

Weddings in the Mekong Delta: Tradition and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Throughout historical vicissitudes, the Vietnamese people have consistently taken pride in their customs and traditions. These cultural practices have long constituted a distinctive national identity. Among them, wedding rituals occupy a significant place and display regional variations across Vietnam. In the Mekong Delta, wedding ceremonies represent a distinctive cultural form transmitted across generations and still actively maintained today.

This article provides an overview of traditional wedding rituals in the Mekong Delta, while examining their transformations in the context of contemporary integration and socio-economic change. It further analyzes the underlying causes of such transformations. Through this inquiry, the study affirms the enduring cultural values embedded in spiritual life and contributes to discussions on safeguarding cultural identity amid modernization.

Keywords: Wedding rituals; Mekong Delta; Tradition; Cultural transformation; Cultural ecology.

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the wedding ceremony has functioned as a traditional rite marking the beginning of married life. It serves as an occasion for both the groom's and the bride's families, along with relatives and friends, to offer blessings to the couple. Beyond its celebratory dimension, the wedding historically operated as a primary mechanism of social recognition for marriage. Traditional beliefs held that the longevity and prosperity of the marital union—including the hope for numerous descendants—depended in part upon the proper observance of wedding customs.

Over time, contemporary wedding ceremonies have come to encompass increasingly diverse procedures and formats. In this regard, the wedding also serves as an occasion for the bride and groom to gather and celebrate joyfully with their close friends. It provides an opportunity to strengthen social relationships and to create meaningful and memorable experiences that remain unique and unforgettable for the couple. Although present-day weddings are no longer governed by the strict customs and complex ritual prescriptions of the past, they have not lost the essential significance inherent in a wedding ceremony. The fundamental purpose and symbolic value of the ritual continue to be preserved, even as its forms have become more flexible and adapted to contemporary life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the broader trajectory of research on Vietnamese culture, wedding customs and family rituals have consistently attracted sustained scholarly attention. This interest stems from the recognition that a thorough understanding of such rites is fundamental to reinforcing family cohesion and maintaining social order.

A review of written sources indicates that numerous earlier studies laid the groundwork for the systematization of Vietnamese life-cycle rituals. A seminal contribution in this regard is *Việt Nam phong tục* (Vietnamese Customs) by Phan Kế Bính (1990). Building upon this foundational work, subsequent scholarship expanded the scope of inquiry by engaging in comparative analyses between tradition and modernity, notably *Gia lễ xưa và nay* (Family Rituals Then and Now) by Phạm Côn Sơn (1999) and *Văn hoá phong tục* (Wedding Customs) by Hoàng Quốc Hải (2000).

In the 2000s, Bù Xuân Mỹ and Phạm Minh Thảo (2006) further enriched the corpus with Tục cưới hỏi (Wedding Customs). Overall, these preceding works primarily adopted descriptive, documentary, and synthetic approaches to wedding customs and ancestral worship practices among the Vietnamese at a general level. They constitute an important theoretical foundation upon which the present study builds, enabling a more in-depth analysis of the specific case of the Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long from the perspective of cultural transformation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded primarily in ethnographic inquiry, complemented by documentary analysis and historical–logical approaches in order to examine wedding practices from the perspective of tradition and cultural transformation.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork constitutes the principal methodological framework for data collection. Field investigations were conducted across selected communes and wards, including Rạch Giá, Vĩnh Thông, Giồng Riềng, Hòa Thuận, Long Xuyên, Tri Tôn, and Hà Tiên in An Giang Province.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, enabling the collection of in-depth qualitative accounts from community members directly involved in wedding practices. This methodological orientation facilitates an interpretive understanding of ritual performance, local perceptions, and the socio-cultural dynamics shaping contemporary transformations.

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis serves as a critical methodological component, providing both conceptual grounding and contextual orientation. The systematic review of written sources and prior scholarship on Vietnamese wedding customs - at the national level as well as within the Mekong Delta - allowed for the identification of established interpretive frameworks, key debates, and historiographical trajectories. This body of literature forms the theoretical foundation upon which the present analysis is constructed.

