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PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION OF TAY DRY PUPPETRY ART IN ASSOCIATION WITH COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN DINH HOACOMMUNE, THÁI NGUYÊN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

The dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa Commune, Thái Nguyên Province, represents a unique form of folk performance deeply imbued with traditional cultural, spiritual, and indigenous knowledge values. Throughout its long process of formation and development, dry puppetry has not only reflected the spiritual life of the Tay community but has also contributed significantly to the preservation of ethnic cultural identity. However, under the impacts of modernization and cultural integration, this traditional art form is currently facing the risk of decline and disappearance. In the context of contemporary community-based tourism development, the preservation and promotion of Tay dry puppetry in connection with cultural tourism exploitation is considered an appropriate approach to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while simultaneously creating momentum for local socio-economic development. This article focuses on analyzing the cultural values of Tay dry puppetry in Dinh Hoa, assessing the current situation of its preservation, and proposing several solutions to effectively preserve and promote this traditional art form in association with the development of community-based tourism in the locality.

KEYWORDS: dry puppetry; Tay people; Dinh Hoa; community-based tourism; cultural preservation; intangible cultural heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the rich repository of intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam's ethnic minority groups, the dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa Commune, Thái Nguyên Province, represents a distinctive form of folk art embodying significant cultural, spiritual, and performative values. This art form serves not only as a means of traditional entertainment but also as a medium for preserving indigenous knowledge, reflecting the production practices, customs, and aesthetic perceptions of the Tay community across generations.

Dry puppetry experienced a prolonged period of interruption and decline within community life. After more than forty years of absence, this traditional art form was revived in 1999. However, in the context

of increasing cultural exchange and the rapid development of modern entertainment forms, dry puppetry has gradually lost its former position in the spiritual life of local people, particularly among younger generations.

At present, Dinh Hoa Commune has placed considerable emphasis on the development of community-based tourism associated with the preservation and promotion of the traditional cultural values of ethnic minority communities. This orientation is regarded as a favorable condition for transforming dry puppetry into a representative cultural tourism product of the locality. Nevertheless, the preservation and promotion of this art form still face numerous limitations, including a shortage of successor artisans, ineffective promotional activities, the narrowing of performance spaces, and the absence of specialized tourism products.

Given this context, researching and proposing solutions for the preservation and promotion of Tay dry puppetry in connection with community-based tourism development in Dinh Hoa is of considerable theoretical and practical significance. Such efforts contribute not only to safeguarding ethnic cultural identity but also to fostering sustainable tourism development in the locality.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs methods of collecting, systematizing, and analyzing documents related to dry puppetry art, Tay folk culture, intangible cultural heritage, and community-based tourism development. The research materials include: scientific studies on Vietnamese folk puppetry art; documents on the traditional culture of the Tay people in Vietnam and in Dinh Hoa Commune; policy documents issued by the Party, the State, and local authorities concerning the preservation of intangible cultural heritage; projects on community-based tourism development associated with the preservation of traditional cultural values in Dinh Hoa and Thái Nguyên Province; as well as articles, scientific reports, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations related to dry puppetry art and cultural tourism development.

The documentary research process was conducted through several stages:

Stage 1 (*before 2000*): focusing on materials concerning the historical formation, cultural characteristics of the Tay people, and the emergence of dry puppetry art within community life;

Stage 2 (*2000–2015*): examining documents reflecting the revival process of dry puppetry after a long period of decline, particularly following the restoration of the Tham Roc puppetry troupe in 1999;

Stage 3 (*from 2015 to the present*): concentrating on studies related to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in association with community-based tourism development, as well as policies promoting cultural tourism in Dinh Hoa Commune and Thái Nguyên Province.

