

The Buffalo Sacrifice Custom in the Life of the Ca Dong Community in Bờ Y Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province in the Contemporary Context¹

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ABSTRACT

The buffalo sacrifice custom of the Ca Dong people is closely associated with a range of traditional rituals, including ceremonies celebrating the construction of a new communal house (nhà rông), village taboo rituals, rain-praying ceremonies, healing rituals, and post-harvest communal feasts. These rituals have traditionally been performed at both the community and household levels. Since the 1990s, however, the transition from swidden cultivation to wet-rice agriculture, together with the disappearance of the traditional nhà rông and changes in the multi-ethnic demographic structure, has significantly reduced the social and cultural space in which the buffalo sacrifice custom has been practiced. Consequently, today the custom survives primarily within the household context, mainly during post-harvest celebrations following the rice harvest and healing rituals. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines the rituals associated with the buffalo sacrifice custom and analyzes its transformation in the contemporary context. It also identifies several emerging challenges and proposes recommendations for preserving and promoting the cultural values embodied in this traditional practice in Tà Ka Village, Bờ Y Commune.

KEYWORDS: buffalo sacrifice custom; Ca Dong people; Bờ Y Commune; Quảng Ngãi Province

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INTRODUCTION

The Ca Dong are one of the five local groups of the Xơ-Đang ethnic group, belonging to the Mon- Khor-me branch of the Austroasiatic language family, and are primarily distributed in the northern Central Highlands of Vietnam. In the traditional cultural life of the Ca Dong people, folk beliefs occupy a central position, reflecting the close relationship between humans, nature, spiritual beings, and the community. Within this belief system, the buffalo sacrifice custom constitutes a distinctive cultural practice closely associated with many important communal rituals, including the new rice celebration, the water-trough worship ceremony, the nhà rông inauguration ceremony, the village taboo ritual, and various life-cycle ceremonies.

For the Ca Dong people, buffalo sacrifice is not merely a ritual of animal offering performed to express gratitude to, or seek blessings from, supernatural beings. It also serves as an important social occasion through which community solidarity, mutual sharing, and ethnic identity are reaffirmed. Through the ritual practices surrounding the buffalo, numerous elements of traditional culture are preserved and transmitted across generations, thereby contributing to the maintenance of community cohesion within the mountainous living environment.

A review of the relevant literature indicates that numerous studies have examined the rituals and belief systems of the Ca Dong people, including several works on the buffalo sacrifice custom. Notable examples include Nguyễn Văn Sơn's (2001) study of the water-trough worship ceremony, Lê Hồng Khánh's (2003) research on the buffalo sacrifice festival, and Đinh Long Ta's (1999) work on related ritual practices. However, these studies were conducted primarily in localities that formerly belonged to Quảng Ngãi Province, whereas the buffalo sacrifice custom of the Ca Dong in present day Bờ Y Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province, has not yet been the subject of in-depth scholarly investigation.

Drawing upon a review of published literature and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tà Ka Village, Bờ Y Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province, in April 2026, this study employs in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to examine the forms and practices of the buffalo sacrifice custom within the Ca Dong community at both the communal and household

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levels. It further analyzes the transformations of this custom in the contemporary context, identifies the key challenges facing its continued practice, and proposes several recommendations for preserving and promoting the traditional cultural values embodied in the buffalo sacrifice custom in contemporary Ca Dong society.

1. STUDY AREA

Bờ Y is a border commune in Quảng Ngãi Province, established on 1 July 2025 following the administrative merger of the former Plei Càn Town, Đắc Xú Commune, and Pờ Y Commune. The commune is located approximately 230 km from the administrative center of Quảng Ngãi Province. It borders Dục Nông Commune to the north, Sa Loong Commune to the south, Đắc Tô and Ngọc Tụ communes to the east, and Laos and Cambodia to the west. Bờ Y is home to the Bờ Y International Border Gate and is traversed by several major transportation routes, including National Highway 14C, National Highway 40, and the Hồ Chí Minh Highway. These transport networks facilitate cross-border trade, economic development, and cultural interaction among ethnic communities both within and beyond the region.

According to statistics provided by the People's Committee of Bờ Y Commune in 2025, the commune had a population of 35,487 people living in 10,476 households, representing 17 ethnic groups residing across 30 villages and urban residential units. Ethnic minority groups accounted for 17,041 people, or approximately 48% of the commune's total population. Among them, the Ca Dong population numbered 9,278 and was concentrated in villages and residential units such as Thôn 4, Thôn 5, Kei Joi, Đắc Long Giao, Residential Group 5, Chiêng Chiết, Đắc Răng, Đắc Tăng, Iêk, Phía Pháp, Tà Ka, Măng Tôn, Kon Khôn, and Thôn 7.

Among these settlements, Tà Ka Village is the principal residential area of the Ca Dong community. According to village statistics for 2025, Tà Ka had a total of 183 households with 637 residents. Of these, 141 households comprising 469 people were Ca Dong, while the remaining households belonged to other ethnic groups, including the Thái, Mường, Giê Triêng, Dao, Kinh, and Xơ Đăng. The long-standing co-residence of multiple ethnic groups within the same locality has fostered intensive processes of cultural interaction and exchange, which have, in turn, exerted a noticeable influence on the traditional beliefs and ritual practices of the Ca Dong in the contemporary period.

2. THE BUFFALO SACRIFICE CUSTOM AMONG THE CA DONG

2.1. The Buffalo Sacrifice Custom (Đak Mlao Cha Kpua) at the Community Level

In the spiritual and cultural life of the Ca Dong community in Tà Ka Village, Bờ Y Commune, the buffalo sacrifice custom (Đak Mlao Cha Kpua) constitutes one of the most important ritual practices and is closely associated with a wide range of communal religious ceremonies and festivals. The custom is practiced at two levels: the community and the household. At the community level, buffalo sacrifice is traditionally performed during village taboo ceremonies, celebrations marking the completion of a new nhà rông (communal house), new rice festivals, and communal post-harvest celebrations.

More than a ritual of animal sacrifice offered to express gratitude to the Yang (deities or guardian spirits), the buffalo sacrifice ceremony serves as an important social institution through which communal solidarity is reinforced, reciprocal support is strengthened, and the cultural identity of the Ca Dong is reaffirmed. As such, the custom plays a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and ensuring the continuity of the community's traditional cultural values.

