

Similarities in the Representation of Spiritual Life in Pu Péo and Lô Lô Folk Songs

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ABSTRACT: This article examines similarities in the representation of spiritual life in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs, thereby clarifying the interrelationship among beliefs, symbols, and ritual practices as articulated in the folk-song traditions of these two ethnic groups. The research corpus comprises 308 Pu Péo folk-song texts and 100 Lô Lô folk-song texts drawn from published works and supplementary field collections. Employing survey and statistical methods, textual analysis, and comparative analysis, in conjunction with cultural studies and performance-oriented approaches, the article identifies points of convergence at three levels: spiritual conceptions, modes of expression, and the functions of song lyrics in ritual contexts. The findings indicate that these similarities are concentrated in two principal dimensions. First, the folk songs of both ethnic groups reflect funeral customs and folk beliefs, most notably conceptions of the soul and vital spirit, death as a journey back to the ancestors, and continuity between the living and the dead. Second, both traditions express belief in the spirit world through a system of sacralized natural forces, including mountain, forest, earth, and water deities, as well as the sky and rain. Within performance contexts, song lyrics not only reflect systems of belief but also directly enact ritual acts of summoning and guiding souls, invoking sacred beings, making supplications, and communicating with the sacred realm. These similarities have developed from comparable ecological environments, livelihood practices, forms of community organization, and long-term cultural contact; however, they should not be equated with direct borrowing. The article thus affirms that folk songs serve as a means through which the Pu Péo and Lô Lô communities preserve collective memory, belief-related knowledge, and cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: folk songs; Pu Péo; Lô Lô; spiritual life; folk beliefs; similarities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Folk songs constitute an important component of intangible cultural heritage through which communities preserve and transmit their languages, knowledge, emotions, worldviews, and cultural values across generations. According to UNESCO's 2003 Convention, intangible cultural heritage encompasses not only oral traditions and performing arts but also social practices, rituals, festive events, and knowledge concerning nature and the universe [10, Article 2]. Accordingly, folk songs, particularly ritual folk songs, should not be regarded merely as verbal texts detached from community life. From a performance-oriented perspective, the meaning of a work of folklore emerges through the relationship among the song text, the performer, the audience, and the specific communicative context [2, p. 293]. The study of spiritual life in folk songs must therefore attend simultaneously to their verbal content, symbolic systems, and the functions performed by the songs within ritual settings.

The Pu Péo and the Lô Lô are two ethnic minority groups with very small populations in Vietnam. According to the results of the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Pu Péo population comprised 903 people, while the Lô Lô population numbered 4,827 [9]. Both communities reside predominantly in the northern mountainous border region, particularly on the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and in several areas of Cao Bằng Province. Despite their geographical proximity and long history of cultural interaction, they are two distinct ethnic groups. The Pu Péo language belongs to the Kadai group of the Tai-Kadai language family [1, pp. 32-34], whereas the Lô Lô language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family [5, pp. 328-335]. These differences in linguistic origins, considered against their similarities in ecological environment, livelihood practices, and forms of community organization, make the two groups a significant case for comparative research. In both communities, spiritual life bears the strong imprint of conceptions of the soul and vital spirit, ancestor worship, polytheistic beliefs, and the sacralization of natural forces. These conceptions exist not only at the cognitive level but are also embodied in life-cycle rituals, ceremonies for successful harvests, funerary rites, ancestor-worship ceremonies, musical instruments, ritual movements, and song lyrics.

Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs have been introduced through several valuable collections, translations, and scholarly studies. Lê Trung Vũ's *Dân ca Lô Lô [Lô Lô Folk Songs]*, published in 1975, was one of the earliest works to establish a documentary foundation for identifying the characteristics of Lô Lô folk songs [11]. In 1993, Lê Trung Vũ published *Dân ca Pu Péo [Pu Péo Folk Songs]*, which contains 281 folk-song items translated into Vietnamese [12]. Lò Giàng Páo's *Dân ca trong lễ hội của người Lô Lô [Folk Songs in Lô Lô Festivals]* subsequently expanded the available corpus and further clarified the relationship between song lyrics,

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festivals, rituals, and performance contexts [6]. These sources were later included in a large-scale anthology of folk songs from Vietnam's ethnic minority groups [13]. In addition to these collection efforts, Trần Văn Ái's work provides important ethnographic evidence concerning Pu Péo history, beliefs, rituals, and folklore [1]. A study by Dương Thu Hằng and Nguyễn Thị Thu Trang initially demonstrated that Pu Péo folk songs preserve a relatively comprehensive range of the community's material culture, spiritual culture, and cultural norms of social conduct [4, pp. 610-615]. More recent studies have also examined the contemporary vitality of Lô Lô folklore, transformations in its performance contexts, and the incorporation of Lô Lô folk arts into community-based tourism activities [7, pp. 45-58].

