

Traditional Self-Governing Institution of the Co Ho Sre People in Lam Dong in Current Social Life

Vo Tan Tu¹, Phan Van Bong²

Abstract

The Co Ho Sre people, the largest local group within the Co Ho ethnic group, had a long-standing culture, highlighted by developed wet rice farming and stable settlements in their villages. The village of the Co Ho served as a traditional social organization with essential functions in organizing, managing, and operating the community regarding economy, society, culture, and ethnic consciousness in a context of low development. The traditional self-governing institution of the Co Ho village relied on customary laws and the prestige of the village chief to govern all activities within the village. Although there have been many changes in social management, the self-governing institution of the Co Ho Sre still retained many positive elements, playing an essential role in building the Co Ho Sre community in particular and minority ethnic communities in Lam Dong in general. The article applied synthesis and analysis methods along with survey and interview methods to reconstruct the traditional self-governing institution and evaluate its role in the current life of this ethnic group.

Keywords: Ethnic Group, K'Ho Sre, Self-Governing Institution.

Introduction

Lam Dong, a mountainous province in the southern Central Highlands of Vietnam, had a population of 1,332,530 people in 2023 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam [GSOV], 2024). The province of Lam Dong had 47 different ethnic groups living interspersed, among which ethnic minorities had 70,655 households with 333,561 people, accounting for 24.91% of the province's total population. The Kinh ethnic group had the highest population, with 963,290 people (74.28%), followed by the Co Ho ethnic group with 175,531 people (13.53%) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam [GSOV], 2024) (Figure 1).

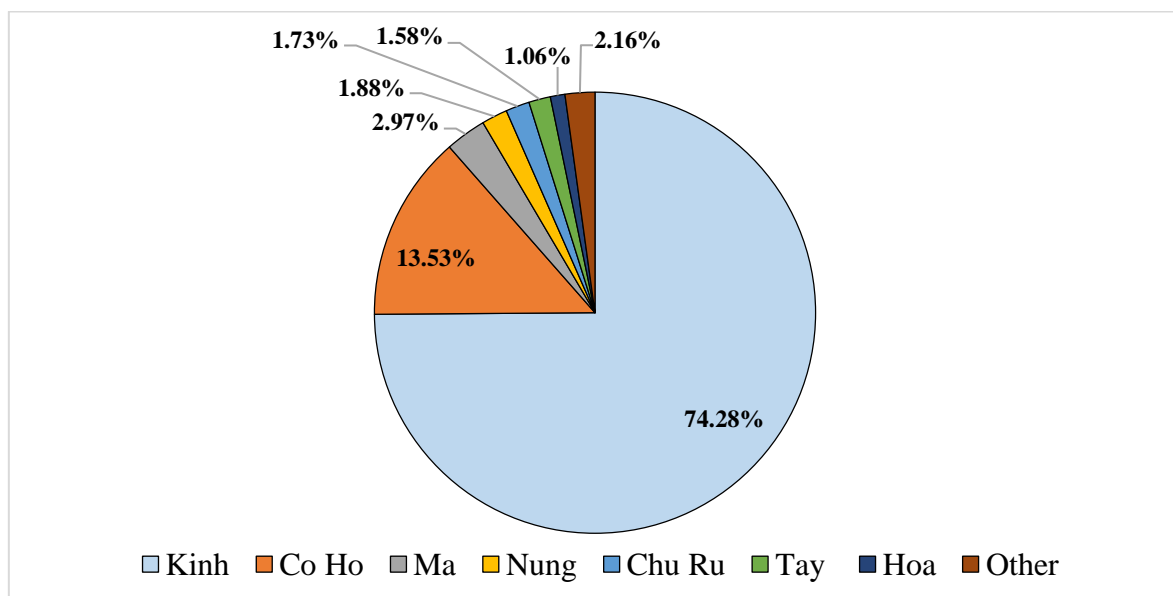


Figure 1. Population Ratio of Ethnic Groups in Lam Dong Province

¹ Dalat University, 1 Phu Dong Thien Vuong Street, Da Lat City, Lam Dong, Vietnam, Email: tuvt@dlu.edu.vn, (Corresponding Author)

² Dalat College, 109 Yersin, Da Lat City, Lam Dong, Vietnam.

The Co Ho people were among the 54 ethnic groups recognized in Vietnam. Various names, including Kõho, Kõ ho, Kõ hô, Cờ ho, K'ho, and Ka ho also knew this ethnic group. However, “Co Ho” was the official name recorded in the List of Vietnamese Ethnic Groups published by the General Statistics Office on March 2, 1979, and was widely used in official documents.

The Co Ho belonged to the Mon-Khmer language community, had common cultural origins from the southeastern coast of China, and migrated to the southern Indochina Peninsula, including the Central Highlands of Vietnam, from the Stone Age, tens of thousands of years ago. Later, the invasion of Malay-Polynesian language group residents (such as Cham, Ede, Gia rai, Raglai, and Chu ru) caused the Co Ho to move to the southern Central Highlands (Cao, 1996). Currently, the Co Ho is distributed from the south part of Khanh Hoa province to Lam Dong province, from the western part of Binh Thuận province to the northern part of Dong Nai province. Lam Dong province had the largest number of Co Ho, with 175,531 people, accounting for 87.42% of the total Co Ho population, followed by Binh Thuan Province with 13,531 people, Khánh Hòa with 5,724 people, and Ninh Thuận with 3,333 people (GSOV, 2021).

According to research by the Center for Cultural Information Analysis, American University (Washington, D.C.), “Koho speakers, including various groups such as Chrau, Kil, Lat, Laya, Ma, Nop, Pru, Rien, Sre, and Tring, all spoke Koho with only minor variations, and this language originated from Mon-Khmer (Schrock, 1966).

The Co Ho was divided into several local groups, including Co Ho Sre (Xre, Sre), Co Ho Nộp (Nóp, Tu Nóp), Co Ho Chil (Cil, Chin, Kil), Co Ho Lạch (Lạt, Lát), Co Ho Tring (Trin), and Co Ho Cờ dòn (K'Dòn). The Co Ho Sre group had the largest number with 103,682 people, mainly residing in Di Linh, Duc Trong, Bao Lam, Lam HA, and Don Duong districts, with Di Linh district having the highest concentration of Co Ho Sre (GSOV, 2021).