2.1.1. Buffalo Sacrifice in the Ceremony Celebrating the Construction of a New Nhà Rông

Among the communal rituals of the Ca Dong, buffalo sacrifice is traditionally performed at the nhà rông (communal house) the village's cultural, social, and ritual center. For the Ca Dong, the nhà rông is more than a venue for communal gatherings, feasting, and social activities; it is a sacred space where rituals are performed to express gratitude to the Yang (deities or guardian spirits) for safeguarding the community, ensuring the health and well-being of its members, and bestowing abundant harvests.

The resources required to organize the ceremony are mobilized through voluntary contributions from village households, reflecting the Ca Dong's strong tradition of collective responsibility and mutual support. As one village elder explained, "Those who are financially able contribute money, while those with fewer resources contribute rice or other agricultural products, which are then converted into cash to purchase the buffalo" (In-depth interview with village elder A.U., born in 1954, Tà Ka Village, April 2026). This mechanism of resource mobilization exemplifies the communal solidarity and reciprocal support that have long characterized the traditional social organization of the Ca Dong.

Preparations for the ceremony are collectively discussed and agreed upon by the village head and the council of village elders before the ritual takes place. This decision-making process highlights the central role of respected elders in traditional Ca Dong society. They are not only responsible for coordinating communal affairs but also serve as custodians of customary law, ritual knowledge, and indigenous cultural traditions. Through their active participation in ritual practice, they ensure the continuity and intergenerational transmission of the community's cultural heritage.

Preparations for the Ceremony: At the community level, the buffalo sacrifice ceremony traditionally lasts for three days and is held at the traditional nhà rông (communal house). The first two days are devoted to preparations and the performance of ritual ceremonies, while the final day is reserved for a communal feast attended by all villagers. Preparatory tasks are clearly allocated

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according to gender and age. Young men constitute the primary labor force and are responsible for physically demanding tasks such as collecting bamboo, lồ ô bamboo, thatching grass, and rattan from the forest to construct the ritual shelter and prepare the cây nêu (ritual pole). They also hunt birds, rats, and other wild animals to supplement the food prepared for the ceremony. According to the traditional beliefs of the Ca Dong in Tà Ka Village, all participants involved in these preparations should be members of the village community, as the presence of outsiders is believed to diminish the sacred efficacy of the ritual.

Women are responsible for gathering wild vegetables, preparing food ingredients, cutting bamboo tubes for cooking com lam (bamboo-tube rice), and preparing side dishes. Men are responsible for slaughtering the buffalo and preparing the principal dishes served during the ceremony. This division of labor reflects the traditional social organization of the Ca Dong, in which each member of the community assumes specific roles and responsibilities in the collective performance of communal rituals.

The First Day: Constructing the Ritual Shelter and nêu tree (ritual pole): The first day of the ceremony is devoted to constructing the ritual shelter and erecting the cây nêu, two essential components of the ceremonial space. A group of physically strong young men is assigned to collect construction materials from the forest before working together to build the shelter in the open space in front of the nhà rông. Constructed primarily from lồ ô bamboo and thatching grass, the shelter serves as the venue for ritual performances and the preparation of ceremonial offerings.

Upon completion of the shelter, the community proceeds to erect the cây nêu. In Ca Dong belief, the ritual pole holds profound symbolic significance, serving as a medium that connects the human world with the spiritual realm while simultaneously marking the sacred space of the ceremony. Before the pole is erected, the village head or a village elder performs a ritual invocation, reciting: "Lơ ngép lơ boong xoong giol đol cöl clok rok rak," meaning "May Heaven and Earth bless the villagers with longevity, good health, and good fortune." Following the invocation, the village head is the first to raise the pole, after which other villagers join together to erect and secure it firmly in the ground.

Attached to the cây nêu is an altar dedicated to the Yang, upon which sacrificial offerings-most notably the buffalo's head-are presented to the deities. Once the altar has been completed, the village elder performs another prayer, asking the Yang to bless the villagers with safety in the forest, success in farming, good fortune in hunting, and prosperity in gold panning. Thus, the cây nêu is not only a sacred religious symbol but also a material expression of the community's aspirations for peace, prosperity, and well-being.

The Second Day: Buffalo Sacrifice and Offerings to the Yang: Following the completion of the preparatory activities, the second day marks the central phase of the buffalo sacrifice ceremony. Early in the morning, villagers gather in the courtyard of the nhà rông to participate in the ritual dedicated to the Yang, officiated by the village elder. During the invocation, the elder calls upon various deities and spiritual beings, including the Sky Deity (Yang Pling Ngay), the Earth Deity (Yang Tờ Ne), the Thunder Deity (Yang Grâm), the Wind Deity (Kda Pút), as well as the spirits of rivers, streams, and other supernatural beings, inviting them to witness the villagers' sincerity. The prayers primarily seek blessings for good health, abundant harvests, and peace and prosperity for the community. The sequence of offerings follows a prescribed ritual hierarchy: the celestial deities are invoked first, followed by the deities associated with the land, water sources, and the village territory. This ritual order reflects the Ca Dong's animistic worldview, in which all elements of the natural world are believed to possess spiritual agency and the power to influence human life.

Following the invocation to the Yang, the buffalo sacrifice is performed. The village elder delivers the first ritual stab, after which the young men of the village continue the sacrifice until the animal dies. The buffalo is then butchered for use in subsequent ritual offerings and the communal feast. During the butchering process, selected organs-including the liver, brain, tongue, and kidneys-are reserved as sacrificial offerings to the deities. A portion of the fresh liver is hung from the roof of the ritual shelter while prayers are offered to the Sky Yang and the Earth Yang. According to Ca Dong belief, the deities must be the first recipients of the sacrificial offerings; only after the Yang have accepted these offerings will the community receive their protection and blessings.

The Third Day: The Communal Feast: Upon the completion of the sacrificial rituals, the ceremony enters its final stage the communal feast. Villagers gather around the nhà rông to share food and drink, perform gong performance (cồng chiêng), xoang dance, and drink rượu ghè (jar of rice wine). This is the liveliest stage of the festival and provides an important occasion for community members to meet, interact, and strengthen their social relationships.