Through the processes of analysis, comparison, and synthesis of documentary sources, the author

identifies the distinctive cultural values of Tay dry puppetry while also recognizing the current difficulties and limitations in its preservation and tourism exploitation. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork methods, methods of document analysis and synthesis, interdisciplinary approaches combining cultural studies and tourism studies, comparative methods, and archival research methods were employed in order to obtain practical data. On that basis, the study evaluates the role of the local community and proposes solutions for the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Cultural Values of the Tay Dry Puppetry Art in Dinh Hoa, Thái Nguyên

The dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa Commune, Thái Nguyên Province, is a unique form of folk performance deeply imbued with ethnic cultural identity and profoundly reflective of the spiritual life of the mountainous communities in the Việt Bắc region. With a history spanning hundreds of years, dry puppetry is not merely a traditional cultural activity but also a repository of historical, spiritual, educational, artistic, and indigenous knowledge values of the local Tay community.

First and foremost, dry puppetry possesses profound historical value, reflecting the formation and development of the cultural life of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa. According to folk artisans and local historical sources, this art form was introduced to Dinh Hoa from Tuyen Quang by the Ma Quang (MeKong) lineage more than two centuries ago. Despite experiencing historical upheavals and periods of decline, dry puppetry has remained in the collective memory of the community as a traditional cultural symbol closely associated with local life. Its presence in folk festivals, particularly the Long Tong Festival, demonstrates that this art form has become an integral component of the spiritual and cultural life of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa.

In addition to its historical significance, dry puppetry embodies distinctive cultural values that reflect the worldview, philosophy of life, and customs of the Tay community. The narratives, ritual chants, and songs commonly recreate scenes of agricultural production, land reclamation, prayers for favorable harvests and blessings, and aspirations for prosperity and happiness. Through these performances, audiences can clearly perceive the influence of traditional agricultural beliefs, particularly the worship of agricultural deities, spirits, and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The ritual chants used in puppetry performances not only carry ceremonial meanings but also convey moral teachings, encouraging people to uphold ethical values, respect virtue, practice gratitude toward ancestors and parents, and preserve communal solidarity.

One of the most prominent values of dry puppetry lies in its educational role and its function in strengthening community cohesion. In traditional Tay society, each puppetry performance served as a communal cultural space where villagers gathered, interacted, and shared stories of everyday life. Through ritual chants and narrative performances, dry puppetry conveyed moral lessons concerning neighborhood solidarity, collective spirit, diligence in labor, and humane ways of living. These values contributed to reinforcing communal relationships and fostering strong bonds among members of the

village community. At the same time, dry puppetry also functioned as a means for people to relieve the pressures of daily labor, bringing spiritual joy and balance to communal life.

Furthermore, dry puppetry serves as a repository and medium for transmitting the rich body of indigenous knowledge of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa. The songs, chants, and narratives contain valuable experiences related to agricultural production, weather forecasting, environmental adaptation, and local knowledge accumulated over generations. Traditional understandings of observing nature, predicting seasonal changes, and conceptualizing the relationship between humans and the natural environment are vividly expressed through this folk performance art. Such knowledge not only constitutes a valuable source of information on traditional cultural life but also demonstrates the adaptive capacity of mountainous agricultural communities in their processes of survival and development.

Besides its cultural and educational significance, dry puppetry also possesses remarkable aesthetic and artistic values. This art form represents a harmonious combination of puppet craftsmanship, folk songs, ritual chants, traditional music, and stage performance techniques. The puppets, handcrafted with simple yet expressive forms, reflect the aesthetic perceptions and creativity of the Tay people. The accompanying musical system, including the “Dan Tinh” lute, flutes, percussion instruments, and *then* singing melodies, creates a comprehensive performance space deeply imbued with the folk cultural identity of the Việt Bắc region. Through puppetry art, the Tay people not only depict the realities of daily life but also express aspirations for beauty, justice, goodness, and faith in life.

In the contemporary context, despite being strongly affected by modernization and the emergence of new forms of entertainment, dry puppetry continues to play an important role in preserving ethnic cultural identity. However, the gradual disappearance of traditional performance spaces, the shortage of younger successor artisans, and changing preferences among younger generations pose significant challenges to the preservation of this art form. Therefore, researching, restoring, and promoting the cultural values of dry puppetry not only contributes to safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the Tay people but also provides an important foundation for the development of community-based tourism and traditional cultural education in the current context.

