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# Folk Tales of the Giay Ethnic Group from the Perspective of Cultural Memory: A Mechanism for Preserving and Recreating Community Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of globalization, the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is facing the risk of disruption. This study approaches the folk tales of the Giáy people from the perspective of "Cultural Memory" theory. Instead of analyzing traditional poetics, the article considers this narrative system as a "living library" preserving important cultural codes. The results indicate that Giáy folk tales function as a memory storage mechanism along three main axes: Historical, Social, and Ecological. The study affirms the role of folk tales in non-formal education and the preservation of ethnic identity for sustainable development.

**KEYWORDS:** Giáy ethnic group, Cultural memory, Giáy folk tales , Ethnic identity, Ecological memory, Historical memory, Ethnic cultural memory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *1.1. Context and Urgency*

Cultural diversity is a precious asset of humanity, in which the indigenous knowledge of ethnic minorities plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological and social balance. In Vietnam, the Giáy people, with their long history of residence in the provinces of Lào Cai, Hà Giang, and Lai Châu, possess a rich treasury of folk tales. However, under the impact of modernization, the space for traditional performance is shrinking, leading to the risk of "memory erosion." Folk tales are not only products of verbal art but also "repositories of cultural memory," recording history, customs, and worldviews. Studying Giáy folk tales from this perspective is an urgent action to decipher how the community shapes its identity through generations.

### *1.2. Research Gap*

Although the monumental works of earlier researchers such as Nguyen Dong Chi and Dinh Gia Khanh have laid a solid foundation for Vietnamese folklore, most of them have only focused on classifying motifs and purely artistic values. In particular, for the Giay ethnic group's folk tales, the application of "cultural memory" theory remains a large, unexplored gap.

Instead of approaching the topic solely from a literary perspective, this study proposes a crucial shift: focusing on the social and cognitive functions of storytelling. In this context, each story is not merely an ancient tale but a vibrant "collective memory," preserving and shaping ethnic identity across generations. This is key to understanding how the Giáy people position themselves within the flow of history and the modern living space.

### *1.3. Research Objectives*

The article aims to: (1) Identify the manifestations of cultural memory in Giáy folk tales; (2) Analyze the mechanisms of encoding history, society, and ecology into narrative structure; and (3) Evaluate the role of folk tales in community-based education and maintaining ethnic identity.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1. Cultural Memory: From "Collective Memory" to Ethnic Cultural Identity*

This research is based on Maurice Halbwachs' theory of "Collective Memory," asserting that remembering is not merely an individual act but operates within social frameworks such as family, community, and nation. Unlike formal history, which tends towards systematicity and objectivity, collective memory is heavily influenced by emotion and selectivity, serving the community's need to affirm its identity in the present. When objectified through enduring means such as texts, symbols, or rituals, it transforms into "cultural memory"—a unique form that allows the community to "tell its own story," maintaining an invisible yet strong connection to the distant past that transcends the limitations of individual lives.

*2.2. Ethnic Cultural Memory: The Vibrancy of Oral Heritage*

Within the scope of this article, "Ethnic cultural memory" is defined as a collection of events, myths, and knowledge selected and preserved by the Giáy community to establish cultural boundaries and protect the individuality of the ethnic group in a multicultural context.

On a narrower scale, ethnic cultural memory emerges as a system of knowledge and spiritual values closely linked to the local ecological environment and space. Unlike national memory, which is often preserved in museums or historical sites, ethnic memory is "revived" daily through language, clothing, and especially the treasure trove of folk tales. Although primarily transmitted orally – a highly flexible form of communication – the continuous recreation within community life allows ethnic memory to both preserve its traditions and adapt strongly to the changes of modern society. This is not merely an act of remembering but also a cultural defense mechanism, helping the community affirm its unique identity in a multicultural environment.