Following a matriarchal system, the Co Ho Sre people had a long-standing tradition of wet rice farming and lived concentrated in villages along valleys. Their self-governing institution had formed a solid system, maintaining order and stability for the community. After Vietnam unified in 1975, especially in 1986, when Vietnam carried out its economic renovation, the administrative system was increasingly consolidated at the grassroots level, leading to the decline of the traditional self-governing institution. However, the positive aspects of the conventional self-governing institution still needed to be promoted to maintain social stability and support local authorities in community management while preserving the cultural values in the life of the Co Ho Sre people today.

Literature Review

With their long-standing culture, the Co Ho Sre people built a solid self-governing system based on customary rules and the prestige of village chiefs. In traditional society, the village chief played an essential role in managing community activities, resolving disputes, and maintaining social order. This system was based on matriarchal principles, where the eldest woman in the family had a decisive role, but community management was the responsibility of men.

Since Vietnam's reunification in 1975, especially from 1986 when Vietnam embarked on the Renovation policy, the self-governing system of the Cõ Ho people was affected by the development of the administrative apparatus and new policies. Economic and social changes, including the shift from a self-sufficient economy to a market economy, altered the structure and function of the traditional self-governing system. The intrusion of other ethnic groups and the development of science and technology put pressure on the traditional economic and cultural activities of the Cõ Ho people.

In the self-governing system of the Co Ho Sre, people in Lam Dong province underwent extensive influence from social, economic, and religious factors. Previous studies illuminated many aspects of this system, but further research was needed to understand better the changes and impacts of these factors in the modern context.

Ngo et al. (2017) pointed out that the Co Ho were Indigenous inhabitants of the South Central Highlands, with early settlement and deep cultural integration with the local ecological environment. They interacted with other ethnic groups, leading to cultural integration and a sense of ethnic solidarity. Jacques (1977) and Hickey (1982) focused on aspects of power within the communities of the Central Highlands ethnic groups, such as the Jörai (Gia Rai), and the social and ritual changes within the K'ho-Chil community. Tran (2015) indicated that land cultivation and allocation policies altered the traditional economic, cultural, and social activities of the ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands. Pham (2011), Honda & Pham (2016), and Ngo et al. (2017) analyzed the economic and social changes within the K'ho and Mnông communities in the context of Vietnam's Renovation policy since 1986. Mai (2013, 2019) and Salemink (2003, 2015) focused on the development and influence of Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) on the cultural and social structures of local ethnic minority communities. Bui (2003) provided a relatively complete and vivid introduction to the Co Ho people, including economic, social, traditional customs, and a small part about the current economic and social situation. Phan (2024) outlined the traditional and current self-governing systems of the indigenous peoples of Lam Dong (Co Ho, Ma, Chu Ru) and some of their roles in the current period.

Current studies showed that the Co Ho Sre self-governing system underwent significant changes due to the influence of social, economic, and religious factors. These studies provided a clear view of these changes, but further exploration was still needed better to understand community management issues in the current renovation context. The changes and impacts of these factors on the structure and function of the traditional self-governing system remained a critical research area, requiring continued and detailed analysis.

Methodology

Research Method

The authors applied a combined research method of qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure objectivity and scientific rigor in addressing the research problem. Specifically, the Grounded Theory method helped build theory from practical data, using a data-driven approach to form and adjust theory based on observations and collected information. This method allowed the construction of new theories from practical data, suitable for studying phenomena that had not been deeply explored (Glaser & Strauss, 2014; Glaser et al., 1968). The survey method was applied to collect quantitative data on the self-governing system of the Co Ho Sre people. The survey method helped capture and analyze factors affecting livelihood activities and their transformations. According to Dillman et al. (2014), the design of questionnaires and field surveys is needed to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected data.

The observation method was deployed to gather direct information about the roles of village elders, clan leaders, and longhouse owners of the Co Ho Sre people. Direct and indirect observations allowed for capturing the characteristics and changes in the self-governing system of the studied community.

The interdisciplinary research method was used to ensure a comprehensive view of the self-governing system of the Co Ho Sre people. The authors combined theories and methods from various sciences, such as Linguistics, Folklore, Geography, Sociology, and Demography (Miller & Brewer, 2003)

The theoretical research method involved synthesizing and analyzing secondary data. The authors collected data from secondary sources such as books, newspapers, scientific journals, and previous research documents to build a theoretical foundation for the study. This method helped inherit important information and create a solid theoretical basis for the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Chih-Pei & Chang, 2017)

The sampling method: The purposive sampling method (judgment sampling) was applied to select subjects suitable for the research scope (households of the Co Ho Sre people in Lam Dong), ensuring that the research sample reflected the characteristics of the studied subjects (Etikan et al., 2016). Additionally, the convenience sampling method was chosen based on the accessibility of the research subjects, helping save

time and costs and often used in exploratory and preliminary research stages (Rahman et al., 2022; Taherdoost, 2016)

The sample size determination method: The sample size was determined based on the sample size distribution table of Krejcie & Morgan (1970). According to the available data, with a total of 103,682 Co Ho Sre people in Lam Dong, the necessary sample size was calculated to be about 400 to ensure the representativeness and accuracy of the results (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970; Kreuger & Neuman, 2006)

The survey method: The questionnaire design included general information and survey content. The questions included multiple-choice, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions to collect qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure its rationality and reliability (Fink, 2003; Johnny et al., 2014). Field surveys were conducted with 400 samples from different areas such as Bao Thuan commune, Di Linh town (Di Linh district), and Nthol Ha commune (Duc Trong district). In-depth interviews were also conducted to gather detailed information about livelihood transformations and influencing factors (Alston, 2020)

Research Tools

Research tools: They used survey questionnaires to collect information from Co Ho Sre households in Lam Dong. The survey included multiple-choice, multiple-response, and open-ended questions designed according to sociological research methods (Becker et al., 2012).