Virtually every part of the buffalo is utilized in preparing traditional dishes, including grilled buffalo meat, bone soup, hoof porridge, and boiled head and offal served with chili salt. These dishes are eaten together with com lam (bamboo-tube rice), wild vegetables, and grilled meat prepared from birds, rats, and other wild game. Throughout the ceremony, the Ca Dong continue to observe a number of traditional food taboos. For example, they refrain from eating fiddlehead ferns because the slippery texture of the plant is believed to increase the likelihood of slipping and encountering misfortune while travelling or hunting in the forest.

Rượu ghè (jar of rice wine) is an indispensable beverage in communal ceremonies and festivals. In the past, when economic conditions were difficult, cassava was commonly used as the primary ingredient for brewing. As glutinous rice cultivation became more widespread, however, glutinous rice gradually replaced cassava as the principal brewing material. Although the Ca Dong traditionally produced their own fermentation starter, they now commonly purchase yeast from the Brâu, whose brewing starter is widely regarded as producing superior fermentation quality and a more aromatic flavor.

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At the conclusion of the ceremony, the remaining buffalo meat is distributed equally among all households in the village. This distribution not only ensures that every household shares in the ritual blessings but also embodies the principles of equitable resource sharing and communal solidarity. Consequently, the buffalo sacrifice custom represents not only a religious practice but also an important mechanism of social integration, contributing to the maintenance of community relationships and the preservation of the Ca Dong's traditional cultural identity.

2.1.2. The Buffalo Sacrifice Custom in the Village Taboo Ceremony

The village taboo ceremony is performed when the community experiences repeated illness, misfortune, or prolonged outbreaks of disease. According to Ca Dong beliefs, such disturbances are not solely attributable to natural causes but may also result from the displeasure of the Yang (deities or guardian spirits) or the interference of malevolent supernatural forces. The ceremony is therefore conducted to seek the protection of the deities, dispel misfortune and evil influences, and restore peace, health, and well-being to the community.

Unlike household healing rituals, the village taboo ceremony is explicitly communal in nature, requiring the participation of the majority of households in the village. Preparations generally extend for more than one week. The host household, or a group of households responsible for organizing the ceremony, must prepare sufficient rice, rượu ghè (jar wine), and other ritual offerings before mobilizing the village's young men to construct the ritual shelter, erect the cây nêu (ritual pole), collect firewood, harvest lồ ô bamboo, and gather rattan vines.

A notable feature of the ceremony is that only young men belonging to the resident community are permitted to participate in these preparatory activities. According to local belief, the presence of outsiders may diminish the ritual efficacy of the ceremony. This restriction reflects a clearly defined cultural boundary between the resident community and outsiders, while also illustrating the relatively closed nature of ritual practice within traditional Ca Dong society.

Throughout the ceremony, those responsible for ritual preparations and service are required to observe a number of strict ritual prohibitions. Young men usually sleep in the nhà rông or on temporary platforms constructed in the communal courtyard, whereas young women stay in the house of the ritual host. This spatial separation between males and females is intended to prevent any behavior considered capable of compromising the ritual purity of the ceremony. Individuals who violate these ritual regulations are required to provide compensation to the community in the form of sacrificial offerings, typically a pig or a chicken. These regulations demonstrate that the village taboo ceremony functions not only as a religious ritual but also as a social institution through which communal behavior is regulated, collective discipline is reinforced, and traditional moral norms are maintained.

According to local informants, the preparation of the ceremony must follow a prescribed ritual sequence. The ritual shelter is constructed first, followed by the erection of the cây nêu. Once the shelter has been completed, temporary raised platforms are built to accommodate the young men during the preparation period. In the past, constructing the ritual shelter and cây nêu was relatively straightforward because timber, lồ ô bamboo, and rattan were readily available in the surrounding forests. Today, however, the depletion of forest resources has made these materials increasingly difficult to obtain, requiring villagers to travel farther into the forest or substitute them with alternative materials. This transformation reflects the direct impact of environmental change on the continuity and practice of traditional ritual life among the Ca Dong.

One of the earliest tasks in the preparation process is the brewing of rượu cần (jar of rice wine). Traditionally, the Ca Dong prepare their own fermentation starter using locally available ingredients before brewing the wine, which is then fermented in ceramic jars for one to two days prior to its use in the ceremony. Only after the jar wine has been prepared do the village's young men enter the forest to collect materials for constructing the ritual shelter and erecting the cây nêu (ritual pole). From the initial preparation of the wine to the completion of the buffalo sacrifice, the entire ceremonial process typically extends for more than one week. Throughout this period, the host family is required to observe a number of ritual taboos to preserve the sacredness and ritual efficacy of the ceremony.

Compared with those erected during major communal festivals, the cây nêu used in the village taboo ceremony is relatively simple in design. It generally consists of a straight wooden pole with several crossbars or basic decorative elements. Today, many community members are no longer able to explain the symbolic significance of each component of the ritual pole, but continue to construct it in accordance with customs handed down from previous generations. This suggests that while the external form of the ritual has been largely preserved, the symbolic knowledge associated with it has gradually diminished. Nevertheless, the continued presence of the cây nêu demonstrates that it remains an important symbol of sacred space within the religious life of the Ca Dong people.

The central rite of the village taboo ceremony is the buffalo sacrifice. According to traditional belief, the buffalo selected for sacrifice must be healthy and must not die before the ritual is formally performed. After the ritual officiant has completed the invocations to the Sky Yang, the Earth Yang, and other deities, inviting them to witness the ceremony, the village's young men proceed to slaughter the buffalo as the sacrificial offering. The buffalo's blood is collected in a bronze vessel for use in subsequent ritual performances, while its head is hung on the cây nêu or within the ritual shelter as an offering to the deities.

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The use of the buffalo as the sacrificial animal reflects its exceptional importance in both the economic and religious life of the Ca Dong. The buffalo is regarded not only as the household's most valuable possession but also as the most prestigious offering that can be presented to the Yang. Consequently, buffalo sacrifice is understood as a symbolic exchange between the human community and the supernatural realm, whereby the community offers its most valuable possession in return for divine protection, good health, prosperity, and peace.