3.2. Current Situation of the Preservation and Promotion of Dry Puppetry Art

The dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa Commune, Thái Nguyên Province, is a distinctive form of folk performance containing significant historical, cultural, educational, and indigenous knowledge values. However, in the context of modernization and the strong impact of the market economy, this traditional art form is currently facing a serious risk of decline, while efforts to preserve and promote its values continue to encounter numerous difficulties and limitations.

At present, two representative dry puppetry troupes still exist in Dinh Hoa District: the Ru Nghe puppetry troupe in Dong Thinh Commune and the Tham Roc puppetry troupe in Bình Yên Commune.

According to the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Dossier on the Tham Roc and Ru Nghe dry puppetry art of the Tay people, the following statistics have been recorded:

- *Current status of puppetry troupes:* There are currently two Tay dry puppetry troupes in Dinh Hoa Commune, namely the Ru Nghe troupe in Dong Thinh Commune and the Tham Roc troupe in Binh Yen Commune.
- *Number of artisans:* Ru Nghe troupe: 3 artisans; Tham Roc troupe: 2 artisans.
- *Number of practitioners:* Ru Nghe troupe: 20 practitioners; Tham Roc troupe: 15 practitioners.
- *Number of performance repertoires:* Ru Nghe troupe: 3 repertoires (including ritual chants, performance sketches, and gecko puppetry); Tham Roc troupe: 4 repertoires (including non-verbal puppet performances such as crowd-clearing, the king's appearance, agricultural production, and gecko performances).
- *Skills, techniques, and customary practices:*

The Ru Nghe troupe is formed voluntarily by villagers according to the principle of “those who observe, perform, and understand.” The manipulation of puppets, particularly gecko and Pu Cay puppets, requires meticulousness, patience, and harmonious coordination.

The Tham Roc troupe is organized along clan lines, with clearly assigned responsibilities for each member. Before performances, rituals are conducted to seek permission from ancestors, and close coordination between puppets and musical accompaniment is required.

- *Number of artisans still capable of transmitting knowledge:* Ru Nghe troupe: 3 artisans; Tham Roc troupe: 2 artisans.
- *Number of current learners:* Ru Nghe troupe: 20 learners; Tham Roc troupe: 15 learners.
- *Methods of transmission:* Instruction in puppet crafting and puppet manipulation, combined with opportunities for learners to accompany the troupe during invited performances.

It can be observed that the number of artisans with profound knowledge of dry puppetry is currently very limited and consists mainly of elderly individuals. The successor workforce remains insufficient, while the transmission of knowledge to younger generations faces many challenges due to the declining interest of youth in traditional folk arts. Although the artisans remain deeply devoted to their profession and wish to pass on valuable indigenous knowledge to future generations, attracting learners and maintaining troupe activities continue to be difficult tasks.

In addition to the shortage of successor practitioners, the material conditions serving performances have also deteriorated seriously. Many old puppets, props, and traditional musical instruments have been damaged, lost, or degraded over time. In particular, numerous ancient ritual chants—an essential component contributing to the cultural value and unique identity of Tay dry puppetry in Dinh Hoa — are no longer preserved in their original form. As a result, contemporary performances are often reduced to short and simplified sketches lacking the cultural depth and authenticity characteristic of traditional puppetry art.

The performance space and frequency of dry puppetry performances have also been significantly narrowed. Presently, performances mainly take place during the Long Tong Festival or at several small-scale local cultural events. Puppetry troupes rarely have opportunities to perform or exchange experiences in larger cultural spaces within or beyond the province. Due to financial limitations, participation in art festivals or international cultural exchange programs is almost nonexistent on a regular basis. This situation has reduced the capacity to promote and disseminate the values of dry puppetry to broader audiences.