Historical and Logical Approaches

Given the study's focus on wedding practices as processes of continuity and transformation, the research situates its object of inquiry within a diachronic framework extending from traditional configurations to contemporary manifestations. The historical approach is employed to contextualize wedding rituals within specific socio-historical conditions, thereby elucidating patterns of persistence and change.

Concurrently, the logical approach is applied to analyze the internal structure of wedding practices and to clarify the dialectical relationship between traditional and contemporary forms. Through this integrated framework, the study seeks to illuminate not only empirical differences but also the structural interactions and adaptive mechanisms that underpin cultural transformation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws upon the theoretical framework of cultural ecology, a paradigm developed in the mid-twentieth century to explain the formation of cultural characteristics within specific environmental contexts. Cultural ecology focuses on the dynamic interrelationship among culture, the natural environment, and social organization, emphasizing that culture functions as an adaptive mechanism through which human communities respond to and negotiate environmental challenges.

The theory of cultural ecology is most closely associated with Julian Steward (1902–1972). In *Theory of Culture Change* (1955), Steward conceptualized ecology, in relation to human societies, as an analytical tool for understanding the ways in which environmental conditions shape cultural patterns. In order to distinguish his

approach from other perspectives employing related notions such as biological ecology, human ecology, or social ecology, he introduced the term “cultural ecology.”

According to Steward (1955, p.30), cultural ecology refers to processes of “adaptation to the environment.” His formulation centers on the adaptive strategies through which distinct cultures adjust to specific ecological settings. Rather than viewing culture as static or isolated, Steward’s framework underscores its functional and responsive character, shaped through ongoing interaction with environmental constraints and opportunities.

The Mekong Delta is a region endowed with favorable natural conditions, including a temperate climate and abundant ecological resources conducive to agricultural production. Historical accounts depict a landscape of relative material ease and environmental abundance. As noted by Nguyễn Hiến Lê (2002), local inhabitants once enjoyed a leisurely mode of subsistence: cultivating a modest plot of land was sufficient to secure an annual rice surplus; fish were so plentiful that even children could spear them in nearby waters; wild birds, turtles, and aquatic vegetation were readily accessible; and fuel resources such as bamboo, reed, and melaleuca were widely available.

Such ecological abundance contributed significantly to shaping what is often described as the generosity and openness characteristic of the region’s inhabitants. Moreover, the expansive spatial configuration of the Delta - with its vast rice fields, dense river networks, and open waterways—has been associated with a particular psychological disposition. Nguyễn Hiến Lê (2002, p. 125) evocatively portrays the sensory and emotional experience of navigating small canals or the great Mekong River: the lush gardens, rhythmic sounds of daily life, and the boundless horizon of water and sky foster a sense of vitality, expansiveness, and existential reflection.

From a historical perspective, the cultural configuration of the Mekong Delta did not emerge as an entirely autonomous system. Rather, it developed through processes of migration and settlement, as Vietnamese populations from northern and central regions relocated to the southern frontier. In adapting to the ecological conditions of this newly reclaimed land, migrants selectively modified inherited cultural forms, reshaping social practices to align with the environmental and economic realities of the Delta.

Accordingly, cultural practices in general - and wedding customs in particular-within the Mekong Delta both reflect significant influences from northern and central Vietnam and demonstrate processes of localized adaptation. These “transformations” can be understood as responses to the region’s distinctive ecological environment, illustrating the dynamic interplay between inherited tradition and environmental context.

Traditional Wedding Practices

“Mandatory” Rituals

The Lễ Dạm Ngõ (Preliminary Visit Ceremony)

The Lễ Dạm Ngõ - also known as the Lễ Coi Mắt - constitutes the opening rite in the sequence of traditional Vietnamese wedding ceremonies. It marks the first formal step in the marital process, signifying that the bride’s family has agreed to receive the groom’s family. The ceremony provides an official occasion for the parents of both parties to meet and discuss the prospective marriage of their children. At a symbolic level, the rite expresses the groom’s family’s acknowledgment and respect toward the young woman whom their son wishes to marry, as well as their formal request to welcome her into their lineage as a daughter-in-law.