Data analysis tools: Quantitative and qualitative data were coded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 365 software. This method helped to organize and process data efficiently to draw accurate conclusions from the research (Field, 2024)

Results and Discussion

The Traditional Social Organization of The Co Ho Sre Ethnic Group

The traditional social organization of the Co Ho Sre, people in Lam Dong province reached its highest social structure at the village unit, called *hòn*. Each Co Ho Sre village was organized like a neighborhood commune, consisting of many large matrilineal families. Due to wet rice cultivation and concentrated living characteristics, a Co Ho Sre village usually included 20 to 30 large matrilineal families.

The family was the most basic unit in the social structure, followed by the clan and the village, with no other intermediate levels. The scope of a Co Ho Sre village was usually about 3 to 4 km², including residential areas, cultivated land, irrigation works, forests, mountains, rivers, streams, ponds, lakes, and cemetery land. The village boundaries were determined by rivers, streams, or hills and were regulated by the *kuãng hòn* (village chief), maintained over many generations. All village members clearly understood the boundaries for cultivation, hunting, fishing, and gathering.

The Co Ho Sre village was a socio-administrative unit with an independent self-governing system. Traditionally, the self-governing system in the village included members such as the village chief, the village chief's representative, clan leaders, family heads, and shamans. This system was essential in managing and maintaining village affairs based on customary laws expressed through taboos and prohibitions. It was responsible for transmitting and enforcing regulations from generation to generation. Violations of the rules led to punishment, such as performing rituals to the deities and compensating the community and the offended individuals.

The Village Chief (Kuãng Hòn)

The village chief (*kuãng hòn*) was the head of the village. He was an older man, usually over 50 years old, chosen from the group of clan leaders (*keõn pàng*) or the uncles (*keõn*) of a reputable lineage. Although not

officially elected, the village chief had to gain high trust from the village members. He needed experience in production, hunting, and fighting and had to understand the history, customs, and traditions of the village and the ethnic group. The village chief could also serve as the forest chief “*kuăng brê phê bòn*” selecting and distributing forest land to villagers, representing the village in transactions with neighboring villages, and handling land disputes or conflicts. Economically, the village chief was not given priority over other members and had to work to support himself and his family. Spiritually, the village chief held high prestige and presided over community rituals. A good village chief was trusted and respected by the entire village and was often compared to the “root of the village”.

The *deputy village chief* was chosen to perform the duties of the village chief in case he was ill or absent for a long time. This person was usually a potential candidate to become the village chief when the current chief died. The selection of the deputy village chief was often carefully considered and based on the consensus of the village members.

The role of the village chief was significant for the stability and development of the village, as reflected in the proverb of the Co Ho Sre people: “*Sur geb gōma/ Iār geb gōmăp/ He Kôn – cau geb kôn pàng/ kuăng bòn ăt bở*” (Pigs have a leader/Chickens have order/We, the highlanders, have clan heads/village chiefs leading us) (Nguyen, 2016)

Village Elder (kră bòn), Clan Head (kôn pàng) và Head of the Family (pô hâu)

Village Elder (kră bòn)

Village Elder (kră bòn): In the social structure of the Co Ho Sre people, there was no council of village elders as in some neighboring ethnic groups like the Chu Ru and Ma in Lam Dong province. However, the role of the village elders in the Co Ho Sre community was vital. These elders were older men in the village, usually aged 60 and above, who had prestige and virtue. They participated together in managing and administering the village, including dividing arable land, exploiting forest resources (hunting, gathering, and cutting), mobilizing labor for communal tasks such as building houses, constructing dams to block streams, organizing festivals, as well as resolving disputes and conflicts between families based on customary laws.

The title of ‘village elder’ was not only given to older people but also based on the prestige and knowledge of individuals in the community. Only older adults who lived in the village for a long time and had significant prestige were called village elders. Individuals who violated customary laws had terrible behavior, or were new to the village and had not yet proven their trustworthiness and understanding were not considered village elders but were called elderly people (cau kră).

According to the Co Ho Sre, village elders were not only respected individuals but also role models and standards of the community. They played essential roles in preserving and disseminating customs and traditions and were the ones who transmitted the regulations of customary laws to later generations. The advice and decisions of the village elders carried great weight for individuals and the entire community. Village elders often advised the village chief on resolving important matters, ensuring the community’s regulations and customs were maintained and promoted.

Clan Head (kôn pàng)

In the society of the Co Ho Sre people, the clan played an important role and was highly esteemed, as reflected in the proverb: “*Ū dũl kơ năc/ Răc dũl rơ sòn/ Kôn dũl me bập*” (A clump of soil/ Birds of one nest/ Children of one mother and father) (Nguyen, 2016). In this social structure, the clan leader, also known as *kôn pàng*, held the leadership position in each clan. The clan leader was a man, usually an uncle, chosen and authorized by the highest-ranking woman in the clan. Each traditional village of the Co Ho Sre people typically included two to three clans. The clan leader had essential responsibilities in monitoring and managing the clan’s production activities, resolving internal disputes, and handling matters related to funerals and weddings according to tradition. Additionally, the clan leader presided over the clan’s religious

activities, including dealing with issues related to sorcery and deciding appropriate punishments. The clan leader closely coordinated with the village chief in the overall management of the village, from religious activities and production to resolving disputes with neighboring villages. The role of the clan leader was not only to manage the internal affairs of the clan but also to be an essential part of the comprehensive social management system of the Co Ho Sre community.

Head of the Family (pô hùu)

In the traditional society of the Co Ho Sre people, the family structure was mainly organized according to a matriarchal extended family model, which included many smaller families of sisters, with a total number of members ranging from 10 to 30 people. The head of the family (Pô hùu) played an essential role in representing the family in village activities and events. The head of the family was the husband of the eldest woman. The leading role of the head of the family was to participate in and represent the family in village affairs and meetings. The prestige of the head of the family within the village community was further enhanced for extended families with many members and several smaller families.