Another noteworthy issue is the strong influence of modern forms of entertainment on community cultural life. The rapid development of the internet, social media, films, and contemporary entertainment programs has significantly altered the artistic preferences of younger generations. Whereas dry puppetry once served as an indispensable “spiritual nourishment” in the cultural life of the Tay community, today it has gradually lost its former position. Many people now perceive dry puppetry merely as a form of entertainment without fully understanding the cultural, educational, and indigenous knowledge values embedded in each performance narrative and ritual chant.

In recent years, local authorities and cultural agencies have initiated various activities aimed at preserving and promoting dry puppetry art, including the restoration of puppetry troupes, the organization of performances at traditional festivals, the establishment of cultural clubs, the incorporation of puppetry into experiential activities in schools, and its promotion through cultural and tourism programs. These activities have initially contributed to raising awareness of Tay dry puppetry in Dinh Hoa among both domestic and international audiences. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of preservation and promotion efforts has not yet been commensurate with the intrinsic value of the heritage. Transmission activities remain seasonal, small in scale, and lacking systematic organization. Funding for preservation remains limited and largely dependent on state budgets, while the mobilization of social resources has yet to achieve significant effectiveness. Puppetry clubs and troupes operate inconsistently, with irregular rehearsal schedules because members must also secure their family livelihoods. Furthermore, the development of cultural tourism products associated with dry puppetry remains fragmented and has not yet generated strong attraction for tourists.

It can therefore be seen that, despite certain efforts in preserving and promoting the dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa, this traditional art form continues to face substantial challenges. Without comprehensive and long-term solutions, the risk of further decline and eventual disappearance of dry puppetry in contemporary life is inevitable.

3.3. Proposed Solutions for Preserving and Promoting Dry Puppetry Art Associated with Community-Based Tourism Development

3.3.1. Strengthening the Coordinated Role of Local Authorities, Local Communities, and Puppetry Troupes in Heritage Preservation

The preservation of the Tay dry puppetry art in Dinh Hoa cannot rely solely on the efforts of folk artisans but requires close and coordinated collaboration among local authorities, local communities, and puppetry troupes. Such cooperation constitutes an important foundation for establishing a sustainable preservation mechanism while simultaneously promoting the values of this art form within the development of community-based tourism.

Local authorities should promulgate specific support policies for the activities of puppetry troupes, including financial assistance for restoring props and performance equipment, organizing transmission and training classes, constructing performance spaces, and implementing cultural promotion programs associated with local tourism development. At the same time, dry puppetry should be incorporated into community cultural activities, traditional festivals, and experiential educational programs in schools in order to enhance younger generations' awareness of the value of ethnic cultural heritage.

In addition, the local community should be regarded as the central主体 in the heritage preservation process. Encouraging residents to participate in performances, learning activities, knowledge transmission, and the introduction of dry puppetry to visitors will contribute to fostering a sense of responsibility for safeguarding cultural heritage. Only when the community genuinely understands and takes pride in the cultural value of dry puppetry can this traditional art form sustain its vitality in contemporary life.

3.3.2. Integrating Dry Puppetry Art with Community-Based Experiential Tourism Activities

In order to, effectively promote the value of dry puppetry art in the contemporary context, it is necessary to develop experiential tourism models associated with the indigenous culture of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa. This is considered an important solution that not only contributes to heritage preservation but also creates livelihood opportunities for local communities.

Community-based tourism programs may incorporate experiential activities related to dry puppetry, such as watching traditional puppet performances, learning about the process of puppet-making, practicing puppet manipulation techniques, studying ritual chants, or participating in folk performance activities. These experiences not only enhance the attractiveness of tourism programs but also enable visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural life, spiritual beliefs, and indigenous knowledge of the Tay people.

In addition, souvenir products inspired by dry puppetry—such as wooden puppet models, commemorative paintings, and handicraft products—should be developed to serve tourists. Such initiatives would contribute both to promoting the image of dry puppetry and to generating additional income for residents. Furthermore, connecting dry puppetry performances with cultural and ecological tourism destinations throughout Thái Nguyên Province would help expand performance spaces and improve visitors' accessibility to this traditional art form.