Previous studies have established a valuable documentary corpus and contributed to identifying the cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. Nevertheless, most research has continued to examine Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs as separate objects of study. Few studies have placed the two folk-song traditions within a common analytical framework in order to systematically compare how they represent and construct spiritual life. Dimensions such as conceptions of the soul and vital spirit, the soul's journey back to the ancestors, ancestor worship, an animistic worldview, and the communicative role of song lyrics in rituals have generally been discussed only as isolated cultural characteristics. The relationship among belief systems, symbolic structures, and ritual performance has not yet been adequately examined. Furthermore, the basis of the similarities between the two traditions has not been fully explained in relation to the combined influence of ecological conditions, livelihood practices, lineage organization, and the history of cultural interaction.

Within the scope of this article, "spiritual life" is approached through the relationship among beliefs, symbols, and ritual practices. Clifford Geertz defines religion as a "system of symbols" capable of constructing conceptions of the order of existence and shaping human conduct [3, pp. 90-91]. In Vietnamese folklore and cultural studies, Ngô Đức Thịnh regards folk belief as a form through which individuals and communities express their faith in the sacred under specific social conditions [8, p. 18]. Building on these perspectives, this article understands "spiritual life" as a system of beliefs, symbols, and practices relating to the soul and vital spirit, the deceased, ancestors, deities, supernatural forces, and the relationship between human beings and the sacred realm. Spiritual life in folk songs is identified at three levels: conceptions of human beings and the cosmos; modes of expression through images, motifs, and verbal formulas; and the functions of song lyrics within performance events. This approach makes it possible to regard folk songs not merely as reflections of belief but also as cultural acts that participate directly in the ritual processes of summoning, invoking, supplicating, guiding, and bidding farewell.

In response to the research gap identified above, the article addresses three principal issues: (1) how shared conceptions of the soul and vital spirit, ancestors, deities, and the relationship between human beings and the sacred realm are represented in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs; (2) how these conceptions are articulated through systems of images, motifs, and verbal formulas, and how they are actualized within ritual performance contexts; and (3) the cultural, social, and ecological foundations from which these similarities have developed, as well as their significance for recognizing the values of the folk songs of the two ethnic groups. Accordingly, similarities constitute the central analytical axis of the article, while differences are considered only when necessary to illuminate the distinctive nuances of each tradition. These points of convergence are not automatically regarded as evidence of direct borrowing; rather, they are explained in relation to the typological characteristics of the belief systems, ecological environments, livelihood practices, and long-term cultural contact between the two communities.

The research corpus draws on the following four sources:

1. Folk songs included in *Dân ca Pu Péo* [*Pu Péo Folk Songs*], collected, compiled, and rendered into verse by Lê Trung Vũ and published by the Ethnic Culture Publishing House in 1993.
2. Twenty-seven Pu Péo folk songs newly collected and transcribed into written form in Đồng Văn District, in the former Hà Giang Province, between October 2019 and June 2020. With the assistance of local Pu Péo collaborators and cultural practitioners, the research team obtained handwritten records of Pu Péo folk songs. In addition, the author met with local folk singers, documented their songs, and directly transcribed them using a Latin-based writing system.
3. Folk songs included in *Dân ca Lô Lô* [*Lô Lô Folk Songs*], collected, compiled, translated, and introduced by Lê Trung Vũ and published by the Ethnic Culture Publishing House in 1975.
4. Twenty Lô Lô festival folk songs collected and translated by Lò Giàng Páo and published in *Dân ca các dân tộc Pu Péo, Sán Diu, Dao, Cao Lan, Lô Lô* [*Folk Songs of the Pu Péo, Sán Diu, Dao, Cao Lan, and Lô Lô Ethnic Groups*], published by the Ethnic Culture Publishing House in 2012.

The object of this study is the shared representations of spiritual life in the lyrics of Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs, with particular emphasis on conceptions of the soul and vital spirit, ancestor worship, the spirit world, and the ritual functions of song lyrics.

The article employs four principal methodological approaches. First, survey and statistical methods are used to determine the composition of the corpus and the distribution of ritual folk songs. Second, textual analysis is applied to clarify the layers of meaning embedded in images, motifs, recurring formulas, and speech acts within the song lyrics. Third, the comparative method places corresponding materials alongside one another according to a common set of criteria, thereby identifying shared structures without conflating the two traditions. Finally, cultural studies and performance-oriented approaches are employed to relate the song lyrics to systems of belief, ecological environments, livelihood practices, and ritual functions. Because most of the materials are accessible

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through Vietnamese translations, the article prioritizes the analysis of motifs and cultural functions and avoids drawing extensive conclusions about the phonological, rhyming, and rhythmic features of the original-language texts.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Pu Péo and Lô Lô Folk Songs as Reflections of Funeral Customs and Folk Beliefs