Forest Chief (tờm bri/brê), Shaman (bớjớu)

Forest Chief (tờm bri/brê): Although they had a relatively stable wet rice agricultural economy, the Co Ho Sre people maintained a close relationship with the forest environment. In each Co Ho Sre village, the position of forest chief (tờm bri/brê) played an essential role in managing and protecting the forest areas. The forest chief was usually an elderly, reputable individual trusted within the community, tasked with supervising and preserving the forests, which were considered the dwelling place of deities (yàng). The forest chief had the duty to understand the boundaries and land conditions of the village and to assist the village chief in allocating land to households based on the number and farming conditions of each family. The delineation of boundaries between swidden fields was carried out specifically during the clearing and planting process. When the swidden fields became infertile, the forest chief could propose to the village chief to move to other forest areas for cultivation. Besides selecting forest land for swidden farming, the forest chief also participated in choosing trees for different purposes, such as building houses, making boats, crafting coffins, and erecting ritual poles. In cooperation with the village chief, the forest chief played an essential role in managing forest resources, contributing to the sustainability of the agroforestry system within the Co Ho Sre community.

The shaman (bớjớu): In the Co Ho Sre community, the shaman played a vital role in beliefs and traditional medicine activities. He was a highly respected individual in the village responsible for healing, conducting rituals, and exorcising spirits and charms. The Co Ho Sre believed in polytheism and trusted in the presence of supernatural forces; alongside deities (yàng), there were also evil spirits (cà rắk) that could cause misfortunes such as illnesses, accidents, and death, like forest spirits (phút mu), water spirits (bunb dà)... When illnesses occurred, the people usually invited the shaman to treat them with plant-based medicine and magical methods, including using talismans to exorcise evil spirits, expel negative forces from the sick, and break charms. The shaman in the Co Ho Sre community was not appointed or elected. According to the Co Ho Sre, he discovered and possessed the Lu Dek stone, which naturally generated special powers, helping the shaman mix herbs into a potent medicine. The shaman's abilities were considered to be bestowed by the deities and were reinforced by the community's trust over many years. On certain special occasions, a reputable shaman could be invited to participate in village rituals or adjudicate matters related to violations of customary laws. However, not every Co Ho Sre village had a shaman, and not everyone could become a shaman. This role required a unique 'destiny' such as being struck by lightning, experiencing near-death, and could not be passed on to others.

Customary Law (Nớ)

Customary law (nớ) was crucial in maintaining social order in Co Ho Sre communities. This customary law existed in oral form and was strictly remembered and followed by community members. According to the Co Ho Sre belief, violations of customary law caused disturbances to natural harmony and resulted from

offending the deities. According to Nguyen, the Co Ho Sre's customary law system that included 86 regulations covering various aspects of community life, from judicial power to specific issues such as *píc bao kroñau kòi* (stealing rice seeds, food), *jă kwàng sɔndwàng jɔng* (adultery), *sreh gǒp srǒp cau* (stabbing a friend), and *thàm dà cɔl hà ù* (land disputes) (Nguyen, 2016). Among these, incest was considered the most serious offense, heavily punished due to its severe insult to the deities. When customary laws were violated, community leaders such as the village chief, clan head, village elder, and family head played crucial roles in adjudicating and resolving the matters. They participated in 'trials' and determined punishments based on the customary law provisions.

In summary, the research indicated that the traditional self-governing institutions of the Co Ho Sre people performed the following main functions: managing resources, coordinating the use of land and natural resources within the community, resolving disputes, dealing with customary law violators, making reconciliation decisions, and handling internal conflicts; preserving culture, organizing and maintaining traditional festivals, rituals, and cultural practices according to customs. In the traditional society of the Co Ho Sre, positions such as the village chief (or village chief's representative), clan head, family head, shaman, and forest chief played essential roles in both social and religious life. The long-standing customary law system and the leadership of these respected individuals formed a robust self-governing institution, contributing to long-term stability within the Co Ho Sre community.

The Role of The Traditional Self-Governing Institution of The Co Ho Sre People in Today's Society

In practice, the traditional social organization of the Co Ho Sre people did not change much after 1945 when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established. Despite the emergence of new administrative units such as communes, districts, and provinces, the villages of the Co Ho Sre people still maintained the neighborly commune organization, operating according to pre-class social institutions and the matriarchal system. After Vietnam unified the country (April 30, 1975), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam established local governance down to the grassroots level. The traditional self-governing institution of the Co Ho Sre village was replaced by the hamlet self-governing system operating under state law, under the direct management of the commune-level government. The Hamlet self-governing structure included Hamlet's chief, deputy Hamlet chief, Hamlet police, village militia, and self-governing groups... Mass organizations such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, Farmers' Association, Veterans' Association, Elderly Association, and Red Cross were also established. The structural change of the village led to the disintegration of the traditional self-governing institution of the Co Ho Sre people. Essential members of the old system, such as the village chief, village elder, forest chief, clan head, and shaman, now only held symbolic roles, and their influence was primarily spiritual.

According to Vietnamese law, land belonged to the state; therefore, the villages of the Co Ho Sre people no longer owned land as before. 'The landowners in the villages of Austronesian-speaking peoples and the forest chiefs in the villages of Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples no longer had the function of overseeing subsistence activities according to customs and customary laws' (Bui, 2010). The roles of the village chief, village elder, and forest chief in coordinating village economics, selecting forest areas for exploitation, and distributing swidden fields according to customs and customary laws were no longer implemented. Additionally, the communal festivals of the Co Ho Sre people were gradually fading and only maintained in some places infrequently.

Based on the survey results on the role of the village chief/village elder in the Co Ho Sre community, we collected and analyzed the data as follows: 188 people participated in the survey, stating that *the village chief or village elder still held a role in the community* (47.0%). This role was mainly related to maintaining customs, reminding about customary laws, encouraging descendants, and propagating state policies. Forty-five people (11.3%) stated that *the village chief or village elder no longer had a significant role in today's society*. The main reasons were management transfer to state agencies, state law, and declining traditional festival activities. Additionally, 167 people (41.8%) stated that there was *no village elder*. This indicated changes in the social structure and the replacement of the traditional self-governing institution with the new government system (Figure 2).