On this occasion, the groom’s family typically dispatches close relatives - most often the parents and a few designated representatives - to the bride’s household. Offerings presented during the ceremony are generally modest yet symbolically meaningful, including betel leaves, areca nuts, rice wine, fruits, and small gifts. While it is customary, though not obligatory, for the groom’s family to reciprocally invite the bride’s family to visit their home after the ceremony, the essential outcome lies in the bride’s family’s acceptance. Upon preliminary approval, the groom’s family may discreetly inquire about the expected betrothal offerings for the forthcoming engagement ceremony. Concurrently, a diviner is consulted to determine the compatibility of the couple’s ages

and to select an auspicious date and time for the engagement, which is then communicated in advance to the bride's family.

From the perspective of cultural ecology, the adaptive character of this ritual is evident in both its material components and its procedural logic.

First, the ritual offerings reflect the utilization of locally available ecological resources. Symbolic items such as betel, areca, rice wine, and fruit are products closely associated with the orchard-based ecosystem of the Mekong Delta. Their use demonstrates the pragmatic orientation of agrarian communities, who mobilize locally accessible material culture to fulfill social and ceremonial obligations while minimizing economic burden at the initial stage of marital alliance formation.

Second, the inquiry regarding betrothal gifts may be interpreted as a negotiated redistribution of economic resources. Beyond its ritual appearance, this process functions as a mechanism for determining the scale of material investment required for the transfer of a woman's residential affiliation and productive labor within the traditional kinship structure. In this sense, the ceremony regulates the economic dimensions of alliance-making between two domestic units.

Third, the consultation of a diviner and the selection of an auspicious date reflect adaptation to natural and cosmological cycles. For wet-rice agricultural communities historically dependent on seasonal rhythms, the act of choosing a "propitious" time represents a spiritual strategy for mitigating environmental uncertainty. It embodies the aspiration to harmonize human agency (*nhân*) with cosmic order (*thiên*), thereby safeguarding the stability and continuity of the newly established familial unit.

Within the broader matrimonial process, the *Lễ Dạm Ngõ* may thus be understood as an initial adaptive mechanism—a low-risk exploratory phase through which two residential groups (the groom's and bride's families) assess the viability of establishing a durable alliance. In the ecological and settlement context of the riverine Delta, characterized by dispersed habitation patterns, this rite functions as a transitional step that formalizes social access and facilitates the integration of new human resources - the bride - into the groom's household economy.

The Lễ Ăn Hỏi (Betrothal Ceremony)

In the Mekong Delta, offerings presented during the *Lễ Ăn Hỏi* - also referred to as the engagement ceremony—are typically abundant and varied. They commonly include *bánh phu thê* (Husband and wife cakes), betel leaves and areca nuts, rice wine, roasted pork, boiled chicken, and a range of other food items. Each offering carries specific symbolic connotations, expressing the groom's family's sincerity and their wish for marital harmony and prosperity. The ceremony also provides an opportunity for the two families to engage in formal interaction, thereby deepening mutual understanding and consolidating relational ties.

As the engagement rite involves ancestral worship and constitutes a pivotal stage in the matrimonial process, both families are required to dress formally, traditionally in *khăn đóng* and *áo dài*. Following preliminary agreement between the two households, the *Lễ Ăn Hỏi* functions as a public and ritualized acknowledgment of the marital covenant before both the community and the ancestors. It marks a significant transition from an individual romantic relationship to the formal incorporation of two lineages, thereby expanding the social support network necessary for navigating environmental and socio-economic contingencies.

From the perspective of cultural ecology, the adaptive character of this ritual is most clearly manifested in its system of material offerings.

First, it is considered as an expression of economic capacity. The abundance of offerings such as roasted pork, boiled chicken, *bánh phu thê*, rice wine, and betel–areca—constitutes a symbolic display of economic surplus on the part of the groom's family. These items are products of wet-rice agriculture and household animal husbandry, subsistence strategies historically adapted to the fertile ecological conditions of the Mekong Delta. Through the ceremonial presentation of these goods, the groom's family demonstrates its capacity to mobilize

and manage natural resources effectively, thereby affirming its ability to provide for the bride and future generations.

Second, the ceremony carries connotations of fertility and survival. Beyond their symbolic value, these offerings embody aspirations for fertility and continuity. Livestock and agricultural products signify abundance, reproduction, and generational renewal—elements that are vital within agrarian communities reliant upon human labor for economic sustainability.

