dead get married, build houses, live in villages and farm just as human beings do in their living world. The souls can also use assets, which the people in the living world share with them at the funeral ceremony.

The Bahnar also have some specific criteria to use for selecting the burial ground. I was told that burial ground has to be far from the village, water resources and is usually located in the west, a direction that is believed to be the best one for enabling the dead go to *Mang Lung*. Although these souls live perpetually in *Mang lung*, they sometimes come back to the place where they were buried, and visit the living world of human being. The visit, according to my informants, aims at seeing the newly dead or to claim a sacrifice from the people. Thus, the burial ground of the good dead is called *Plêi atou koting* and it is a sacred place of the village. Any activity that violates the burial ground will be seen as an action to undermine the village.

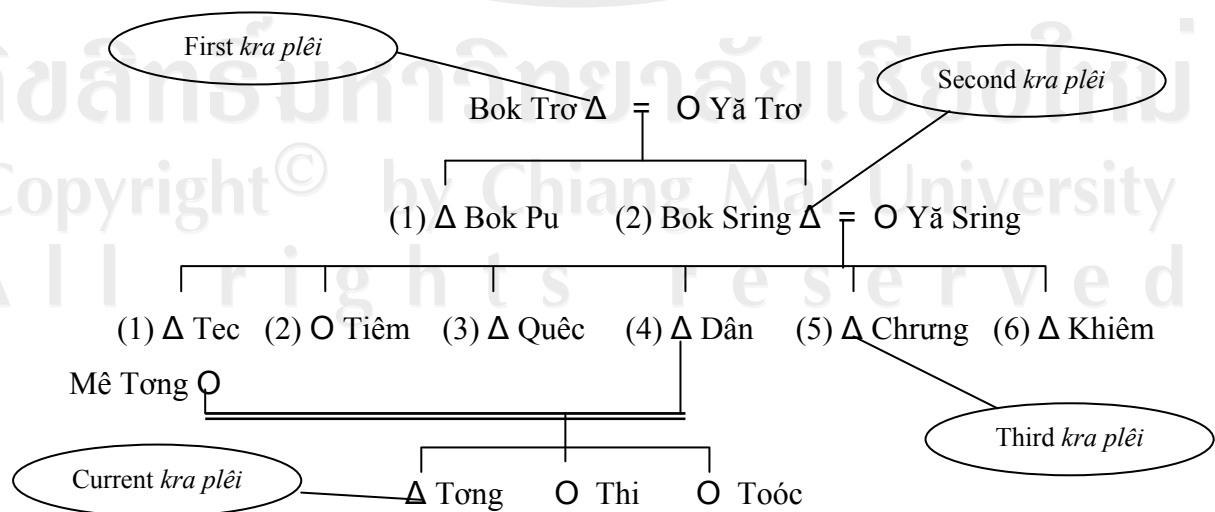
Different from souls of the “good dead”, the souls of the “bad dead” will go to *Plêi atou mê* located at the *Trong Tuk* or galaxy. Souls of the “bad dead” will go to the galaxy when a rainbow (*poda*) appears in the place of a sunset, and they will become servants for *Po’rang* or malicious spirits. After the *chăng dam* ritual, the family of the “bad dead” will not make any rituals for its unfortunate members.

In the perception of elder Bahnar people, their ancestors determine the results of the production of one family and the health of its members. In particular, if the family has poor results from their annual cultivation in comparison with other families in the village, or if anyone in the family has an illness (fever, cough and etc.) or even a contingent accident, members of the family will first think that they are receiving a punishment from their ancestors. Then, they will seek to find out their mistakes, which have led to punishment by the ancestors. In case the family cannot determine their mistakes by themselves, they can go and ask the shamans inside or outside of the village to identify the mistakes. If a shaman cannot determine the mistakes with ancestors, then the family will seek to find out if they have made mistakes with nature. In either case, the family will organize one propitiatory ritual given to the ancestors or the spirits in order to solve the problem.

#### 4.3 The Organization of the Village and Social Regulations

##### 3.2.1 The Organization of the Village and Leadership

The principal structural unit of Bahnar society is the village. Traditionally, the Bahnar organize their village and regulate the activities of people based on their worldview under the guidelines of a village headman or in Bahnar terms, *kra plêi*. The first *kra plêi* was the village founder called *tom plêi*. Then, this position was passed on to his descendants. But, this does not mean that the former *kra plêi* had a right to pass his position to his descendants.



In the past, the successors were elected from among the old men of the village by the adult villagers after the previous village headman passed from the human world. The basic criteria for selection of a successor were wisdom, wealth, and other personal qualities, such as, being a good father, good living experiences. According to several old Bahnar people who I interviewed, the wisdom of *kra plêi* includes knowledge not only on customs and traditions, but also on natural conditions (weather, soil conditions, forests). Knowledge on customs and traditions of a *kra plêi* is one of the most important criteria for choosing a *kra plêi*, because his major responsibilities are to regulate the practices of customs, organize the village's ritual ceremonies, arbitrate conflicts among his villagers, consult on marriage arrangements, and act as a representative of the village in establishing alliance with other villages. Meanwhile, the knowledge on weather, soil conditions and forests is selected for analyzing ability to instruct cultivation activities of the village. In the past, responsibilities of a *kra plêi* on instructing agricultural production for in the village were in fact very heavy. The *kra plêi* had to work with older villagers to predict the annual weather conditions in making cultivation plan for all villagers. He also consulted with older villagers on the selection of cultivation sites in his village's territory.

Previously, wealth of a person was measured in terms of the number of cattle and pigs in comparison with the others, a well-constructed house, a set of *ching yuan* or gongs (at least), some good wine jars and most importantly four or five paddy storehouses. This wealth of a *kra plêi* demonstrated that he had sufficient experience in cultivation, cattle raising, organizing labor. At the same time, it presented his abilities to instruct other families in the village on how to make good agricultural production and good cattle raising.

Although the *kra plêi* had a mandate to regulate the activities of all villagers in accordance with their customs, he was not able make any decision without consensus from all villagers. If there was an offence of customs by his villagers, the *kra plêi* had to investigate the case. Then, he had to organize a village meeting and report about the offence. In this meeting, every villager had a right to give voice on the offence or conflicts. Only if none of the villagers had a disagreement, punishment would be

given to the people who offended the customs. After a decision was made, the *kra plêi* had to keep a close watch on how the decision had been implemented.

Although a *kra plêi* had heavy responsibilities and received high respect from his *kon plêi*, he received no benefit from carrying out such responsibilities. Moreover, if he himself offended customs, he would be treated the same as other villagers. On the other hand, the duration of time for someone who served as a *kra plêi* was not fixed. If the *kra plêi* was too old, customs were offended or serious problems occurred with his village (diseases, failures of plantation and etc.) during the time that he undertook his position, a new *kra plêi* would be selected.

From their research on this leadership regime, Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, in their well-known study, “Kontum’s Savage” (*Mọi Kontum*), come to a conclusion that “this political organization of the savage is really equalitarianism and republicanism, there is no oppression and autocracy” (Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, 1934: 62).

#### **4.3.2 Family and Family Relations**

By 1975, the common residential proto-type in the Bahnar villages was a three-generational family, which included a husband and wife, their married and unmarried children, and their nephews (Dang Nghiem Van, 1981). The number of persons per family ranged from four to twelve. There were also families with four generations (grandparents, head of household, wife and their married and unmarried children, their nephews). There was no single-generational family. This was a result of residential rules after marriage. My informants told me that Bahnar married children continued to stay with their parents. Married children would become a semi-independent family when they had their first child. At that time they then would allow to create their own cultivation area, produce their own food and cook their food separately from their parents. When they had second child, the married children moved out to live in a separate house from their parents. At this time, the married children with their offsprings were allowed to build their own home and start their fully independent family.

The parents would not be deserted by their children. One offspring, (usually the most obedient married child), would remain at home to care for their parents until

they died. If a couple did not have any child, they received one or two children from their brothers or sisters as adopted offspring. These children have duties to live and care for the childless couple.

Whether a family consisted of one or several semi-independent families, in most spheres of village life it acted as a unified social group under the leadership of the parents of the nuclear family. In fact, members of a Bahnar family lived in harmony and democracy. There was no unequal treatment between male and female, sons and sons-in-law, daughters and daughters-in-law. All activities of a family were democratically discussed among all its members and, then, people worked together. Normally, the children respected and supported the ideas of their parents. The parents tried to provide all the members of the family with the necessities of life, as well as to represent their interests within the village community.

The peaceful way of life of the Bahnar family was very common in the Central highlands in the past. As Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi have stated:

“Each Bahnar family usually includes grandparents, husband and wife, and their children estimated about five to six people, or about seven to eight people in more larger families. Within a family, people are orderly behaved. The young have to respect and to obey the older, the older love and teach the younger. The parents also kiss and caress their children as us ...

Different from our living place, where dominant position is given to male, male and female in the living place of the Bahnar are equally treated ...