Based on an examination of 308 Pu Péo folk-song texts, including 281 songs from Lê Trung Vũ's *Pu Péo Folk Songs* and 27 additionally collected songs, and 100 Lô Lô folk-song texts, including 80 songs collected by Lê Trung Vũ and 20 by Lò Giàng Páo, it is evident that religious and spiritual life constitutes a prominent thematic dimension, particularly in ritual folk songs. In Lê Trung Vũ's corpus, Pu Péo ritual folk songs account for 4.27% of the total (12 of 281 songs), whereas the corresponding proportion in the supplementary collection is 14.81% (4 of 27 songs). Regarding Lô Lô folk songs, ritual songs constitute 22.5% of Lê Trung Vũ's corpus (18 of 80 songs), while all 20 texts collected by Lò Giàng Páo belong to the category of ritual folk songs. This distribution indicates that religious rituals, especially funeral rites and ancestor worship, occupy an important position in the cultural life of both communities. Ritual folk songs not only serve ritual activities but also function as a means of preserving the belief systems, folk knowledge, and traditional cultural values of the Pu Péo and Lô Lô peoples.

One of the most prominent similarities between Pu Péo and Lô Lô spiritual life lies in their conception of the dual constitution of human beings, comprising the body and the soul. From this perspective, death is not regarded as the absolute termination of human existence but as a transition from the world of the living to that of the ancestors. The funeral therefore functions as a rite of passage, ensuring that the soul of the deceased is guided back to the ancestors and incorporated into the community's spiritual life. This conception clearly reflects the two peoples' worldview and ancestor-worship beliefs while also providing the foundation for numerous ritual practices and ritual folk songs.

In Pu Péo folk songs, spiritual culture is constructed through the intimate relationship among human beings, souls, ancestors, and nature. Nature is not merely a living environment but an integral part of the sacred realm. The "soul" and "vital spirit" do not remain entirely inseparable from human existence; they may wander through natural spaces and subsequently be summoned home. This motif reflects the Pu Péo conception of the interconnectedness and continuity between the world of the living and that of the dead. It also demonstrates the central position of ancestor worship in the community's spiritual life and cultural value system:

Soul wandering in caves and hollows, come home!

Vital spirit dwelling in darkness, come home!

Soul wandering amid mist and dew, come home!

Vital spirit lost among clouds and fog, come home!

The deceased do not completely withdraw from the life of their families and lineages; instead, their souls undertake a journey back to the ancestors and return to their villages on important ceremonial occasions. The quoted lines express the Pu Péo people's spiritual conceptions of the soul, the vital spirit, and the invisible world. The "soul" and "vital spirit" are imagined as entities capable of departing from the body and wandering through obscure natural spaces such as "caves and hollows," "mist and dew," and "clouds and fog." This suggests that, within the Pu Péo worldview, the boundary between the human and supernatural worlds is not absolute; rather, communication and connection between them remain possible. The repeated imperative "come home" gives the song the performative quality of a soul-summoning invocation, expressing the desire to restore the soul and vital spirit to the individual and the community. The song thus not only reflects a system of belief but also illustrates the close association between Pu Péo spiritual life and the natural landscape of the mountainous region, while conveying a conception of continuity between the living and the dead. The mountainous terrain of the karst plateau is simultaneously imagined as a series of difficult stages separating the world of the living from that of the ancestors. The importance of community and kinship is particularly evident in the ritual: descendants not only express their grief but also employ song as a spiritual means of guiding the soul and opening the path for its journey. The lyrics are deeply imbued with ancestor-worship beliefs, an awareness of lineage solidarity, and a conception of continuity between the two worlds in Pu Péo culture.

Lô Lô folk songs similarly represent death as a journey back to the ancestors. In Lô Lô songs, however, this journey is frequently associated with the image of bronze drums and related spiritual rites. The "sound of the drum" evokes the sacred role of bronze drums in funerary rituals: the drums both summon the soul and guide the deceased across the boundary between life and death. The lyrics express ancestor-worship beliefs and the conception of continuity among generations in Lô Lô culture:

The Female Drum resounds mournfully,

Singing to bid the departing soul farewell.

The Male Drum whispers softly,

Keeping the rhythm as he guides the spirit.

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Elsewhere, the songs proclaim:

*In this village, the golden drum is sounded,
Its reverberations echo far and wide.
In this hamlet, the bronze drum is sounded,
Its vibrant rhythm fills the air.*

A notable point of convergence is that song is regarded in both traditions as a means of guiding the soul on its journey back to the ancestors and as a bridge between human beings and the supernatural realm. In addition to funeral customs, the folk songs of both ethnic groups also provide vivid representations of ancestor worship. In these lyrics, the ancestors appear as protectors of their descendants and communities. They are not distant or abstract figures but spiritual presences that remain closely involved in everyday life.