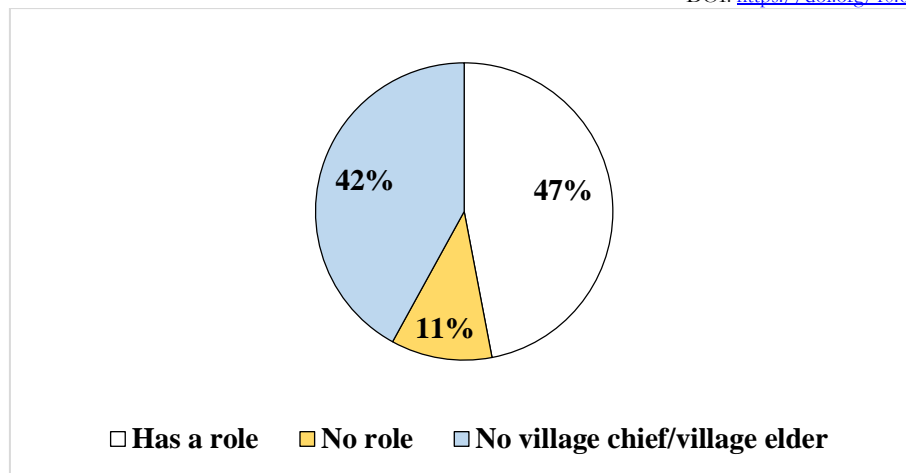


Figure 2. Role Of Village Chief, Village Elder

Regarding the role of the village chief/elder in contemporary Co Ho Sre society (Figure 3). Among the 188 respondents who said that the village chief and elder still had a role, the role expressions were classified as follows: 138 people (73.4%) said that the village chief and elder mainly played a role in organizing and maintaining the community's traditional customs; 40 people (21.3%) recognized the role of the village chief and elder in encouraging and motivating the people to participate in production activities; 35 people (18.6%) considered one of the crucial roles of the village chief and elder was to resolve internal conflicts within the community; 76 people (40.4%) stated that the village chief and elder represented and resolved issues between the community and local authorities, and 94 people (50.0%) said that the village chief and elder also encouraged children to study and develop personally.

The survey results showed that although the role of the village chief and elder in the Co Ho Sre community had declined compared to the past, their role still maintained an important part in sustaining customs and supporting community activities. The primary role expressions focused on preserving traditions, encouraging production, resolving conflicts, and representing the community in issues with local authorities.

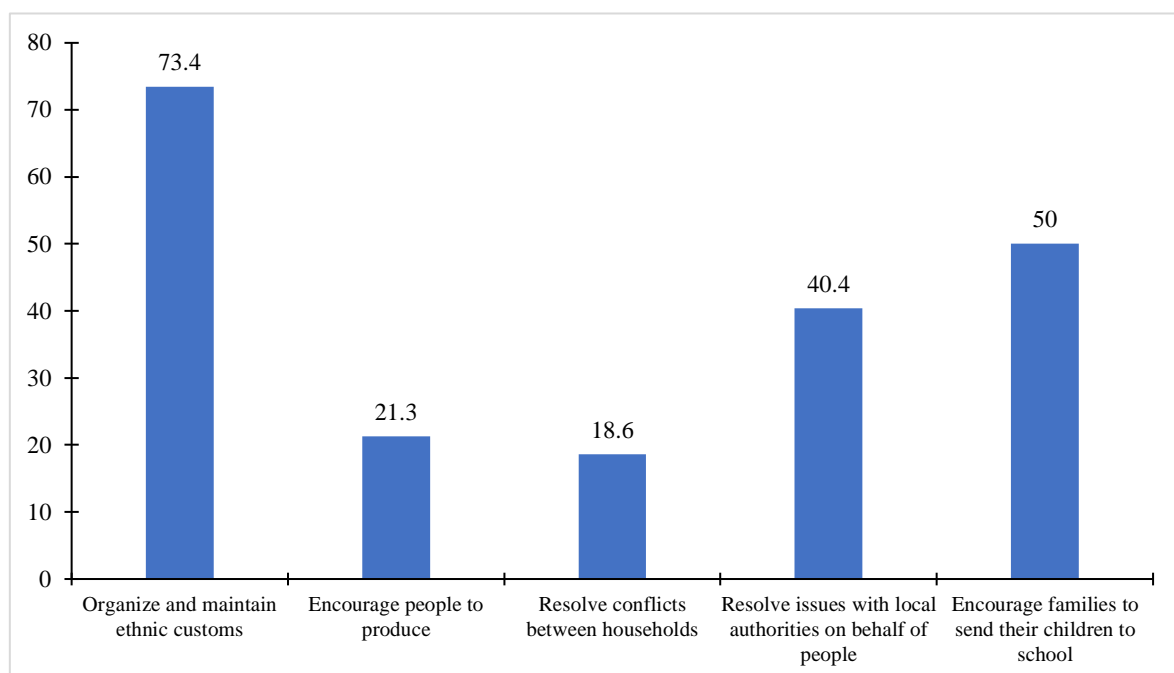


Figure 3. Representing The Role of The Current Village Chief/Village Elder

In the context of the hamlet self-governing system being applied to replace the traditional villages of the Co Ho Sre, the roles of conventional titles such as village chief and elder significantly declined. Despite this, clans still held an important position in the community, and kinship relationships continued to be maintained quite regularly. Survey results showed that 81.9% of the Co Ho Sre people assessed the role of clans as ‘important,’ while only 18.1% considered the role of clans as ‘normal.’ Notably, no respondents in the 400 samples surveyed rated the role of clans as ‘unimportant.’ This reflected the belief that clans still held a sacred meaning and had a decisive influence on the social status of members and families within this kin group. With such an essential role of clans, 74.4% of respondents reported maintaining kinship relationships at a ‘regular’ level, and 10.8% maintained them at a ‘very regular’ level (see Figure 4). This was consistent with the observation of Mr. K”Thus from Chi Rong 1 hamlet, Phu Hoi, Duc Trong: ‘Kinship plays a critical role in the life of the Co Ho Sre. When families have important matters, relatives automatically come to help, from weddings to production... For instance, in the 1990s (20th century), many families in Chi Rong pooled funds to sequentially buy tractors and farming tools for the families (interview conducted on March 10, 2024).

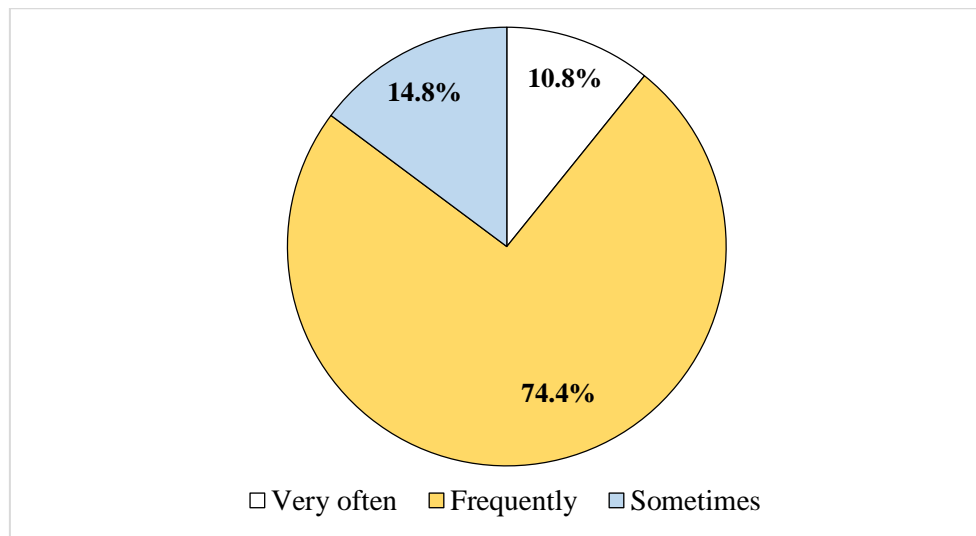


Figure 4. Level Of Maintaining Kinship Relationships Among the Co Ho Sre People

In the clan structure of the Co Ho Sre people, the roles of the clan head and uncles were very prominent and vital. Survey data showed that the majority of the Co Ho Sre identified that the decisive voice in the clan primarily belonged to the clan head or senior uncles, with a rate of 83.8%. Meanwhile, older people played a decisive role at 15.3%, and individuals with higher status only accounted for 1.0% (see Figure 5).

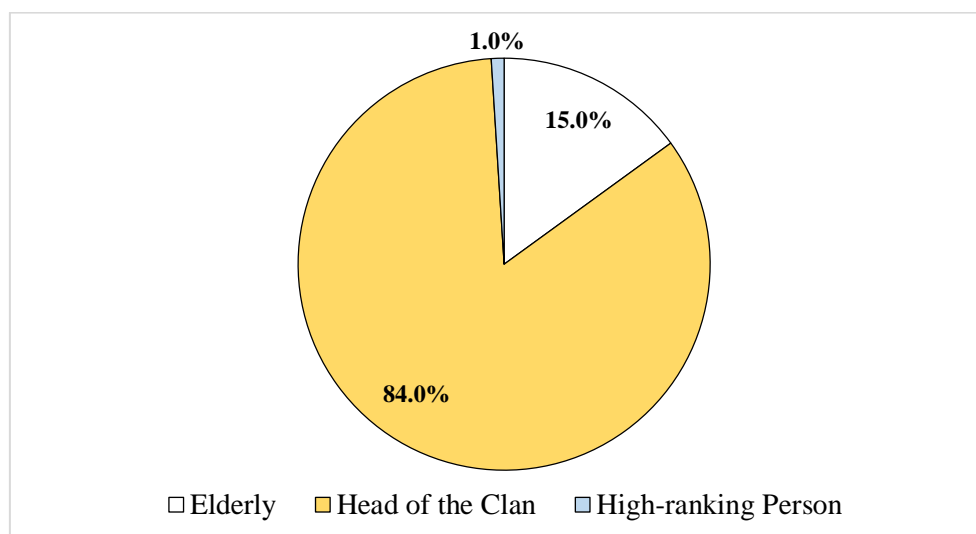
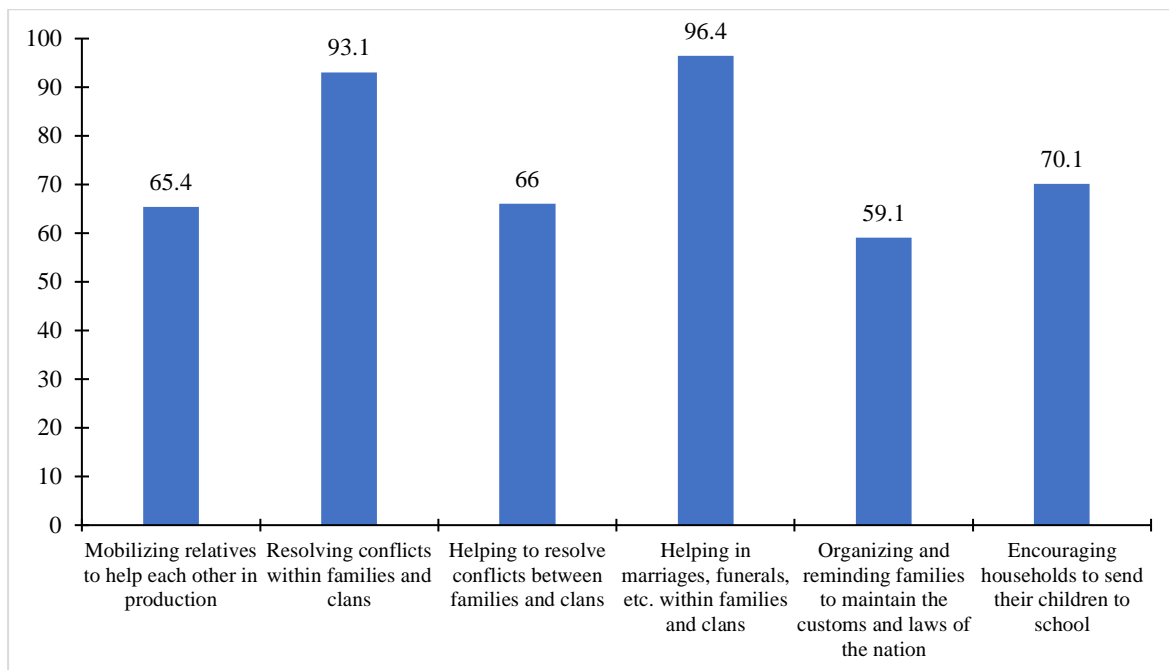