At the behavioral level, the prescribed attire (khăn đóng, áo dài) and the performance of ancestral rites represent a process of ritual standardization. In a society characterized by strong kinship bonds and ancestor veneration, formal dress does not merely fulfill aesthetic expectations; it signals adherence to hierarchical order and moral propriety. The ceremony thus affirms that the newly established alliance is sanctioned not only by the living but also by the spiritual realm, which is perceived as safeguarding lineage continuity and social stability across time.

Accordingly, the Lễ Ăn Hôi extends beyond expressions of emotional commitment. It may be interpreted as a structured ritual of resource transfer and the formal legitimization of a social contract. At this juncture, the alliance between two domestic economic units is consolidated on the basis of their demonstrated capacity to exploit, manage, and adapt to the surrounding natural environment.

Below is an academically structured description of a typical sequence of the Lễ Ăn Hôi in the Mekong Delta.

1	Procession of Offerings	On an auspicious date and at an auspicious hour previously agreed upon by both families, the groom’s family formally brings the betrothal offerings to the bride’s household. The timing, determined in accordance with ritual and cosmological considerations, marks the ceremonial commencement of the engagement rite.
2	Formal Greetings and Transfer of Offerings	Upon arrival, the bride’s family receives the offerings. Representatives of the two families exchange formal greetings. The male gift-bearers from the groom’s side ceremonially hand over the trays of offerings to their female counterparts from the bride’s side, who then carry them into the house. This structured exchange symbolizes reciprocity and balanced alliance formation.
3	Tea Reception and Formal Declaration	<p>During the tea reception, members of both families are formally introduced. A representative of the groom’s lineage articulates the purpose of the visit and formally presents the intention of marriage. Subsequently, the mothers of the bride and groom jointly open each tray of offerings, publicly acknowledging and validating the contents.</p> <p>At this stage, the groom’s mother presents the monetary contribution to the bride’s family as a gesture of shared responsibility in financing the forthcoming wedding ceremony. In parallel, she offers a traditional áo dài and jewelry set intended for the bride, symbolizing her formal acceptance into the groom’s lineage.</p>
4	Presentation of the Bride	Following the formal exchange, the bride is ceremonially escorted to greet both families. If an áo dài and jewelry have been presented, the groom accompanies the bride to change into the new attire before she reappears to formally pay respects. This act visually enacts her transitional status from daughter of her natal family to prospective daughter-in-law.
5	Ancestral Offering Ritual	Prior to the engagement day, the bride’s family prepares the ancestral altar. During the ceremony, the couple, together with the bride’s

		parents, offers incense to the ancestors to express filial piety and gratitude. The ritual includes ancestral invocation and, in some cases, the rite of lamp-lighting ceremony. This stage affirms that the marital alliance is witnessed and sanctioned not only by the living community but also by the ancestral realm.
6	Discussion of the Wedding Arrangements	After the ancestral rites, both families engage in detailed discussions regarding the forthcoming wedding ceremony, including the scale of offerings, logistics, and the specific date and time. This stage formalizes practical coordination between the two domestic units.
7	The Return of Offerings (Lại Quà)	Upon concluding discussions, the bride’s family performs the ritual of the return of offerings, returning a portion of the betrothal gifts to the groom’s family. This act reinforces reciprocity and prevents the symbolic imbalance of unilateral transfer.
8	Concluding Family Banquet	The ceremony concludes with a meal hosted by the bride’s family for the groom’s delegation. The banquet serves as an expression of gratitude and hospitality, consolidating goodwill between the two kinship groups.

The Lễ Đón Dâu (The Bride Reception Ceremony)

The Lễ Đón Dâu (also known as Nghinh Hôn) constitutes the principal and most consequential rite within the wedding complex of the Mekong Delta. During this ceremony, the groom’s family proceeds to the bride’s household to escort the bride to her new residence. If earlier rituals establish the legitimacy of alliance formation between two kin groups, the bride reception ceremony materializes that alliance through spatial transfer and social incorporation.

The timing of the groom’s procession is conditioned by the geographical distance between the two households. