



## THE SYMBOL “LANH” IN HMONG ETHNIC MINORITY GROUP’S SPIRITUAL CULTURE ON DONG VAN KARST PLATEAU, HA GIANG PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

The article researches the “*Lanh*” symbol in the spiritual culture of the Hmong ethnic minority group in Dong Van Karst Plateau, Ha Giang province, Vietnam to indicate that *Lanh* is not just a plant that uses fibers to weave cloth for clothing and daily life. Besides, *Lanh* is the symbol of Hmong ethnic minority group. It is a symbol for the personality and soul of Hmong women. Discovering the symbol will be the key to opening the door to the culture, history, beliefs, religion, and human outlook of the Hmong people. Living scatteredly on the high mountainsides in the middle of the rocky plateau, the material life is still difficult, but the Hmong people have a rich spiritual life, contributing to the cultural diversity of the ethnic groups in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** symbols, cultural symbols, spiritual culture, *Lanh*, Hmong ethnic minority group, Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark

### 1. Statement of the problem

A symbol is a commonly used term in many areas of life. In Philosophy and Psychology, a symbol is a concept indicating a stage, a form in the cognitive process of people when reflecting on objects and phenomena. In the field of culture, a symbol is a basic unit of culture, culture is a system of symbols, so cultural studies need to focus on the study of symbols. Deciphering symbols and understanding the meanings of symbols create the key to opening the door to the national cultural identity. Regarding the mechanism, the symbol always has two sides: expressing and being expressed. On the way of cultural development, each nation always consciously creates new cultural symbols. Through cultural symbols, we can deeply understand how that nation has behaved with nature, society, and human life. In *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*, two cultural researchers Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant affirmed: “*understanding*

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*the symbolic meaning of an individual or a nation means understanding people and that nation”* (2016, Da Nang Publishing House).

The culture of each ethnic group is the expression of the personality and psychology of that nation. Culture includes material culture and spiritual culture, which are expressed in lifestyles, customs, habits, ways of thinking, and behavior. In particular, spiritual culture is crystallized into symbols that are the expression of the creative personality of each ethnic group, which is the basis for distinguishing this nation from others.

Dong Van Karst Plateau is located in the northernmost part of Vietnam, spreading over 4 highland districts namely Quan Ba, Yen Minh, Dong Van, and Meo Vac with a total natural area of about 2,354 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2010, Dong Van Karst Plateau was recognized as Vietnam’s first Global Geopark by UNESCO. With over 60% of the area of limestone, at an average altitude of over 1,000 m above sea level, Dong Van Karst Plateau is famous for its deep gorges, steep cliffs, unique “rock gardens”, “rock forests”, geological heritages, biodiversity, traces of the Earth’s vivid evolutionary history from more than 500 million years ago. Majestic landscapes make people aware of their smallness before Nature. Dong Van Karst Plateau is home to more than 250,000 people belonging to 17 ethnic minorities, such as Hmong, Lo Lo, Pu Peo, Bo Y which, the Hmong people account for about 70% of the population, mainly the White Hmong group. Hmong people come to Dong Van Karst Plateau to explore, settle, adapt to harsh natural conditions and persevere for a long time. Even living in the middle of the “*rock desert*”, life here is still colorful and rich in music, reflected in costumes, beliefs, customs, architecture, and folk-art forms, understanding nature on the rocky plateau.



**Picture 1:** The terrain on Dong Van Karst Plateau

Among those cultural heritages, it is impossible not to mention the cultivation and the weaving *Lanh* of Hmong ethnic women. For generations, the Hmong people on the Dong Van

Karst Plateau have always passed on the saying: “Where there is Lanh, there is Hmong” to talk about the meaning and importance of *Lanh* in the life of the Hmong. *Lanh* trees not only provide materials for making clothes, making household items, but it has also been deeply ingrained in life, beliefs, and spirituality, becoming a unique spiritual and cultural symbol of the Hmong people in general and the Hmong people in Dong Van Karst Plateau in particular.



**Picture 2:** *Lanh* – A plant associated with the life of Hmong people

## 2. Overview of the research problem

From a very early age, Hmong people have become the object of research in many specialties, such as history, ethnography, literature, psychology, cinema, and painting. These scientific projects have studied a certain aspect of the culture and life of the Hmong people.

The first is the research works on the origin, history, name, and time of appearance of the Hmong people in Vietnam: “*Hmong ethnic minority group in Vietnam*” by Cu Hoa Van - Hoang Nam, “*Hmong people in Vietnam*” by Vu Quoc Khanh, “*Hmong people*” by Chu Thai Son... These studies provide an overview of the history of migration, and cultural elements such as eating, clothing, accommodation, village organization, customs, family, religion, belief.

Secondly, there are research works on Hmong culture, such as “*Hmong culture*” by Tran Huu Son, “*Spiritual culture of Hmong in Vietnam: Tradition and modernity*” by Vuong Duy Quang, “*Hmong people with the preservation of traditional cultural values*” by Mai Thanh Son ... In general, the above research works focus on explaining the phenomena of material and spiritual culture of Hmong people, such as culture, food, accommodation, beliefs, religion.

The third is the research works on *Lanh* with an initial introduction to *Lanh* plant as well as how to plant, care, harvest and the stages of weaving. These are the works: “*A few perceptions about Hmong costumes*” by Nguyen Tat Thang, “*The innovation of traditional weaving and sewing of*

*Hmong people*" by Quach Thi Oanh - Ta Duc, "Patterns on the fabric of the Hmong ethnic minority group" by Diep Trung Binh.

However, the above studies only stop at the introduction of *Lanh* and its role in weaving. There are few in-depth studies on the role of *Lanh* in the spiritual and cultural life of Hmong people in a certain area. Therefore, we researched *Lanh* symbol in the spiritual and cultural life of the Hmong people on Dong Van Karst Plateau to find a unique and meaningful cultural beauty. *Lanh* has been deeply attached to the Hmong ethnic group on the Karst Plateau for a long time. It parallels and plays an important role in the material and spiritual life of this ethnic group. With *Lanh*, Hmong have created a lively culture that cannot be dissolved in any other culture.

### 3. Research methods

The authors use ethnographic fieldwork, observation, and interview methods to get a realistic view of life, people, and *Lanh* in the life of Hmong people on Dong Van Karst Plateau.

From the collected and published documents, the authors use analytical and statistical methods to classify and determine the symbolism of *Lanh* in the spiritual cultural life of the Hmong people on the Dong Van Karst Plateau.

The authors also use historical and logical methods to have a clear and true view of the symbol "*Lanh*", thereby explaining the Hmong's conceptions of *Lanh* in their spiritual life.

### 4. Research results

Hmong ethnic culture is rich in symbols, the symbol of "*Lanh*" in the spiritual culture of the Hmong people is a sense, a perception that has been deposited, crystallized, and distilled through many ups and downs, still not fading. On the contrary, it is more deeply engraved in the mind of the Hmong people.

#### 4.1. "*Lanh*" - Symbol for the sign of Hmong people

*Lanh* is closely related to the survival and development of the Hmong people as a tree of destiny. Of the 17 ethnic groups living on Dong Van Karst Plateau, only the Hmong have a profession of growing *Lanh* and weaving and having faith in the tree. Therefore, Hmong people are very proud of their long tradition of growing and using *Lanh*. It has become a distinct cultural feature to distinguish and identify the Hmong people from other ethnic groups. *Lanh* has become a sacred spiritual cultural symbol associated with the life of every Hmong.

Hmong people in general and Hmong people living on Dong Van Karst Plateau, in particular, have an innocent and rudimentary conception of the world around them. They believe that "*All things are spiritual*" (Truong Luu and Hung Dinh Quy, 1996, p.48). Everything has a soul, from people to stumps, stones. Humans have many souls and souls exist forever, so associated with each human life cycle are rituals and associated with the symbol "*Lanh*".

In Hmong people's custom of giving birth and raising children, there were many rituals related to *Lanh* tree and the items from it. *Lanh* is thicker than other fabrics, the background is

smooth, Hmong people use *Lanh* to make clothes, slings, hats, etc. for children. *Lanh* is warm in winter, cool in summer, has high durability. According to Hmong custom, from birth until three days old, the child is not clothed but is wrapped in a diaper cut from the mother's old *Lanh* apron. On the third day, the family holds a naming ceremony for the child and dresses the child in the first *Lanh* shirt made by the mother. From there, the child is officially recognized as a human. During the confinement period, Hmong people believe that the child's astral soul is still playing aimlessly somewhere, only returning to the body for a while and then roaming again, so the family always has to wear a *Lanh* shirt for the child and always keep quiet so that the child is not startled but lost his astral soul. If a stranger comes to the house, the host must invite that guest to a hearty meal. After the meal, the guest will have to tie a *Lanh* rope around the child's wrist to bless it. Hmong people have been associated with *Lanh* since birth. It has become a symbol certifying the birth of Hmong people.

When Hmong people get married, the wedding ceremony of Hmong people on Dong Van Karst Plateau is usually held in the winter when the food has been harvested, and they abstain from getting married in the thundering season. In wedding ceremonies, *Lanh* plays an irreplaceable role. The wedding dress of the bride and groom must be made of *Lanh* and embroidered very well. Patterns in Hmong women's wedding dresses are mainly geometric patterns such as rectangles, rhombuses, spirals, etc. The main colors are blue, white, and black. The wedding dress has many folds, soft, spreading like petals, and the red frill shows the bride's desire for happiness. With each wedding dress, Hmong bride has to do by herself from the stage of planting *Lanh*, weaving, painting beeswax, embroidering patterns, it usually takes about a year to complete, so Hmong women appreciate it very much. and keep it carefully. Unlike the bride's outfit, the groom's outfit is not too bright. The groom usually wears a dark shirt with patterns on the sleeves, black pants, wide legs. In addition, Hmong people living in Quan Ba area on Dong Van Karst Plateau also have a custom when organizing a wedding to have two rolls of *Lanh*, each 10 metres long, a white roll for the bride, and a black roll for the groom, these two *Lanh* rolls are spread out and rolled up according to rituals directed by the shaman for blessings. Thus, *Lanh* is indispensable in the wedding of Hmong, and becomes a symbol of the charm, witness, and blessing of Hmong people when they enter a new stage of life.

When Hmong people die, Hmong people often say that "*Even if you die of hunger, you won't eat the seed. Even if you are poor, you must have Lanh clothes to wear when you die*" (quoted by Tran Huu Son, 1996, p.250). The funeral of Hmong people is a unique cultural phenomenon that includes many different rituals, reflecting the historical and social relations of the ethnic community. Hmong's funeral is divided into two times: when the person has just died and when the person has been buried for half a month. At funerals, Hmong people stipulate that the clothes for the dead must be made of *Lanh*, and the visitors must also wear *Lanh*, so it is an indispensable product. As many children as the dead have, they will have as many *Lanh* costumes made by their daughter and daughter-in-law. Looking at the number of *Lanh* towels placed on the dead person's face, we can tell how many children the dead person has. Therefore, after getting married, a Hmong girl, in addition to being responsible for sewing clothes for her husband and children, also has to prepare for her biological parents, each of her parents-in-law a *Lanh* outfit to wear when she dies. Hmong people believe that when they die, they must wear *Lanh* because

only if they wear *Lanh*, they will not lose their ancestors, and if they wear *Lanh*, their ancestors will recognize their descendants. In addition to wearing *Lanh* for the dead, every Hmong funeral rite uses *Lanh* fiber. The *Lanh* rope is a bridge for the dead to receive the sacrifices of their descendants and relatives, and at the same time helps them to enter the world of their ancestors. Hmong believe that *Lanh* is a guiding symbol connecting the real world with the world of ancestors and gods.

In short, *Lanh* has an important position in the cultural and spiritual life of Hmong people, becoming the most powerful symbol of vitality. From the time Hmong people were born, they were clothed in *Lanh* diapers. When they got married, the bride and groom had to wear traditional *Lanh* clothes. Until they died, they were forced to wear *Lanh* clothes, tied with a *Lanh* rope. The dead man's hand becomes a sacred object to guide the dead back to his ancestors. In today's modern society, Hmong people on Dong Van Karst Plateau still maintain the profession of *Lanh* cultivation, *Lanh* weaving, and *Lanh* clothing because those products are made from *Lanh* - a plant that bears the symbolism, ethnic signs, reminding Hmong people to always remember their roots and national pride. Ethnic history and living conditions have produced a spiritual culture of Hmong ethnic group bearing a strong impression of the rocky plateau.

#### **4.2. "Lanh" - Symbol for the personality and soul of Hmong women**

Hmong people living on Dong Van Karst Plateau are always proud that they have two traditional occupations that make other ethnic groups respect, namely, the weaving of *Lanh* and the unique craft of blacksmithing. If blacksmithing is only for men, *Lanh* farming is only for women. Therefore, each Hmong family on Dong Van Karst Plateau dedicates the most fertile land to growing *Lanh*. *Lanh* belongs to the family of thorns, the *Lanh* tree is called "*Chaozmangx*" in Hmong language. It is usually planted at the end of February and beginning of March of the lunar calendar and harvested at the end of June and beginning of July of the lunar calendar every year. *Lanh* plant, in addition to the main purpose of taking textile fibers, has other uses such as making medicine (leaves and roots), making green fertilizer (leaves), dried stems for fuel, seeds for making cakes or burning *Lanh* for food or mixing with some other substances to make gunpowder, carbon paper. From the raw material is *Lanh* plant, going through more than 40 stages made entirely by hand, it is possible to make a soft *Lanh* cloth that is beautiful, airy, warm, durable, dust-free, and suitable for topographical characteristics (rocky mountains), highland climate (cold), work (lots of dust and sweat) so *Lanh* is very popular among Hmong people. Hmong women begin the main process of stripping *Lanh*, pounding yarn, joining yarn, spinning, cooking yarn, whitening, polishing yarn and then on the loom, painting beeswax, embroidering patterns... *Lanh* fabric, through the skillful hands of Hmong women, has become clothes, skirts, and bags with high aesthetic value. From *Lanh*, beeswax, and simple techniques, they have created a unique handicraft. *Lanh* is promoted to the height of the art of painting, needlework, and symbolism. "*Lanh*" – symbolizes the personality and soul of Hmong women.



**Picture 3:** Spinning - A stage in the process of *Lanh* making (The authors photographed with Hmong artisans in Lung Tam commune, Quan Ba district, Ha Giang province)

When it comes to Hmong women, the first impression is a *Lanh* dress with distinctive lines, colors, and patterns that cannot be confused with other ethnic costumes. Hmong women are associated with *Lanh* cultivation, weaving, and bundling as their inseparable objects. Hmong women are very hardworking no matter where they are, whether in a crowded market or when walking on the street. This is a job that not only shows dexterity and hard work but also is a criterion for evaluating the talents, ethics, qualities, and ways of doing business of Hmong women, so they often say “A pretty girl who is not good at *Lanh* making is also ugly, a pretty girl who doesn't know how to hold a needle is bad” (Ma A Lenh and Tu Ngoc Vu, 2014, p.478). Making *Lanh* clothes has soaked into their flesh and blood, giving them the habit of hard work, skillful hands. The profession of growing *Lanh* has contributed significantly to creating the character of Hmong women. Therefore, in order to evaluate the quality and personality of a woman, Hmong people took the technique of growing *Lanh* and weaving as a measure. The ideal beautiful woman must be proficient in *Lanh* making, weaving, and embroidery. On the contrary, a woman is considered ugly when she is not good at *Lanh* making. Just by looking at the *Lanh* roll, you can guess a woman's personality. If the *Lanh* roll is smooth, shiny, and neat, then it is a woman who is responsible, careful, and skillful. On the contrary, if the *Lanh* rolls are messy, it is a sloppy, lazy, and clumsy woman. Therefore, *Lanh* is a symbolic image for Hmong women, *Lanh* rolls reflect the character, and *Lanh* seeds are the fate of Hmong women.

Stripping *Lanh* fibers requires ingenuity. After stripping the *Lanh* fibers into the mortar, pounding until the *Lanh* fibers become soft, smooth, and loose. After that, splicing will be done, which is the most difficult and time-consuming step. Hmong women have to strip each small

strand by hand and then re-join it at intervals of equal length, the *Lanh* fibers are meticulously connected, the root is connected to the root, the top is connected to the top, and then rolled into a smooth yarn. Looking at the way the *Lanh* fibers are joined, you can see the meticulousness and patience of Hmong women. After they have finished splicing into large rolls of *Lanh*, they will spin, soften, stretch the *Lanh* yarn, put it on a loom... go through more than 40 stages, and do not know how many drops of a woman's sweat fall to do it. A *Lanh* cloth is produced, it is soaked in kitchen ash water until it becomes shiny white.

*Lanh* fabric can be used to make beautiful skirts which is also a measure of the ingenuity and rich soul of Hmong women. From an early age, the girls joined their mothers to weave *Lanh*, learn to embroider, and draw beeswax on clothes. Without a certain pattern, Hmong women have constantly created shapes, textures, painted beeswax, and mixed colors to create their own unique beautiful dresses with subtle observation, imagination, and skillful hands. Each dress shows the industriousness, hard work, skillful hands, and rich imagination of a woman, and at the same time reflects cultural and aesthetic values, contributing to creating richness and diversity in the cultural and spiritual life of Hmong people. Patterns are the most important factor in creating the beauty of Hmong costumes. However, the pattern is very rustic, derived from ancient stories and poems about national origins, natural landscapes, familiar crops, livestock, and agricultural products. Patterns are often seen in the form of horizontal cells with borders of squares, crosses, rhombuses, triangles, circles, single vortex, double vortex, sawtooth, curve, wavy line... Inside are the five-pointed, six-pointed, eight-pointed star, pumpkin flower, spider web, snail, goat horn... Hmong people believe that the beautiful pattern will help invite gods to the family to give good omens and dispel evil things. These patterns all have bright colors, especially red, creating a warm feeling for the wearer when walking Hmong deep forests, high mountains, and abysses in the cold climate of the Karst Plateau.



**Picture 4:** Some products from *Lanh* with typical motifs, completely natural materials and handmade production process under the skillful hands of Hmong women on Dong Van Karst Plateau

*Lanh* plant and *Lanh* making create the skillful hands, the patient and resilient personality, and the rich and sensitive soul of Hmong women. Going up to Dong Van Karst Plateau, it is easy to see anywhere the image of a Hmong woman, with a harpoon on her back, ardently walking with a *Lanh* roll in her hand. *Lanh* is one of the precious products of this land, which is



completely handmade in the skillful hands of women. For Hmong people, *Lanh* is not only a garment material. It is an heirloom that clearly reflects the cultural traditions, history, beliefs, personality, and wealth of Hmong people. *Lanh* has become a unique spiritual and cultural symbol of the Hmong people.

## 5. Discussion

Culture is expressed in many different forms, but it is most visible when it exists in the form of symbols. Symbols are always central and are considered the cell of culture. In other words, symbols are the encoding of the spiritual values of the ethnic group along the time axis. To understand the meaning of symbols, people need to decipher what those symbols mean. The decoding of symbols not only aims to discover eternal cultural values, but also aims to open up many new layers of meaning. The symbol is a living entity born from the thinking and imagining process of people, so in the process of development, the symbol is constantly being built up. Therefore, each culture of the ethnic group contains extremely unique cultural symbols.

Studying symbols is an extremely difficult and complicated job. It requires researchers to have both a specific and comprehensive approach in both synchronic and chronological dimensions. The study of symbols can be considered as one of the most specific approaches to culture because symbols are the crystallization of cultural values created by people. And so, the symbol is a tool for people to express their culture through their worldview.

A symbol is a cultural product formed naturally in the cultural journey of mankind. However, as a human civilization grows more advanced, those cultural elements become more complex. Therefore, modern science has divided approaches to symbolism into different disciplines or groups of research, symbolism research in modern science requires a smooth coordination between different scientific disciplines to have an overall and comprehensive perspective.

The symbol "*Lanh*" in the spiritual culture of Hmong ethnic minority group is a multi-meaningful, multi-expression symbol. With its complex and vivid nature, the symbol "*Lanh*" constantly evokes unique, new, and vibrant associations.

## 6. Conclusion

Symbols exist within the community and within each of its members. A symbol is always social because it has the power to link society, calling for a sense of community. To be able to fully and accurately grasp the identity of a culture, we must not only go through a few single symbols, but must seriously study the entire traditional symbol system from myths, festivals, culture, and folk art to behavioral patterns. The symbol "*Lanh*" in the spiritual culture of Hmong people always contains traditional values: culture, history, religion, beliefs, customs, practices. These values are summed up and accumulated over hundreds of years of history and it has become the strength and pride of Hmong people. It can be said that the "*Lanh*" symbol is like a colorful crystal that reflects the different illumination of the light source, depending on which side we can see it at this angle or not. Deciphering the symbol "*Lanh*" in the spiritual culture of the

Hmong people is an interesting job to help us understand the rich cultural identity of Hmong people on Dong Van Karst Plateau. In the current international integration context, the role of the community and each individual in restoring, protecting, and promoting the cultural values of ethnic minorities is especially important. Since then, it has actively contributed to the preservation and development of an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Authors**

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