Another noteworthy similarity in the religious life of the Pu Péo and Lô Lô peoples is the presence of polytheistic and animistic conceptions. According to traditional beliefs, elements of the natural environment, including mountains, forests, land, and water sources, are associated with supernatural forces capable of influencing human life. This belief is reflected in ritual songs for good harvests and blessings, which express the communities' reverence for nature and their desire to receive the protection and assistance of divine beings. These songs also reveal the intimate relationship among spiritual life, agricultural production, and the two communities' living environments.

The Pu Péo traditionally lived in relatively self-contained communities and depended heavily upon natural conditions. Consequently, nature-related deities became an important component of their spiritual life from an early period. Living predominantly in rocky mountainous, forested, and highland areas, where nature is at once familiar and bountiful yet also mysterious and harsh, the Pu Péo believe that gain and loss, fortune and misfortune, and even life and death are significantly influenced by natural forces. This understanding gave rise to attitudes of respect, reverential fear, and worship toward supernatural powers. Forest protection was also elevated into a sacred responsibility. Each year, on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, the Pu Péo hold a ceremony to worship the forest deity, expressing their reverence and praying for divine protection. Song lyrics assume a particularly important role in religious life as a means of communicating with the supernatural world. To invite the deities to participate in New Year celebrations, the Pu Péo offer ritual invocations to all deities, both near and far, thereby expressing their belief in the presence and assistance of divine forces in community life:

*O deity of the hamlet, deity of the village,
O deity of the crops, rain, and sunshine,
O deity of the fields and rice paddies,
Deity of the swidden fields, deity Rắt,
Deities of the Bium and Hiêng forests,
Deities of the Kiên and Kiên forests,
Deities of the Ruông and Nié forests,
Deities of the Xạn and Sán forests,
Deities of the Xân and Xê forests,
Deity of the rocky mountains and mountain ranges,
Deity of the earthen mountains, deity of Né land,
Deity of Mount Buôm, deity of Tàng land,
Deity of the hollows, deity of the caves.
[...] We invite the eight male deities from every place,
The ancestral deities, the deities of the graves,
The deities of the air and the waters.
[...] We invite the eight female deities by their eight names:
Chú Đìn and Chờ Mống,
Tì Náo and Quan Hẫu.
[...] A special invitation is extended to the Deity of the Earth.*

This ritual song vividly reflects the polytheistic beliefs of a mountainous community. The successive invocation of individual deities indicates that each element of nature is conceived as a sacred entity endowed with its own power and capable of directly influencing the peace of the village, crop yields, water sources, and community health. Within this system of belief, mountains, land, and water are not merely material conditions necessary for production and daily life; they are also sacred spaces inhabited by deities. The song thus expresses a relationship of intimacy, dependence, and reverence between human beings and nature, while reflecting the community's animistic worldview and polytheistic religious foundations.

In Lô Lô folk songs, the system of deities is represented through such figures as the deities of heaven and earth, corresponding to natural elements of direct importance to the community's daily life:

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*Shall I take the Storm as my father,
So that the Storm will deliver me?
[...] Shall I take the Rain as my mother,
So that the Rain will save me from danger?*

Elsewhere, the songs state:

*The Father Sky gives life its vital force,
The Mother Earth brings forth the grass.
To adorn oneself with beauty,
One finds tree sap with which to paint...*

Natural phenomena such as the "Storm," "Rain," "Sky," and "Earth" are personified and placed in a relationship of kinship with human beings through the terms "Father" and "Mother." This indicates that nature is regarded as a collection of sentient entities capable of influencing and protecting human life. In particular, the representation of the Sky as "Father" and the Earth as "Mother" expresses the conception of natural forces as sources of life and nurture, while also reflecting the community's awareness of human dependence upon the living environment. The divine figures in the folk songs do not exist in isolation but form a network of supernatural forces associated with different dimensions of life, ranging from birth and growth to the protection of human beings from natural disasters. Lô Lô folk songs thus both reflect the community's polytheistic worldview and express a harmonious, reverential, and dependent relationship between human beings and nature.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs provide relatively clear representations of conceptions associated with funeral rites and folk beliefs. Through images such as the soul, ancestors, mountain deities, earth deities, water deities, and bronze drums, the lyrics reveal the two communities' belief in the presence and influence of the supernatural world upon human life. These elements also express an orientation toward ancestral origins, the bond between the living and their ancestors, and a respectful and harmonious relationship with nature. They are therefore not merely manifestations of belief but also cultural values that contribute to the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity.