Following the sacrificial rite, the distribution and consumption of the buffalo's body parts are governed by a well-defined set of ritual rules. On the first day, villagers typically consume the meat, liver, and bones, while the head and legs are prepared on the second day. The brain, tongue, and kidneys, however, are reserved exclusively for the host family after the completion of the ritual offerings. According to the Ca Dong people belief, these organs embody the life force and spiritual essence of the sacrificial animal and must therefore be offered to the Yang before they may be consumed by humans. This practice clearly reflects the principle that the deities receive the sacrificial offerings before the human community, while also illustrating the symbolic meanings attributed to different parts of the sacrificial animal's body.

During the village taboo ceremony, the community also erects temporary barriers at the entrances to the village and around the residential area. The taboo period generally lasts from four to five days, during which outsiders are prohibited from entering or leaving the village without permission. Anyone violating this restriction is required to provide a compensatory offering typically a pig which is then shared among all village households. These ritual barriers function not merely as physical boundaries but also as symbolic markers separating sacred space from the ordinary world. The temporary isolation of the community reflects the belief that the ritual space must remain pure and intact for the villagers' prayers and offerings to be effectively received by the Yang.

Another distinctive feature of the ceremony is the application of the sacrificial animal's blood to the legs or bodies of community members. This ritual act is believed to purify and protect participants, safeguarding them from illness and harmful supernatural forces. From an anthropological perspective, it represents a ritual transfer of sacred power from the sacrificial animal to human participants, a practice commonly found in sacrificial traditions throughout the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

If illness or misfortune persists after the village taboo ceremony, the Ca Dong may perform an additional ritual involving the hanging of dog heads at the village gate. Two dog heads typically from dogs of the same color, most commonly black are suspended on either side of the entrance, together with ritual fences and bamboo barriers blocking the pathway into the village. In Ca Dong cosmology, dogs are regarded as animals capable of repelling malevolent spirits and perceiving supernatural beings. Consequently, the hanging of dog heads is intended to prevent evil spirits and disease from entering the community's residential space. This ritual reflects the Ca Dong's belief in the protective power of sacred animal symbols within their traditional religious worldview.

Closely associated with the Ca Dong's notions of communal safety and prosperity is the careful selection of village locations. When a village repeatedly experiences misfortunes such as epidemics, a high mortality rate, or successive crop failures, the village elder performs a divination ritual to identify a new settlement site. Two pieces of lồ ô bamboo are used as divinatory objects; if they fall parallel to one another and in the same direction, the outcome is interpreted as an auspicious sign indicating a favorable location for settlement. Only after receiving this positive omen does the community proceed to clear the land, construct houses, and build a nhà rông (communal house). This practice demonstrates that the Ca Dong's choice of settlement is determined not only by environmental conditions but also by religious beliefs and ritual considerations.

In addition to buffalo sacrifice, the Ca Dong perform another ritual practice during village taboo ceremonies involving the hanging of the liver and certain internal organs of the sacrificial animal. After the buffalo or pig has been butchered, portions of the liver, heart, or gallbladder are placed in a woven bamboo basket together with unhusked rice, rice grains, and leaves before being hung at the entrance of the house, on the main roof beam, or within the ritual space. This act signifies to the Yang that the household or the community has fulfilled its obligation to present the prescribed sacrificial offerings. In large-scale communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies, the buffalo's liver, horns, and several other body parts are typically displayed in the nhà rông or within the village's communal ritual space. These practices demonstrate that the sacrificial animal functions not merely as an offering to the deities but also as a tangible medium through which the community maintains its relationship with the supernatural world. At the same time, they reaffirm the sacred character of ritual practice within the traditional cultural life of the Ca Dong.

2.2. The Buffalo Sacrifice Custom at the Household Level

In addition to its communal form, the buffalo sacrifice custom of the Ca Dong is also practiced at the household level, primarily in connection with healing rituals and protective ceremonies intended to restore health and ward off misfortune affecting members of the family. According to traditional Ca Dong beliefs, illness is not solely attributed to natural causes but may also result from the disturbance of malevolent spirits or the displeasure of the Yang (deities or guardian spirits). Consequently, when a family member suffers from prolonged illness, a serious disease, or other unexplained afflictions, the household may organize a buffalo sacrifice ceremony to seek the protection and blessings of the Yang for the recovery of the sick person.

Unlike the communal buffalo sacrifice ceremony, this ritual is conducted within the household and is attended primarily by close relatives, including members of the extended family, together with a group of physically capable young men from the village who

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assist with labor-intensive tasks such as constructing the ritual shelter, erecting the cây nêu (ritual pole), collecting firewood, and preparing the ceremonial space. Although intended primarily as a household healing ritual, the ceremony continues to follow the traditional three-day sequence observed in communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies.

The first day is devoted to gathering construction materials, erecting the cây nêu, and building the ritual shelter. Unlike communal ceremonies, which are held at the nhà rông (communal house), the ritual pole and shelter for household ceremonies are erected in the courtyard of the patient's home. This domestic space is thereby transformed into a sacred ritual setting where offerings are presented to the Yang and the buffalo sacrifice is performed.

On the second day, the household conducts the principal ritual offerings and hosts a ceremonial feast attended by relatives and members of the extended kin group. According to customary practice, the host family performing the ritual must partake of the sacrificial food before it is distributed to other households within the lineage. Because the household ceremony is considerably smaller in scale than its communal counterpart, a substantial amount of buffalo meat often remains after the feast. The remaining meat is traditionally preserved by drying for later consumption, while the buffalo's head and legs are retained for preparation and consumption on the following day.

A distinctive feature of the household buffalo sacrifice ceremony is the ritual of placing the buffalo's head on the altar dedicated to the Yang, which is attached to the cây nêu (ritual pole) a practice that is absent from communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies. According to Ca Dong belief, communal ceremonies involve the participation of the entire village; consequently, the buffalo's head is typically prepared and consumed on the same day rather than being offered separately to the deities. In contrast, during household healing rituals, the buffalo's head becomes a sacred offering presented to the Yang to seek divine protection and the recovery of the sick family member. At the same time, the buffalo's liver is suspended from the upper part of the bamboo wall of the house as a sacred symbol intended to enhance the ritual efficacy of the ceremony. On the third day, members of the extended family gather to consume the buffalo's head together, thereby completing the ritual cycle and symbolically sharing the blessings bestowed by the Yang.

Within the household protective (kiêng) ritual, certain internal organs of the buffalo—notably the brain, tongue, and kidneys are regarded as the most important sacrificial offerings. The brain is kept intact, while half of the tongue and kidneys are reserved for preparation and consumption by the host family only after the ritual offerings to the Yang have been completed. According to Ca Dong belief, the deities must "partake of the offerings first," while humans may consume them only afterward; only by observing this ritual order can the ceremony attain its intended efficacy and the Yang grant the family good health, protection, and well-being. This belief reflects the community's profound conviction that the deities play a central role in safeguarding human health, while also illustrating the close interrelationship between religious belief, sacrificial ritual, and the spiritual life of the Ca Dong.

2.3. The Buffalo Sacrifice Custom in Agricultural Rituals

2.3.1. Buffalo Sacrifice in the Rain-Praying Ceremony

In traditional Ca Dong society, swidden cultivation constituted the principal economic activity and was highly dependent upon natural conditions, particularly land, water resources, and climatic patterns. Consequently, alongside their indigenous agricultural knowledge, the Ca Dong developed a system of agricultural rituals intended to seek the protection and blessings of supernatural beings over the cultivation process. These rituals reflect the Ca Dong worldview, in which humans, nature, and the spiritual realm exist in a close and mutually dependent relationship. Through ritual offerings, prayers, and the observance of ritual taboos, the community seeks the protection of the Sky Yang, the Earth Yang, and other supernatural beings in the hope of securing favorable harvests, social well-being, and the continued prosperity of the community.

Within the agricultural cycle, water occupies a particularly significant role in ensuring crop growth and productivity. Consequently, prolonged periods of drought are commonly interpreted as signs of an imbalance in the relationship between humans and the supernatural world. When severe water shortages occur, the community performs a rain-praying ceremony to petition the Yang for rainfall, thereby ensuring sufficient water for both agricultural production and daily life. The ceremony is typically conducted beside major rivers or streams, which are regarded as the dwelling places of water deities.

In preparing the ritual offerings, villagers fashion a small ceremonial boat from a banana sheath. Placed inside the boat are a newly hatched yellow chick, several anthropomorphic figurines, and a symbolic representation of a buffalo molded from black tree resin. According to Ca Dong belief, the chirping of the chick serves as a medium through which human prayers are conveyed to the deities, while the buffalo effigy symbolizes abundance, agricultural strength, and the fertility of future harvests.

During the ceremony, the ritual officiant presents offerings and recites prayers requesting timely rainfall, favorable weather, healthy crop growth, and peace and prosperity for the village. Upon the completion of the invocation, the ceremonial boat is released to drift downstream. This symbolic act represents the transmission of the community's prayers to the Yang who govern rivers, streams, and water sources.

Although the rain-praying ceremony does not invariably include the sacrifice of a buffalo, the buffalo nevertheless occupies an important symbolic place within the ritual as a sacred representation of agricultural prosperity. In years marked by severe natural

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disasters or when the community organizes large-scale ceremonies to petition the deities for rain and the protection of crops, a buffalo may be selected as the sacrificial offering. This practice demonstrates the close relationship between the buffalo sacrifice custom and the agricultural belief system of the Ca Dong, while also reflecting the community's understanding of the central role played by the Yang in sustaining agricultural production and, ultimately, the continuity of community life.

2.3.2. Buffalo Sacrifice in the New Rice Festival (Choong Ó Nao)

After the rice harvest has been completed and the newly harvested grain has been stored, the Ca Dong perform the New Rice Festival (Choong Ó Nao) to express their gratitude to the Sky Yang, the Earth Yang, and their ancestors for blessing the community with a successful harvest. This is one of the most important rituals in the traditional agricultural cycle of the Ca Dong, marking the completion of one cultivation season and the beginning of a new agricultural cycle.

The New Rice Festival is traditionally celebrated first at the household level. During the ceremony, women are responsible for pounding the newly harvested rice, cooking the new rice, and preparing the ritual offerings, while men undertake hunting, fishing, and the preparation of dishes for the ceremonial feast. The offerings typically consist of the first agricultural products of the season, including newly harvested rice, rượu ghè (jar wine), fish, meat, and other foods produced by the household. Through these offerings, the household head expresses gratitude to the deities and prays for overflowing granaries, continued agricultural abundance, good health, and prosperity for the family.

One of the ritual offerings commonly presented during the New Rice Festival is bamboo rat meat. According to Ca Dong folk belief, the bamboo rat is an animal that burrows underground and lives within the earth. Offering its meat therefore symbolizes the fertility of the soil and the regenerative power of cultivated land. Through this symbolic offering, the community expresses its hope for abundant harvests and an increasingly prosperous livelihood in the years to come.

Following the completion of the household rituals, many families join the communal celebration held at the nhà rông (communal house) or in the village's common gathering space. Villagers share cơm lam (bamboo-tube rice), drink rượu ghè, perform gong music (cồng chiêng), and celebrate the fruits of their labor after a year of agricultural production. The communal celebration serves not only as an occasion to express gratitude to the Yang but also as an important means of reinforcing social relationships and strengthening solidarity among members of the community.

In years of exceptionally abundant harvests, or when the New Rice Festival is combined with major village celebrations, the community may perform a buffalo sacrifice. The buffalo is regarded as the most prestigious sacrificial offering that can be presented to the Yang, symbolizing the community's deepest respect and gratitude for the deities' blessings upon agricultural production. Following the sacrificial rite, the buffalo meat is prepared and distributed among the households participating in the celebration. Consequently, the buffalo sacrifice performed during the New Rice Festival embodies not only religious significance but also the principles of resource sharing, communal solidarity, and the Ca Dong's collective aspiration for prosperity, abundance, and social well-being.

3. TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BUFFALO SACRIFICE CUSTOM IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

3.1. Changes in Community and Household Level Rituals

In the contemporary context, the buffalo sacrifice custom of the Ca Dong has undergone profound transformations under the combined influence of economic, social, and environmental changes.

Among the Ca Dong of Tà Ka Village, these transformations are particularly evident in the scope of ritual practice, the scale of ceremonial organization, and the social functions performed by the ritual. Whereas in traditional society the buffalo sacrifice constituted a central institution of communal life performed during major occasions such as the inauguration of a new nhà rông (communal house), village taboo ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and post-harvest festivals today its practice has contracted considerably and survives primarily at the household level.

This transformation is closely associated with changes in the traditional social organization and cultural landscape of the community. In the past, the nhà rông functioned not only as the center of communal life but also as the principal sacred space for conducting large-scale sacrificial ceremonies. It served as the focal point of traditional institutions, including the authority of village elders, customary law, and mechanisms of communal cohesion. However, the traditional nhà rông no longer exists in Tà Ka Village today, resulting in the erosion of the cultural environment and ritual space that once provided the institutional foundation for maintaining buffalo sacrifice ceremonies at the community level. As this central ritual space has disappeared, many of the ceremonies historically associated with it have gradually diminished or ceased altogether.

At the same time, socioeconomic development and the expansion of the modern administrative system have fundamentally reshaped the organization of community life. Whereas buffalo sacrifice ceremonies were formerly coordinated by village elders and conducted in accordance with customary law, many collective activities are now organized through formal local administrative institutions. The declining authority of traditional institutions has made it increasingly difficult to sustain rituals that require substantial communal resources and the collective participation and consensus of the entire village. As a result, large-scale communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies are no longer performed as regularly as they once were.

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Another important factor contributing to these transformations is the changing demographic composition of the community. In the past, Tà Ka Village was inhabited predominantly by the Ca Dong, creating a relatively homogeneous cultural environment characterized by shared religious beliefs and ritual practices. Today, however, the village has become a multi-ethnic residential community comprising not only the Ca Dong but also the Kinh, Mường, Tày, Nùng, Dao, and Brâu, together with an increasing number of interethnic marriages. This long-term process of coexistence and cultural interaction has enhanced cultural diversity while simultaneously reducing the homogeneity of the traditional belief system. Within this context, communal rituals that once required the participation of the entire village such as the village taboo ceremony and communal buffalo sacrifice have become increasingly difficult to sustain because the various ethnic groups no longer share a common set of religious beliefs and ritual obligations.

These transformations are clearly reflected in the virtual disappearance of large-scale communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies, including the village taboo ceremony and the celebration marking the completion of a new nhà rông. In particular, the village taboo ceremony, which traditionally functioned to protect the community from epidemics, natural disasters, and other forms of collective misfortune, has undergone a marked decline. In traditional Ca Dong society, illness and adversity were commonly interpreted as resulting from supernatural causes, such as the displeasure of the Yang or the interference of malevolent spirits. Consequently, the community performed buffalo sacrifice rituals to seek the protection and blessings of the deities. However, with the expansion of modern healthcare services, local understandings of the causes of illness and appropriate methods of treatment have changed substantially. When illness occurs, community members now primarily seek treatment through medical institutions rather than relying on communal ritual practices as they once did. This transformation indicates that some of the practical functions formerly fulfilled by ritual have gradually been assumed by modern social institutions.

Furthermore, the depletion of forest resources has had a direct impact on the practice of buffalo sacrifice. In the past, ritual materials such as timber, lồ ô bamboo (*Bambusa balcooa*), rattan, and thatching grass could be readily collected from nearby forests. Today, however, the decline of natural forest areas, together with increasingly stringent government regulations on forest resource exploitation, has made it considerably more difficult to acquire the materials required for ritual performance. As a result, the costs of organizing these ceremonies have increased, contributing further to the declining frequency of traditional ritual practices.

Although communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies have largely disappeared, the custom itself has not vanished entirely. Instead, it has been preserved primarily within household-level healing and protective (kiêng) rituals. Fieldwork findings indicate that buffalo sacrifice is now most commonly performed in cases where a family member suffers from a serious illness, has undergone prolonged but unsuccessful medical treatment, or has been discharged from hospital without prospects for further recovery. Under such circumstances, the ritual serves as an important source of spiritual support for the family, expressing their faith in the protection of the Yang and their ancestors. On average, only one or two households in Tà Ka Village perform a buffalo sacrifice each year for healing or protective purposes.

From the perspectives of cultural studies and anthropology, the transformation of the buffalo sacrifice custom should not be understood merely as the decline of a traditional cultural practice. Rather, it reflects the adaptive capacity of an indigenous belief system in response to the profound social changes of the contemporary period. Whereas buffalo sacrifice formerly fulfilled multiple functions including religious devotion, the reinforcement of communal solidarity, the regulation of social relationships, and the affirmation of ethnic identity its communal and social functions have now diminished substantially. By contrast, its spiritual function, together with its role in providing psychological support and fulfilling the religious needs of individuals and households, has remained largely intact. This transformation illustrates a broader shift from a community-based ritual to a household-centered one, and from a ritual serving broad social functions to one primarily concerned with specialized spiritual and therapeutic needs in contemporary Ca Dong society.

3.2. Transformations in Traditional Agricultural Rituals

Compared with community- and household-level rituals, the transformation of the buffalo sacrifice custom within the sphere of agricultural rituals has been more profound and comprehensive, as it is directly associated with changes in the production system and livelihood strategies of the Ca Dong.

In traditional Ca Dong society, the livelihoods of communities in the Bờ Y area were based primarily on swidden cultivation. The entire agricultural cycle from selecting cultivation sites, clearing and burning swidden fields, sowing, crop tending, to harvesting was embedded within a comprehensive system of traditional agricultural beliefs and rituals. Within this context, ceremonies for praying for favorable harvests, celebrating the New Rice Festival, and holding post-harvest communal feasts not only fulfilled important religious functions but also provided the social framework for organizing large-scale communal buffalo sacrifice ceremonies.

Since the 1990s, however, the implementation of sedentary settlement policies, the expansion of irrigated rice cultivation, and the support provided through socioeconomic development programs have gradually transformed agricultural production among the Ca Dong, Bờ Y Commune. Traditional swidden cultivation has increasingly been replaced by wet-rice farming. This transition has

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fundamentally altered the relationship between people and their natural environment. Whereas agricultural production was previously highly dependent upon rainfall and other unpredictable natural conditions, improved access to irrigation systems, high-yield crop varieties, and modern agricultural technologies has enabled villagers to exercise far greater control over the production process. As dependence on natural forces has declined, the cultural and religious foundations that once sustained traditional agricultural rituals have correspondingly weakened.

The transformation is most evident in the rain-praying ceremony. In traditional Ca Dong society, this ritual constituted an important communal response to drought, through which villagers petitioned the Yang (deities) to send rain and ensure the healthy growth of crops. Although buffalo sacrifice was not an obligatory component of every rain-praying ceremony, the image of the buffalo consistently appeared as a sacred symbol of abundance, agricultural productivity, and fertility. In years marked by severe natural disasters or when large-scale communal ceremonies were organized to pray for favorable harvests, the buffalo was regarded as the preferred sacrificial animal. Today, however, the rain-praying ceremony is no longer practiced. According to the Ca Dong, whereas drought, crop pests, and harvest failures were once commonly attributed to the will of supernatural beings, villagers now have increasing access to scientific knowledge concerning climate, irrigation, and agricultural techniques. This transformation suggests that changes in local perceptions, together with advances in science and technology, have gradually supplanted many forms of indigenous ecological knowledge in the contemporary context.

A similar process of transformation can be observed in the New Rice Festival. Although the ceremony continues to be practiced, its scale and mode of organization have changed considerably. In the past, following the completion of the harvest, numerous households participated in communal rituals and celebratory feasts held at the *nhà rông* (communal house). During years of abundant harvests or on the occasion of major village festivals, buffalo sacrifice could be performed as an expression of gratitude to the Yang for their blessings upon agricultural production. Today, by contrast, the New Rice Festival is celebrated primarily within individual households or extended kin groups on a much smaller scale. Ritual offerings generally consist of agricultural products produced by the household, while buffalo sacrifice has almost entirely disappeared from the ceremony. This transformation reflects a broader tendency toward the simplification of ritual practice and the gradual abandonment of costly sacrificial rites in response to contemporary economic conditions and changing patterns of social life.

In addition to changes in agricultural production practices, the continuing decline in natural forest areas has further reduced the ecological and cultural setting in which traditional agricultural rituals have been practiced. Much of the indigenous knowledge associated with selecting swidden fields, forecasting weather conditions, conducting agricultural rituals for favorable harvests, and observing ritual taboos in cultivation is no longer practiced on a regular basis. Today, most of this knowledge survives only in the memories of the older generation. This situation indicates a partial disruption in the intergenerational transmission of traditional cultural knowledge within the Ca Dong community.

Nevertheless, these transformations do not signify the complete disappearance of buffalo sacrifice within agricultural ritual practices, as certain elements of the tradition continue to be maintained in specific contexts. Fieldwork findings indicate that some households continue to organize post-harvest feasts or thanksgiving rituals to express gratitude to the Yang following abundant harvests, particularly among families that still practice upland rice cultivation on farmland located in border areas or on swidden fields borrowed across the border in Laos. In such cases, when buffalo sacrifice is performed, it serves primarily as an expression of gratitude, a means of invoking good fortune, and a way of maintaining customary traditions, rather than fulfilling its former function of ritually regulating agricultural production. Moreover, the scale of these ceremonies has shifted from community-wide events to rituals conducted within individual households or extended kin groups.

From a cultural studies perspective, the transformation of the buffalo sacrifice custom within agricultural rituals reflects the broader transition from a subsistence-based swidden economy to a more stable agricultural system that is increasingly integrated into the market economy. Whereas buffalo sacrifice once constituted an integral component of the traditional agricultural belief system helping to maintain a symbolic balance among humans, nature, and the Yang this function has now diminished considerably. Instead, the buffalo sacrifice custom is gradually being reconstituted as a cultural symbol that evokes collective memory and traditional values, while continuing to embody spiritual beliefs and contribute to the preservation of Ca Dong cultural identity amid the profound social transformations of the contemporary era.

4. ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE VALUES OF THE BUFFALO SACRIFICE CUSTOM IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

4.1. Emerging Issues

The present study of the buffalo sacrifice custom in the cultural life of the Ca Dong indicates that its ongoing transformation has given rise to several important issues.

First, the socio-cultural environment that traditionally sustained the buffalo sacrifice custom has been progressively diminishing. In traditional Ca Dong society, the ritual was closely associated with the *nhà rông* (communal house), customary law, the authority of village elders, and indigenous forms of community organization. However, changes in settlement patterns, the declining influence

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of traditional institutions, and the emergence of multi-ethnic residential communities have gradually undermined many of the social conditions that once ensured the continuity of these rituals. As a consequence, the buffalo sacrifice custom is increasingly losing the cultural environment in which it was naturally embedded and practiced.

Second, the transition from swidden cultivation to irrigated rice farming and market-oriented economic activities has substantially weakened the traditional agricultural belief system. Many rituals formerly associated with the agricultural cycle, including rain-praying ceremonies, rituals for favorable harvests, and post-harvest communal celebrations, no longer occupy a central position in agricultural production and community life. As the socioeconomic foundations of these agricultural rituals have changed, the buffalo sacrifice custom has gradually lost one of its most important contexts of ritual practice.

Third, the processes of modernization and the expansion of education, healthcare, and scientific and technological knowledge have fundamentally altered local understandings of nature, illness, and spiritual life. Practical functions that were traditionally entrusted to ritual such as invoking rainfall, curing illness, or protecting the community from misfortune have now largely been assumed by modern social institutions. Consequently, the social functions of the buffalo sacrifice custom have been significantly reduced, and the ritual has come to exist primarily as a spiritual and symbolic practice.

Fourth, the intergenerational transmission of traditional cultural knowledge is increasingly at risk of disruption. Because many rituals are no longer performed regularly, younger generations have fewer opportunities to participate in, observe, and learn the knowledge associated with the buffalo sacrifice custom, including ritual chants, sacrificial procedures, the construction of the cây nêu (ritual pole), codes of conduct governing ritual performance, and the symbolic meanings attached to individual ritual elements. Without appropriate mechanisms for documentation and transmission, many of the cultural values embodied in the buffalo sacrifice tradition may gradually disappear.

Fifth, contemporary efforts to preserve the buffalo sacrifice custom require a careful balance between safeguarding traditional cultural heritage and responding to evolving legal frameworks, ethical considerations, concerns for animal welfare, and policies promoting a civilized cultural life at the grassroots level. Addressing this challenge requires a flexible and context-sensitive approach that both respects the community's right to maintain its cultural practices and ensures their compatibility with the values and conditions of contemporary society.

4.2. Recommendations for Preserving and Promoting the Traditional Values of the Buffalo Sacrifice Custom

First, greater efforts should be devoted to the collection, documentation, inventory, and digital preservation of materials related to the Ca Dong buffalo sacrifice custom. Establishing a comprehensive database of ritual chants, ceremonial procedures, indigenous knowledge, and the memories of village elders, ritual specialists, and other knowledgeable community members would contribute significantly to safeguarding cultural values that are increasingly at risk of disappearance. Such a database would also provide valuable resources for future research and for the education and transmission of traditional cultural heritage.

Second, the preservation of the buffalo sacrifice custom should be guided by the principles of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, with emphasis placed on preserving its cultural values, indigenous knowledge, symbolic meanings, and social functions rather than reconstructing all forms of traditional animal sacrifice in their original form. Particular attention should be given to safeguarding ritual chants, gong music (cồng chiêng), xoang dance, the artistic traditions associated with the construction and decoration of the cây nêu (ritual pole), indigenous religious knowledge, and the communal values embodied in the ritual, as these constitute the core elements of the tradition.

Third, the central role of the Ca Dong community should be strengthened throughout the process of heritage preservation. All activities aimed at safeguarding and promoting the cultural values of the buffalo sacrifice custom should be based on the needs, aspirations, and active participation of the local community. Community members should be recognized not merely as beneficiaries of preservation initiatives but also as the principal custodians, practitioners, innovators, and transmitters of their cultural heritage to future generations.

Fourth, greater attention should be devoted to the transmission of traditional cultural knowledge to younger generations through appropriate educational approaches, including community cultural activities, folk culture clubs, extracurricular programs in schools, and locally based educational initiatives. Providing young people with opportunities to participate directly in cultural activities and experiential learning will help enhance their understanding of traditional culture, strengthen their sense of ethnic identity and cultural pride, and foster a stronger commitment to safeguarding their community's cultural heritage.

Fifth, the distinctive cultural values embodied in the buffalo sacrifice custom should be appropriately integrated into community cultural events, Great National Unity Day celebrations, traditional festivals, and programs promoting local culture. The symbolic representation of selected ritual elements in culturally appropriate forms can contribute to increasing public awareness of the Ca Dong culture while creating opportunities for traditional cultural values to continue being practiced and appreciated within contemporary society.

Sixth, cultural preservation should be linked to community-based tourism in a cautious and sustainable manner. The interpretation and presentation of cultural elements associated with the buffalo sacrifice custom should ensure authenticity, respect for indigenous

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cultural values, and avoid excessive commercialization or theatricalization. Such an approach would not only contribute to improving local livelihoods but also provide incentives for the Ca Dong community to take an active role in preserving and promoting its traditional cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

The buffalo sacrifice custom constitutes one of the most representative ritual and religious practices in the traditional cultural life of the Ca Dong community in Tà Ka Village, Bờ Y Commune. This ritual profoundly reflects the Ca Dong's animistic worldview, their perceptions of the relationships among humans, the Yang (deities), ancestors, and the natural environment, while also embodying the community's distinctive cultural, social, and spiritual values. In traditional society, the buffalo sacrifice was not merely a sacrificial rite expressing reverence and gratitude toward the Yang, but also an important social institution that strengthened communal solidarity, reinforced the authority of traditional institutions, regulated social relationships, and fulfilled the spiritual needs of the community.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the buffalo sacrifice custom was practiced in a variety of ritual contexts, ranging from communal ceremonies including celebrations of the completion of a new nhà rông (communal house), village taboo ceremonies, and post-harvest communal feasts to household rituals associated with healing, prayers for well-being, and protective (kiêng) ceremonies. The custom was also closely integrated into the traditional agricultural belief system through rain-praying ceremonies, thanksgiving rituals dedicated to the Yang, and the New Rice Festival. These findings indicate that buffalo sacrifice did not exist as an isolated cultural practice but rather formed an integral component of the broader cultural system of the Ca Dong, within which economic activities, social organization, religious beliefs, and the natural environment were closely interconnected.

However, alongside socioeconomic development, changes in livelihood strategies, and the transformation of the community's cultural environment, the buffalo sacrifice custom has undergone profound changes. The transition from swidden cultivation to irrigated rice farming, the decline of traditional agricultural rituals, changes in community organization, and the expansion of modern education, healthcare, and scientific knowledge have substantially reduced the contexts in which the ritual is practiced. Many forms of communal buffalo sacrifice, including village taboo ceremonies, celebrations of newly constructed nhà rông, and traditional agricultural rituals, are now rarely performed. Instead, the buffalo sacrifice custom survives primarily within the household sphere, particularly in healing and protective rituals, where both its scale and functions have changed considerably from those observed in the past.

From the perspectives of cultural studies and anthropology, these transformations should not be viewed simply as the decline or disappearance of a traditional cultural practice. Rather, they represent a process of adaptation and restructuring through which the buffalo sacrifice custom has responded to changing economic, social, and cultural conditions. Whereas the ritual once simultaneously fulfilled religious, social, economic, and community-building functions, its roles in community organization and the regulation of productive activities have diminished substantially. Conversely, its spiritual, symbolic, educational, and identity-affirming functions have continued to be maintained in forms that are more compatible with contemporary social conditions.

The transformation of the buffalo sacrifice custom demonstrates the dynamic nature and adaptive capacity of traditional culture in the course of social change. At the same time, it highlights the need for appropriate preservation strategies that respect the central role of the community as the bearer of its own cultural heritage while prioritizing the safeguarding of intangible cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, ritual practices, ceremonial chants, gong music (cồng chiêng), xoang dance, and the symbolic meanings embodied in the ritual. Preserving and promoting the positive cultural values of the buffalo sacrifice custom will not only contribute to safeguarding the cultural identity of the Ca Dong people but will also enrich the diversity and vitality of the cultural heritage of Vietnam's ethnic communities in the context of contemporary integration and development.

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