3.3.3. Promoting Heritage Transmission and Education for Younger Generations

One of the major causes leading to the current risk of decline of dry puppetry art is the shortage of successor practitioners. Therefore, greater attention should be devoted to the transmission and education of cultural heritage for younger generations to ensure the continuity and long-term development of this traditional art form.

Local authorities should cooperate with educational institutions to regularly organize experiential activities, folk culture clubs, and extracurricular programs related to dry puppetry art. Providing pupils and university students with opportunities to directly interact with folk artisans, learn about the historical formation of dry puppetry, study ritual chants, and practice puppet manipulation techniques will help enhance their interest in learning and raise their awareness of preserving traditional culture.

In addition, community-based transmission classes should be established with the direct participation of folk artisans. The transmission process should not be limited solely to performance techniques but should also emphasize the dissemination of indigenous knowledge, spiritual meanings, and the humanistic values embodied in dry puppetry art. This represents an important solution for nurturing appreciation of ethnic cultural heritage and developing a successor generation for puppetry troupes in the future.

3.3.4. Innovating Performance Content and Forms in Accordance with Contemporary Life

In the context of modern society, characterized by the rapid development of new forms of entertainment, dry puppetry art requires certain innovations in order to better meet the reception needs of contemporary audiences, particularly younger generations, while still preserving its traditional cultural identity.

Puppetry troupes may consider developing new performance narratives reflecting contemporary life, rural modernization, environmental protection, traditional cultural education, or the promotion of local tourism. The content of ritual chants should also be adapted in a concise and accessible manner while continuing to preserve the cultural characteristics of the Tay people and the traditional educational values embodied in the performances.

In addition, performance spaces should be diversified to include outdoor stages, community-based tourism sites, schools, cultural museums, and cultural–tourism events both within and outside the province. The application of communication technologies, together with the production of promotional videos and dissemination through digital platforms, would further contribute to expanding audience accessibility and enhancing the promotion of dry puppetry art in contemporary society.

3.3.5. Strengthening Cultural–Tourism Linkages to Build a Local Heritage Brand

In order for, dry puppetry art to truly become a distinctive cultural product of Dinh Hoa District and Thái Nguyên Province, it is necessary to develop a strategic linkage between cultural preservation and

sustainable tourism development. This represents a long-term solution for enhancing the position and significance of this heritage within contemporary social life.

Cultural and tourism management agencies should establish the brand of “Tay Dry Puppetry of Dinh Hoa” as a unique cultural product of the locality. The organization of festivals, performance events, and ethnic cultural celebrations associated with dry puppetry performances would contribute to widely promoting the image of this heritage to both domestic and international tourists.

At the same time, greater cultural exchange should be encouraged between dry puppetry and other forms of folk art such as *Then* singing, “*Dan Tinh*” performances, “*Tac Xinh*” dance, *Quan họ* folk singing, and water puppetry in order to create integrated and highly attractive performance programs. Through cultural exchange activities and regional tourism linkages, dry puppetry art can not only be preserved but also developed into a representative cultural tourism product, thereby contributing to local socio-economic development.

4. CONCLUSION

The dry puppetry art of the Tay people in Dinh Hoa, Thái Nguyên, represents a form of intangible cultural heritage possessing distinctive artistic, spiritual, and indigenous knowledge values. In the contemporary context, the preservation and promotion of this traditional art form not only contribute to safeguarding ethnic cultural identity but also open up opportunities for the sustainable development of community-based tourism in the locality.

In order to, effectively preserve and promote dry puppetry art, close coordination is required among local authorities, folk artisans, and local communities in activities related to transmission, promotion, and the development of distinctive cultural tourism products. At the same time, particular attention should be paid to strengthening the central role of the Tay community in the heritage preservation process in order to ensure the sustainability and long-term value of dry puppetry art in contemporary social life.

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