The similarities in the thematic content of Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs may be explained by shared historical and cultural conditions. First, both communities have long inhabited the rocky highland areas of Tuyên Quang, where they have experienced relatively similar natural environments and livelihood practices. Moreover, animistic beliefs and ancestor worship constitute foundational elements of the spiritual life of both ethnic groups. Their long-term coexistence and cultural contact have also facilitated interaction among their worldviews, religious conceptions, and expressive motifs in folk songs. Nevertheless, these similarities do not diminish the cultural distinctiveness of either community. Instead, they reveal convergences grounded in the regional cultural context and in the ways northern highland communities construct their spiritual lives.

It can therefore be affirmed that the representation of funeral customs and folk beliefs in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs not only illuminates the cultural, historical, and spiritual values of the two peoples' folkloric heritage but also reveals similarities in the traditional cultural foundations of northern highland communities. Motifs relating to souls, ancestors, deities, and rituals reflect shared conceptions of the relationship between human beings and the supernatural world, nature, and lineage origins. These convergences also provide important evidence for identifying processes of cultural exchange, contact, and acculturation between the Pu Péo and Lô Lô throughout history, while each community continues to preserve its own distinctive cultural characteristics.

2.2. Pu Péo and Lô Lô Folk Songs as Expressions of Belief in the Spirit World

An important dimension of the similarities between Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs is their representation of belief in the spirit world. While depictions of funeral rites and ancestor worship reveal the two communities' conceptions of the relationship between the living and the dead, ritual songs addressed to deities extend this conception to the relationship between human beings and the supernatural forces believed to govern the cosmos and the natural world. An examination of the two peoples' ritual folk songs shows that deities appear as sacred addressees to whom human beings pray, express reverence, and entrust their practical aspirations. Accordingly, song lyrics do not merely express the community's emotions or spiritual needs; they also constitute a form of religious practice through which divine protection is sought for human health, crops, livestock, and the peace of the village.

In the traditional Pu Péo worldview, nature is not perceived merely as a material environment but as a sacred space inhabited by supernatural forces. Elements directly associated with settlement and production, such as mountains, forests, land, water, and vegetation, are frequently personified and associated with deities believed to possess the power to influence community life. This conception vividly reflects the Pu Péo people's animistic worldview and polytheistic beliefs. Within their system of ritual folk songs, particularly songs performed during ceremonies for a successful harvest, mountain, earth, and water deities commonly appear as forces that protect agricultural production and maintain the stability of the village. Prayers addressed to these deities demonstrate the community's awareness that agricultural life depends upon natural conditions, while also expressing reverence and the desire to establish harmony with sacred forces. In one Pu Péo song performed during a harvest ceremony, the singer offers the following supplication:

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*We respectfully invoke the deities and sacred beings.
Please prevent the pests from destroying the rice.
Please prevent the pests from destroying the maize.
Deities of the forest and the swidden fields,
Please protect the rice.
May ten days be prosperous and nine days auspicious.
May ten days be prosperous and a hundred days auspicious.*

The direct invocation of the "forest deities" and "swidden-field deities" demonstrates the prominent presence of polytheistic beliefs in Pu Péo spiritual life. These deities are not conceived as supernatural entities detached from everyday existence; rather, they are associated with natural elements that bear directly upon the community's living environment and productive activities. Living on high rocky mountain slopes, with limited cultivable land and livelihoods heavily dependent upon nature, the Pu Péo sacralized natural forces and regarded them as powerful agents capable of controlling crops, sources of sustenance, and the well-being of the village. Ritual songs therefore not only function as prayers and means of communication with deities but also reflect the community's recognition of the profound dependence of human life upon the natural environment.

As with the Pu Péo, Lô Lô belief in supernatural forces is vividly expressed through worship songs and other ritual songs. The deities are invoked under various names, but they are all associated with fundamental components of the natural environment and productive life, including the sky, earth, mountains, forests, water sources, and crops. The presence of this divine system indicates that the Lô Lô regard nature not only as a space for settlement, daily activities, and cultivation but also as a sacred world capable of governing the community's existence. In songs performed to pray for a successful harvest, the invocation of deities simultaneously expresses reverence for nature and conveys aspirations for favorable weather, abundant crops, and a stable village life. One Lô Lô harvest-prayer song proclaims:

*Today is a beautiful day!
We respectfully beseech Lord Cồ:
May Lord Cồ bring us rain and wind,
So that we may cultivate our paddies and swidden fields...
The people enjoy this day
Because of Lord Cồ's benevolence...
Lord Cồ, please ask Heaven to send rain.*

Whereas Pu Péo ritual songs primarily emphasize inviting deities to attend the ceremony, witness the proceedings, and partake of the offerings, Lô Lô invocations are more directly oriented toward requesting the protection and assistance of supernatural forces. Despite this difference in modes of expression, both systems of song establish deities as powerful agents capable of influencing crops, health, and the stability of the community. This demonstrates that folk songs not only preserve religious practices but also reflect the worldview of mountainous agricultural communities, whose members are acutely aware of the dependence of production and everyday life upon natural conditions.