The most funny issue is about lawsuit between husband and wife and the wrong side does not have properties to compensate for the right side. In this case, the wrong side will become a servant for the right side until the right receives its compensation. During this time, both sides still live together with their own position.

Husband is the dominant of his wife that is our tradition, thus we cannot find the opposite story as what happens in Bahnar area. This manifests that social institutions of the Bahnar are very equitable and their women are very respected. Vietnamese women are calling for feminism and they would be dying for savage feminism if they heard about this story.” (Nguyen Kinh Chi and Nguyen Dong Chi, 1934: 66 - 76)

The family was the major production unit. It cultivated its own subsistence crops. Among members of the family, men had to be responsible for heavy work, such as creating cultivation areas, hunting, building houses and protecting their family and village. Meanwhile, women were responsible for cooking, fetching water, weaving clothes, raising children and so forth. Because of their traditional beliefs,



women also had responsibilities of planting activities, such as planting upland rice or fruit trees. The old people were given work suitable with their health. Children were encouraged to work as much as their capacity allowed.

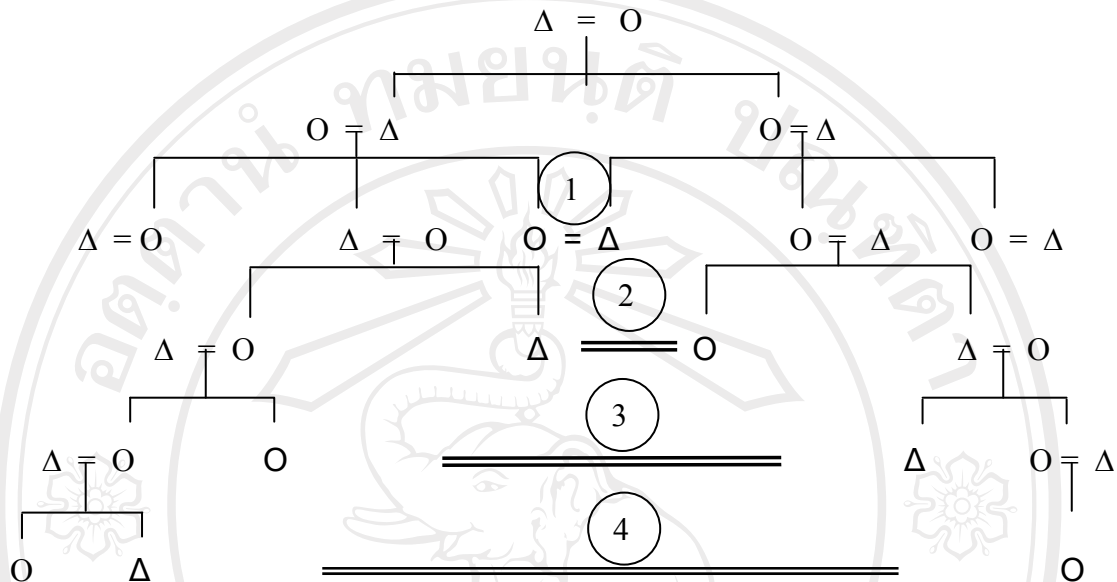
The family was also the major property-owning unit, as is evident by the traditional rules of inheritance. In terms of distribution between the living and the dead, two types of property were recognized: indivisible and divisible. Indivisible properties included the house itself, cultivation areas, gongs, paddy and other planted products. Divisible properties included buffaloes, pigs, household utensils, jewelry and cash. When a person passed away (“good dead”), all divisible properties were equally divided for each family member, and properties belonging to the dead should be used for the funeral or buried at the tomb.

Within a Bahnar village, village’s assessment and distributions were always made on the basis of the family rather than on semi-independent families or individuals. Each family was obliged to participate in co-operative village activities, whether ritual or economic, or else they must move out of the village. For instance, on ritual occasion, such as, planting ritual or New Year festival, each family had to contribute at least one laborer and a jar of homemade wine (regardless of the quantity and quality). At the same time, the family, regardless of the number of its members, was considered as one unit, whenever anything was distributed among the villagers. For example, when somebody killed a large game animal (wild pig, barking deer, bear and etc.), each family received an equal portion of the meat.

In many respects the family was also the ritual unit. The great majority of spirit-centered rituals, whether propitiatory or exorcistic, were family-oriented. And of course it was full independent family, not its semi-independent families, that constituted a single ancestor-propitiating unit.

In Bahnar families, boys and girls were free to select their own spouses. But this does not mean that there was no rule on marriage prohibition. The customary law of Bahnar at Buon Luoi, for instance, prohibited union of a couple that was related within four generations, regardless of whether it was the father’s side or mother’s side. If a couple within four generations fall in love with each other, they should be expelled from the village and their families had to make some rituals to propitiate

punishments of their ancestors and supernatural beings (for more information about punishments see the figure below).



#### Punishments:

- Case 1: The couple is expelled from the village and their parents have to make three rituals. Each ritual has to sacrifice one jar of homemade wine, one chicken, one pig, one goat and one buffalo.
- Case 2: The couple is expelled from the village and their parents have to make two rituals. Each ritual has to sacrifice one jar of homemade wine, one chicken, one pig, one goat and one buffalo.
- Case 3: The couple is expelled from village and their parents have to make one ritual sacrificing one jar of homemade wine, one chicken, one pig, one goat and one buffalo.
- Case 4: The couple is expelled from village and their parents have to make one ritual sacrificing one jar of homemade wine, one chicken and one pig.

Figure 4.3 Punishments for too closely related relationships in marriage

Customary laws of the Bahnar also had punishments for sexual relations before marriage, regardless of if the couple would become husband and wife or not. If a couple was caught when they were having sexual relations, both of them had to contribute a pig, a chicken and one jar of homemade wine to make a propitiatory ritual to the ancestors. Moreover, the families of the couple had to make a rite for the couple before the wedding declaring their past sexual relation with and without his/her future partner to the traditional village headman and other elder people. After the declarative rite, the traditional village headman and elder people would discuss

and made a decision on the appropriate punishment for the couple depending on the status of the past sexual relations.

For married people, if they were caught to have sexual relations with other people other than with their husband or wife, they should receive two types of punishments: one was given by the village and one was given by his/her spouse. Punishment given by the village was the same as in the case of sexual relations between unmarried people mentioned above, while punishment of his/her spouse was given according to the spouse's own decision.

The scale of the wedding of a young couple was dependant on the economic condition of both sides. The main wedding ceremony was organized at the family whose home the young couple would stay after the wedding. Usually, married couples would stay with the family who had more difficulties in terms of economic conditions or need of labor than the other side. When the time came for the married couple to become a fully independent family, their families would negotiate again about which side they would come to live nearest to. In other words, the choice of residence after marriage was mainly a question of convenience.

Apart from the prohibition of marriage, kinship associations are not particularly important among the Bahnar people. Practically speaking, it is not possible to identify a particular mode of behavior with any given kin terms. Outside of the family, relative age is a more significant factor in the ordering of social relationships than is the precise kinship relations. For instance, if a man's father's brother happened to be younger than he was, he would expect the younger man to defer to him despite the younger man's membership in an ascending generation. If two men were of the same age, then neither owed deference to each other. Younger people were always expected to defer to their elders, "who have seen the sun and the moon before they have".

#### **4.4 Summary**

In this chapter, I have examined how the knowledge of the Bahnar is structured and how such ethnic knowledge is applied in their livelihoods, village organization and social regulations. I have shown that the Bahnar people have their own knowledge. Like knowledge of other people in a small-scale society and unlike

the so called “scientific knowledge”, the knowledge of the Bahnar is related to a wider system of conceptions of the universe, which has been accumulated and handed down through generations. The Bahnar traditionally believed that the universe is divided into three worlds: The world of supernatural beings, the human world and the world of the dead (“good death”). For the Bahnar, activities of one person were related not only to other people, but also to supernatural beings. Precisely, humans were dependant upon non-humans. Supernatural beings determined the laws that controlled human beings and everyone should have respect for these laws. The breaking of natural laws by one person was not simply a problem between this person with the supernatural beings alone, but also a problem between the village or all villagers with the supernatural beings.

The people accustomed to western scientific knowledge may perceive the knowledge of Bahnar people, and furthermore, their perception of the universe as “irrational” and “backward” and assume that their beliefs lead them to unstable lives and poverty. For the Bahnar, however, these beliefs were the principal means upon which they would obtain their ideal harmonious life. As we have seen, the village was rather well organized. Natural resources were adequately harvested. Within the village, villagers were supposed to cooperate and help each other. It was the Bahnar tradition that the young respected for the elders, and the elders loved and gave their knowledge to the young.

To examine the knowledge of ethnic people such as the Bahnar is not a straightforward task and a single chapter cannot cover all the social aspects that relate to the knowledge of them. But through the different parts of this chapter, I hope that I have provided some critical insight into the knowledge of the Bahnar. For the purpose of this study, this critical insight is used as the ground for understanding the impacts of the policies and programs of development that were implemented by the socialist state in the next chapter.