Figure 5. The Person with The Final Say in The Family

The role of the clan head or senior uncle was not only decisive but also diverse and vital in community activities. Specifically, the most prominent role was assisting in marriage and funeral matters, with a rate of 96.4%. Following this was resolving family conflicts, with a rate of 93.1%. Other activities, such as encouraging education and helping to resolve disputes, also had high rates, at 70.1% and 66.0%, respectively. Although the rate for organizing and reminding families to maintain ethnic customs and laws was the lowest at 59.1%, it still showed the critical role of the clan head in preserving traditional cultural values (see Figure 6). Mrs. Ka Dem, born in 1956, living in Di Linh Thuong 2, Di Linh town, Di Linh district, said: ‘When there were matters in the family such as weddings, funerals, dividing land for children... they would ask the clan head and senior uncles for help.

**Figure 6.** Representing The Role of The Head of The Family

In the current context, land ownership by the state led to significant changes in the traditional social structure of the Co Ho Sre community. Precisely, the role of the forest chief ceased to exist entirely. The title and role of the forest chief were eliminated due to the transfer of land ownership to the state. Furthermore, the strong development of the grassroots healthcare system led to the decline of the shaman's role in the community. Previously, the shaman played an essential role in rituals and treating illnesses with traditional methods. However, only a few villages currently maintain the presence of the shaman, and their activities were often deemed superstitious, causing the authorities to prohibit them from continuing. This change reflected a transformation in the Co Ho Sre community's social structure and value system, with the increasing influence of government agencies and modern healthcare services.

Customary law (*Nrĩ*) had deep roots in the culture and social structure of the Co Ho Sre community. Although the state's legal system was widely applied today, the government maintained and promoted progressive customary laws within minority communities, including the Co Ho Sre. These efforts aimed to build and strengthen community self-governing institutions while regulating people's behavior in society. In many villages, the roles of village elders and clan heads effectively upheld customary laws in resolving and mediating relationships between individuals and families, preserving ethnic and cultural identity. However, the role of customary law in the current life of the Co Ho Sre people was evident through survey data. Survey data showed that 54.5% of Co Ho Sre people assessed that customary law (*Nrĩ*) still held an important role in current life. Conversely, 29.0% stated that customary law no longer had a significant role, and 16.5% were uncertain or indifferent to the role of customary law. This distribution indicated that, while

customary law still held an essential place in a large portion of the community, a considerable percentage of people believed it was no longer relevant or did not significantly impact daily life.

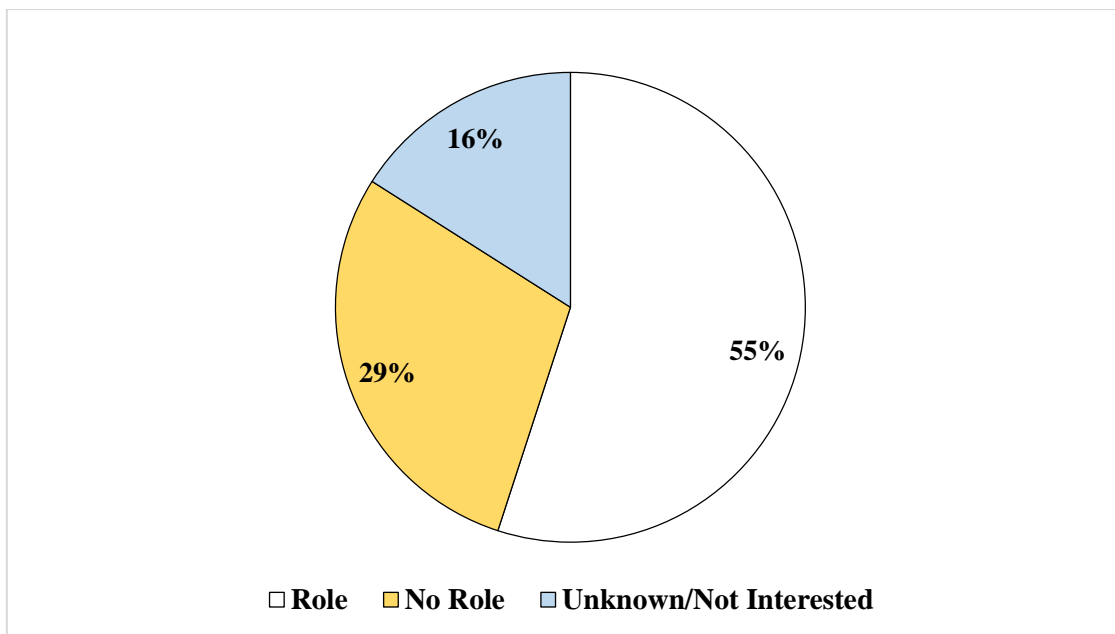


Figure 7. The Role of Customary Law (Nri) In the Life of The Co Ho Sre People

In summary, the traditional self-governing institutions of the Co Ho Sre were replaced by the new social management system, leading to a significant decline in the roles of conventional titles such as village chief/elder and clan head or the disappearance of titles like forest chief and shaman. However, traditional elements and customary laws still played essential roles in preserving the community's customs and cultural values. The maintenance of these elements reflected a transformation in the social structure, where cultural values and traditional self-governing systems were trying to integrate with modern institutions and the state's legal system. The self-governing institutions of the Co Ho Sre still played essential roles in maintaining cultural identity and social order. To respond to modern changes, there needed to be flexibility in how these institutions operated. The preservation and promotion of the values of the self-governing institutions required to simultaneously adapt to external factors such as economic development and social change.

Causes Leading to Changes in The Self-Governing Institutions of The Co Ho Sre People

Since 1975, especially after the Land Laws were enacted in 1993 and 2003, land ownership in the Co Ho Sre community underwent fundamental changes. Previously, land, including farmland, residential land, and forest land, belonged to the collective ownership of villages. However, abolishing collective ownership of villages and transferring land ownership to the state led to significant changes in land management and use. The influence of the market, especially land buying and selling, a taboo action in the Co Ho Sre community and other ethnic minorities, became common. This change eroded the spiritual bond that connected villages with the land, leading to the decline of traditional festivals such as the rain prayer festival (Ñôwer) and the rice storage festival (Ñô lir vong). The village community's sacred material, economic, and spiritual foundations were broken, causing the disintegration of traditional villages and reducing solidarity and mutual support within the community.

Another critical factor in the transformation of the traditional self-governing institution was the change in the residential structure. Previously, Co Ho Sre villages mainly consisted of families of the same clan, forming a closely-knit community. However, from the 1980s onward, with migration and urbanization

policies, many other ethnic groups also migrated to live in the same villages as the Co Ho Sre. This multi-ethnic co-residence significantly changed the structure and characteristics of traditional villages. The presence of multiple ethnic groups led to cultural exchanges and changes in community management. Villages no longer maintained clan relations with 2-3 clans as before but turned into neighborhood communities with diversity in clans and cultures. This contributed to the fragmentation of the traditional village structure and reduced homogeneity in community organization and management. Traditional titles such as village chief, elder, forest chief, and clan head were replaced by state self-governing organizations such as hamlet chief, deputy hamlet chief, self-governing groups, and mass organizations such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, Farmers' Association, Veterans' Association, Elderly Association, and Red Cross.

Although the state aimed to rebuild the self-governing system in villages by establishing self-governing groups elders' groups, and promoting the value of customary law, the effectiveness of these efforts remained limited. According to Mr. K'Brèu, born in 1960, from Dinh Trang Hoa commune, Di Linh district: *'Currently, many elders and reputable individuals have not fully exerted their influence. Some elders tend to demand benefits for the people in the bon instead of encouraging them to implement policies. Additionally, local authorities in many places do not regularly maintain activities with reputable individuals, leading to dissatisfaction and a lack of enthusiasm in advocacy and communication work. Many policy communication contents were not carefully selected before seeking intervention from elders and reputable individuals, resulting in ineffective policy implementation among the people.'*

In summary, the multi-ethnic co-residence in the Co Ho Sre villages, along with changes in laws, government organization, land ownership, and socio-economic development policies, led to changes in the traditional self-governing institution. These factors changed the village structure, leading to adjustments in the management apparatus and reducing the influence of traditional institutions.

The Main Challenges in The Traditional Self-Governing Institutions of The Co Ho Sre People Today

The changes in land ownership, where ownership was transferred from village communities to the state, led to the loss of control and management roles of the forest and village chiefs, which were the primary basis for their roles and positions. This change reduced the role of traditional institutions in distributing and managing land resources.

The decline of traditional festivals: related to agricultural production in the community, such as the rain prayer festival and the rice storage festival, gradually weakened the spiritual connection of the community with traditional culture, diminishing the role of village elders – the traditional ceremony leaders.

The increase in multi-ethnic residency: within the community altered the village community structure, from homogeneous villages to multi-ethnic neighborhood communities. This disruption of social structure led to the loss of homogeneity in organizing and managing the traditional Co Ho Sre community. Cultural exchanges among ethnic groups within the village complicated community management and issues related to maintaining traditional customs.

The changes in the self-governing system at the village/hamlet level: some traditional titles like village chief, clan head, and forest chief relinquished management to new self-governing structures such as hamlet chief, deputy hamlet chief, and state-affiliated mass organizations. Despite state efforts to promote the roles of village elders and clan heads by including them in self-governing groups and elders' groups, the effectiveness of these organizations remained limited due to a lack of coordination and support from local authorities and a lack of enthusiasm and capacity from the elders.

The dispersion in applying customary laws: though a portion of the Co Ho Sre still regarded customary laws as necessary, they faced difficulties in application and maintenance in current life due to changes in social and legal structures. Some community members no longer valued or considered customary laws relevant in modern society, leading to dispersion in applying and enforcing traditional regulations. The conflict between the demands of contemporary culture and customs created tension within the community, affecting management efficiency and consensus in policy implementation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Since 1975, especially after Vietnam implemented the renovation policy in 1986, the grassroots government system has improved significantly, with increasingly strict organization and management at the hamlet/village level. The Land Laws of 1993 and 2003 stipulated essential changes in land management, leading to extensive transformations in the traditional social structure of the Co Ho Srê people. Land ownership transferred from village communities to the state, reducing the role of conventional self-governing institutions such as village chiefs, elders, and forest chiefs in economic management. Population growth and multi-ethnic co-residence led to changes in the structure and characteristics of traditional villages, reducing homogeneity in community organization and management. Cultural exchanges and socio-economic development policies have created significant changes in the maintenance and management of conventional institutions.

Currently, although the roles of village chiefs and elders have declined, they still hold important roles in maintaining customs and supporting community activities spiritually. Clans still play critical roles in community activities such as marriages, funerals, production support, and conflict resolution. Clan heads and elderly members still play essential roles in preserving traditional cultural values. However, the traditional self-governing institutions of the Co Ho Srê are facing significant challenges, including (1) The transition of land ownership from communities to the state, (2) The decline of traditional festivals, (3) Increasing multi-ethnic nature in the community and population growth; (4) Changes in the self-governing system at the village/hamlet level; and (5) Dispersion in applying customary laws.

To address these challenges, appropriate solutions from the state are needed to maintain and promote the traditional self-governing institutions of the Co Ho Srê while supporting the community in adapting to current social and policy changes. This will contribute to sustainable development and the protection of ethnic cultural values.

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