In addition to deities associated with natural elements, Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs also reflect belief in the presence and power of the ancestors. This dimension illustrates the interweaving of ancestor worship and conceptions of the spirit world within the spiritual lives of both communities. According to traditional belief, ancestors do not become entirely separated from the world of the living after death. Instead, they become sacred beings capable of witnessing, watching over, and assisting their descendants. Thus, in many ritual songs, the ancestors are invited to attend ceremonies, witness the proceedings, and receive offerings, assuming a status comparable to that of other supernatural forces. Folk songs consequently express not only an orientation toward ancestral origins and blood relationships but also the role of ancestors in safeguarding spiritual life and maintaining community cohesion.

Pu Péo folk songs contain the following lines:

*I make offerings to my grandparents.
I make offerings to the spirits of our affinal and maternal relatives,
To ancestors of the fifth and sixth generations.
Partake of the new rice and enjoy the newly harvested grain.
When you have finished, please do not be angered.
Please consume everything and leave nothing behind.
Having partaken of it, please bless your descendants.
May the rice grow green, with sturdy stems and strong ears.*

Lô Lô folk songs contain similar prayers:

*May Grandfather grant us good health.
May Grandmother provide us with food and clothing.
[...] May Grandfather help the children grow.
May Grandmother keep the children healthy.*

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These ritual lyrics show that the ancestors are conceived as the closest and most direct protective forces in the lives of families, lineages, and communities. While mountain, earth, and water deities symbolize the powers of nature, the ancestors represent the continuity of bloodlines, collective memory, and cultural traditions. The simultaneous presence of ancestor worship and polytheistic beliefs produces a distinctive structure of spiritual life among both the Pu Péo and the Lô Lô. Within this structure, human beings simultaneously turn toward their lineage origins and express reverence for, and seek protection from, sacralized natural forces.

A notable feature of the expression of belief in deities through Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs is its orientation toward harmony among human beings, nature, and the supernatural world. In many ritual songs, deities are not constructed primarily as frightening forces; instead, they are approached with reverence and familiarity and are believed to be capable of protecting the community. Through prayers, offerings, and songs, human beings actively establish a relationship of spiritual communion with sacred forces, thereby expressing their desire to maintain equilibrium among community life, the natural environment, and the spiritual order. This reflects a mode of conduct grounded in adaptation to, and harmony with, nature within the traditional cultures of both ethnic groups.

This conception is expressed clearly in Pu Péo songs performed to celebrate or pray for the harvest:

*I celebrate the new rice harvest.
A large bundle of rice is brought as an offering.
A bundle of newly harvested rice is presented in celebration.
With every step taken,
Every footprint left behind,
We bring home white rice and purple rice.
The men hold sickles and cut the non-glutinous rice panicles.*

Elsewhere, the songs state:

*I make offerings to the Tutelary God of the Land.
I present offerings to the Earth Deity.
I make offerings to the ancestors.
I make offerings to my grandparents.
I make offerings to the spirits of our affinal and maternal relatives,
To ancestors of the fifth and sixth generations.
Partake of the new rice and enjoy the newly harvested grain.
When you have finished, please do not be angered.
Please consume everything and leave nothing behind.
Having partaken of it, please bless your descendants.
May the rice grow green, with sturdy stems and strong ears.*

Similarly, a Lô Lô ritual song proclaims:

*We invite our grandparents to return,
To the place where they once lived,
To eat and drink together with us
And together protect their descendants.*

Within these traditional systems of belief, the relationship between human beings and deities is understood as reciprocal. By presenting offerings, performing rituals, and expressing devotion, human beings seek recognition, protection, and assistance from supernatural forces. In return, the deities are believed to grant favorable harvests, material sufficiency, and peace to the community. This conception reflects a traditional agricultural mode of thought in which harmony among human beings, nature, and the sacred world is regarded as an essential condition for the stability and continuation of communal life.

From an artistic perspective, divine figures in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs are commonly constructed through familiar natural symbols such as mountains, forests, land, water, the sky, and the sound of bronze drums. These symbols possess both referential and sacral meanings. As a result, the spirit world does not exist separately from everyday community life but is closely interwoven with it. This is also one reason the ritual folk songs of both ethnic groups possess a mystical quality while remaining closely connected to lived experience.

The similarities in the representation of belief in the spirit world originate, first and foremost, from the comparable living environments of the two ethnic groups. Both inhabit the rocky mountains of northern Vietnam, where nature is harsh yet plays a decisive role in agricultural production. Consequently, both the Pu Péo and the Lô Lô developed a reverence for nature and a belief in the presence of supernatural forces. Both groups have also preserved strong animistic beliefs, an ancient cultural stratum found among many mountainous communities in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, their prolonged coexistence in the territory of Tuyên Quang has facilitated cultural exchange and acculturation, contributing to similarities in their worldviews and in the thematic content of their folk songs.

It can therefore be affirmed that belief in the spirit world constitutes an important dimension of the cultural depth embodied in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs. Through images of mountain, earth, water, and forest deities, ancestors, and rituals of communication

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with supernatural forces, the songs reflect the traditional conceptions of highland communities regarding the cosmos, nature, and human existence. In this respect, folk songs are not merely products of folk artistic creativity but also serve as a means of preserving and transmitting community beliefs and values. Ritual songs reveal an awareness of the close and dependent relationship that must be harmoniously maintained between human beings and nature, and between the material world and the sacred realm. Similarities in the construction of divine figures and in practices of spiritual communication illuminate the affinities between Pu Péo and Lô Lô spiritual life while also revealing points of convergence in the folk cultures of ethnic minority communities in Vietnam's far north.

2.3. Discussion

The foregoing findings indicate that similarities in the representation of spiritual life in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs are structured across three organically interrelated levels. At the conceptual level, both communities believe in the existence of the soul and vital spirit, the ancestral realm, and animate natural forces. At the expressive level, these conceptions are embodied in such images as caves and hollows, mist, the sound of bronze drums, Father Sky, Mother Earth, forest deities, swidden-field deities, and ancestors. At the functional level, song lyrics participate directly in ritual, enacting acts of summoning and guiding souls, invoking sacred beings, and seeking their protection. Taken together, these three levels shift the focus of inquiry from what folk songs "say" about belief to how spiritual symbols are constituted and activated within a cultural event.

Viewed through Clifford Geertz's conception of religion as a system of symbols, the foregoing images are not isolated details; rather, they are interconnected elements that construct an order of existence meaningful to the community [3, pp. 90–91]. Within this order, human beings neither stand outside nature nor remain separated from the deceased; they are always situated within a network of relationships involving ancestors, deities, land, water, mountains, forests, and seasonal cycles. This organization also resonates with the characteristics of Vietnamese folk belief, in which ancestor worship, polytheistic beliefs, and conceptions of the sacred are often interwoven in community life [8, p. 18]. The soul and vital spirit, ancestors, and nature deities should therefore be understood as components of a single spiritual structure rather than as discrete thematic categories.

These points of convergence may be explained, first of all, by the two communities' relatively similar ecological conditions and livelihood practices. Both the Pu Péo and the Lô Lô have long inhabited the high mountains of Vietnam's far north, where rocky terrain, limited water sources, and scarce cultivable land impose significant constraints, and where agricultural life depends heavily on rainfall, sunshine, soil, forests, and seasonal cycles. Under such conditions, the sacralization of nature serves both to explain forces beyond human control and to shape norms of prudent conduct toward the environment. Motifs involving prayers for rain and successful harvests, forest and swidden-field deities, and Father Sky and Mother Earth therefore express not merely imaginative conceptions but also the accumulated subsistence knowledge of mountain communities.

A second basis lies in mechanisms of cultural organization and transmission grounded largely in families, lineages, villages, and oral performance. Funerals, ancestor-worship ceremonies, and harvest rituals all mobilize the participation of numerous community members. Song lyrics are remembered, repeated, and adapted through communal practice; spiritual conceptions thereby become shared knowledge rather than merely individual beliefs. From a performance-oriented perspective, repetition and enumeration in the lyrics are not simply artistic devices: they also help practitioners remember the order of deities, offerings, and petitions, while coordinating the words of the song with musical instruments, ritual movements, and the community's witnessing presence.

Long-term co-residence and contact within the cultural space of Vietnam's far north may have increased the degree of similarity among certain motifs and ritual forms. Such similarities, however, do not necessarily indicate direct borrowing. Pu Péo and Lô Lô have different linguistic foundations, and the available materials do not provide sufficient evidence concerning the dates at which individual motifs emerged, the direction of their transmission, or their historical transformations. It is therefore more appropriate to regard them as comparable structures formed within a shared regional ecological and cultural setting. Hypotheses concerning specific processes of exchange and acculturation require further verification through fieldwork and linguistic evidence, as well as the historical study of ritual practices.

At the same time, these similarities are accompanied by distinctive nuances. Pu Péo folk songs are marked by invocations that summon souls from natural spaces and by a named pantheon that functions as a sacred map; Lô Lô folk songs are distinguished by the role of bronze drums and such paired symbols as Father Sky and Mother Earth, and Storm and Rain. Whereas the predominant movement in Pu Péo songs is the summoning and gathering of the soul and vital spirit back to the community, the salient movement in Lô Lô songs is the sending forth of the soul through communal sound. These different symbolic choices demonstrate how each community has particularized a shared spiritual foundation through its own historical experience and mode of expression.