*2.3. Three theoretical axes for decoding the "memory" of the Giáy people.*

To apply this theory to the Giáy folk tale system, the study establishes three strategic analytical axes to fully grasp the spiritual history of this ethnic group. First is " Historical Memory , " focusing on how the community remembers their migration journey and the events that occurred in the region. Next is " Social Memory , " illuminating behavioral norms, family structures, and rituals that strengthen village cohesion. Finally, there is " Ecological Memory , " encoding the wealth of knowledge about nature, seasons, and the characteristic rice-farming livelihood. Simultaneous analysis of these three axes not only helps identify folk tales as an optimal means of preserving memory but also clarifies their role in legitimizing social choices and shaping the future of the Giáy community.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To ensure scientific rigor and reliability, the study employs a multi-dimensional approach:

*3.1. Data Collection*

Desk Research: Survey of published collections of Giáy folk tales (Lù Dín Siềng, Mạc Đình Dĩ, Châu Hồng Thủy, Lý A Sán 2018 ; Nguyễn Trọng Báu, Năm Hồng Mai 2009) and related ethnographic works.

Ethnographic fieldwork: Conducted in areas with concentrated Giáy ethnic communities in Lào Cai (Bát Xát, Sa Pa) and Hà Giang.

Target audience: 6 storytellers and individuals knowledgeable about local customs.

Techniques: In-depth interviews, participant observation in performance spaces, recording and note-taking using Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description" method.

*3.2. Data Analysis*

Statistical and Classification Method: Create a catalog of stories by theme and genre.

Cultural Semiotics Analysis: Decoding Symbols Thematic codes include *"historical memories"* (such as: Giáy hý hanh, Cúng Tsư Tsứ,…), *"ecological memories"* (such as: con phai, chim soong ló, con rù rằng, cây chua chát,…), *"cultural memories"* (stone gate, đậu xị, thầy Mo, ông Tào, bà Then, mường Tiên…); *symbolic codes* (mountains, streams, then, khèn…) to uncover the deeper layers of meaning (deep structures) in culture.

Discourse analysis: Examining the narrative context to understand how memories are reconstructed in the present.

## 4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*4.1. Historical Memory: Reconstructing Origins and Migration Journeys*

If we consider the history of the Giáy people as a flowing stream, then their system of folk tales is the "stopping point" that preserves collective memory. Beyond mere entertainment, the folk tales of the Giáy people in Lào Cai and Tuyên Quang form a tightly woven system of symbols, encoding their migration journey and establishing their ethnic identity.

In the Giáy people's minds, folk tales are not merely for entertainment but serve as a "memory map" establishing their right to inhabit. Through legends about their migration journey from the North, place names in Lào Cai and Tuyên Quang are closely linked to folk narratives, transforming inanimate geographical entities into sacred "memory sites." A prime example is the story *"Flying Mountain* ," where the detail of the mountain stopping at the sound of a rooster crowing cleverly explains the characteristics of the highland terrain and simultaneously "legitimizes" the presence of the ethnic group as an essential part of the cosmic order. The identification of place names in these stories is the community's way of collectively remembering their journey of conquering, exploring, and asserting symbolic sovereignty over their long-standing living space.

The memory of the Giáy people's origins is encoded through the motifs of the "Gourd" and the "Great Flood"—a sharp anthropological discourse on diversity within unity. The story *"The Legend of the Giáy People"* not only explains the origins of humankind but also paints a vivid cultural and ecological map: while other ethnic groups were scattered across high mountains, valleys, or plains, the Giáy people were born from "chopping board dust" along the Red River. This witty explanation not only

reflects the reality of their small population size but also affirms their pride in a distinct identity, linked to fertility beliefs and the protection of Mother Nature within the context of multi-ethnic coexistence in the northern mountainous region.

Besides historical memories, Giáy folk tales also preserve profound lessons about inter-ethnic relations through symbolic contrasting structures. Instead of choosing conflict and exclusion, the Giáy community emphasizes harmony and the strength of indigenous intelligence to preserve their identity. The image of the "tiny nation" defeating the arrogant "big nation" in the story *"Hún lá tỳ án eng"* is a typical example of self-defense through ingenuity rather than violence. This is the "symbolic archive" that helps the Giáy people define their position: an entity with history, territory, and the ability to adapt flexibly, both preserving core values and expanding interaction within a broader cultural environment.

*4.2. Social Memory: Institutions, Ethics, and the "Living Library"*

While historical memory depicts migration patterns, social memory in Giáy folk tales acts as a set of "oral customary laws," shaping character and maintaining village order across generations.

Giáy folk tales serve as a sophisticated "oral customary law," where moral and family norms are encoded through the divine reward-punishment system. Within this patriarchal social space, values such as filial piety, brotherhood, and loyalty are not merely empty advice but are "sacralized" into a way of life. Role models like the dutiful daughter-in-law in the *Túa Lạng story* or the tragic fate of the unfaithful man in the *Fish Wife story* are vivid examples of cause and effect. Through these tales, social memory is preserved and reaffirmed, helping the community establish boundaries between right and wrong, while also functioning as a traditional educational tool to maintain order and cohesion within each village.

Beyond simply providing moral instruction, folk tales serve as a vast "archive" of the Giáy people's folk beliefs and ritual practices. From explaining the origins of customs such as the custom of the groom living with the bride's family and the dowry challenge to affirming the central role of the Sky King (Then) and the shamans (Mo, Tào), the stories legitimize the ethnic group's spiritual worldview. In particular, the seamless integration of narrative and folk songs and ritual performances within the storylines elevates everyday artistic activities to a sacred level. This "singing and telling" mechanism has transformed Giáy folk tales into a form of "ritualized memory," where aesthetic values and spiritual beliefs are preserved intact and sustainably passed down through generations.

*4.3. Ecological Memory: Indigenous Knowledge and its Relationship with Nature*

In the folk tales of the Giáy people, nature is not merely a backdrop but exists as a living entity, a "moral subject" that directly regulates human behavior. The ecological memory of this ethnic group is a crystallization of their experience in wet rice cultivation and the animistic philosophy characteristic of the northern highlands.

Giáy folk tales serve as a symbolic "agricultural knowledge repository," documenting the adaptation of people to the valley and river environment. Hard-won experiences regarding irrigation are cleverly conveyed through dramatic motifs. For example, in the story *"Seven Sisters* ," the detail of the father willingly marrying his daughter to the man who built a sturdy "con phai" (water diversion dam) demonstrates the vital importance of irrigation technology. The con phai is not merely a technical element but a key to livelihood, where labor capacity and the ability to regulate water resources become the highest measure of human value. Furthermore, memories of flash floods and landslides in the story *"Water Flooding the Sky"* are encoded under the mythical veil of "The Gate of Heaven is Blocked," serving as a warning of natural disasters and a reminder to the community of their responsibility to protect the environment and maintain ecological balance.

Deep within the ecological memory of the Giáy people lies the animistic philosophy, where nature is not merely a living environment but also a moral entity with a soul. This intimate relationship is clearly expressed through the motifs of reincarnation and rebirth; the transformation of characters into birds, animals, and plants like purslane or plum trees is not simply an artistic device, but an affirmation of the belief in the interconnectedness between humans and the ecosystem. There, nature becomes a space of shelter and justice, ready to reward benevolent souls but also fiercely inflict devastating "ecological punishments" on the greedy and ungrateful. Through powerful figures like the Tiger Lord, the Bear Lord, or the sacred stream, Giáy folk tales establish a limit on resource exploitation, teaching the community to be grateful, humble, and maintain absolute harmony with Mother Nature to preserve sustainable life.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*5.1. Conclusion*

Research has shown that the folk tales of the Giáy ethnic group are not merely entertaining stories, but a sophisticated and enduring system for storing cultural memory. Through three axes of memory (historical, social, and ecological), folk tales have performed the functions of identity construction, maintaining social order, and transmitting survival knowledge. In light of cultural memory theory, Giáy folk tales emerge as a dynamic heritage , continuously recreated through performance, playing a core role in positioning the Giáy people within the multicultural landscape of Vietnam.

*5.2. Recommendations*

Based on the research results, we propose conservation solutions using a "Community-based education" approach:

The "Living Libraries" model encourages elderly artisans to participate in storytelling sessions at schools and community cultural centers, directly transferring their memories to the younger generation.

Digitizing heritage: Building a multimedia database (audio, images, bilingual Giáy-Vietnamese text) to store and disseminate folk tales on a digital platform.

Integration into cultural tourism: Developing experiential tourism products based on folk tales (e.g., tours following the footsteps of legendary characters, reenacting festivals), transforming cultural memories into sustainable development resources.

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