The findings also raise an issue of preservation: ritual folk songs cannot be adequately safeguarded if only their translated lyrics are retained. Recent research in Lô Lô Chải suggests that folk arts can remain vital when the communities that own and practice them continue to perform, transmit, and adapt them to new social environments, including community-based tourism [7, pp. 45–58]. Nevertheless, removing folk songs from ritual contexts or transferring them to tourism stages may alter the performers, purposes, and symbolic efficacy of the songs. Preservation efforts should therefore encompass audio and video recordings, annotations in the ethnic languages, and descriptions of the practitioners, musical instruments, offerings, spaces, and ritual sequences. The community must remain central to decisions concerning how its heritage is documented, performed, and transmitted.

Similarities in the Representation of Spiritual Life in Pu Péo and Lô Lô Folk Songs

Finally, the limitations of the findings must be acknowledged. The sources vary in scale and collecting orientation; most of the corpus has been examined through Vietnamese translations; and information concerning the singers, dates, and performance contexts of many texts remains incomplete. The article can therefore establish shared textual structures and inferred cultural functions, but it does not provide a sufficient basis for measuring the prevalence of particular beliefs or fully reconstructing ritual efficacy. These limitations also define directions for future research: comparative fieldwork in Pu Péo and Lô Lô communities, comparison with texts in the ethnic languages, observation of performances, and interviews with cultural practitioners concerning the meanings of individual ritual formulas.

3. CONCLUSION

Based on an examination of 408 texts, this article has identified fundamental similarities in the representation of spiritual life in Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs. These similarities occur not only in the thematic content of the lyrics but are also organized into a structure comprising conceptions, symbols, and ritual actions. Within this structure, human beings exist in close relationship with souls, ancestors, deities, and the natural environment. Folk songs therefore do not merely reflect systems of belief from the outside; they also participate directly in constituting and sustaining the spiritual life of the community.

First, Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs both vividly reflect funeral customs and folk beliefs. Both communities conceive human beings as comprising a body and a soul; death is not an absolute termination but a transition from the world of the living to the ancestral realm. In Pu Péo folk songs, this journey is most clearly expressed through the motif of summoning the soul and vital spirit home from distant, obscure natural spaces to the family and community. In Lô Lô folk songs, by contrast, the soul's departure is closely associated with the sound of bronze drums and communal participation in funerary rites. Although the two traditions employ different symbols and expressive modes, the songs of both ethnic groups connect the living with the dead and articulate a belief in the continuity of bloodlines, lineage memory, and ancestral protection.

Second, the folk songs of both ethnic groups express a profound belief in the spirit world. Mountains, forests, land, water, the sky, rain, and other natural forces are imagined as animate entities capable of influencing health, harvests, and the peace of the village. This symbolic system reflects the animistic worldview and polytheistic beliefs of highland agricultural communities. Through acts of summoning, inviting, presenting offerings, and supplicating, song lyrics become a medium of communication with the sacred realm. The relationship between human beings and deities is constructed as reciprocal: human beings present offerings and express reverence, while the deities are entreated to witness the rites, provide protection, and grant the community prosperity and peace. Folk songs thereby express an aspiration to sustain harmony between human beings and nature, and between material life and the spiritual order.

These points of convergence arise primarily from similarities in the ecological conditions, livelihood practices, and forms of community organization of the Pu Péo and Lô Lô peoples. Having long resided in the high mountains of Vietnam's far north, both ethnic groups depend heavily on land, water, forests, weather, and seasonal cycles. Families, lineages, villages, and performance-based transmission have also helped preserve spiritual conceptions across generations. Long-term co-residence and cultural contact may have increased the similarity of certain motifs and ritual practices; however, similarity should not be equated with direct borrowing. Each community continues to create its own distinctive nuances through specific symbolic systems, musical instruments, and modes of ritual practice.

The findings affirm that Pu Péo and Lô Lô folk songs are both works of verbal art and forms through which collective memory, belief-related knowledge, and ethnic identity are preserved. Because most materials are currently accessible through Vietnamese translations and lack complete information concerning performers, spaces, dates, and ritual sequences, the article's conclusions primarily establish similarities in textual structures and cultural functions. Future research should undertake comparative fieldwork, collate song texts in the ethnic languages, produce audio and video documentation, and examine folk songs in their actual performance environments. Preservation efforts must also place the source communities at the center and safeguard song lyrics in their organic relationship with cultural practitioners, musical instruments, offerings, movements, and ritual spaces.

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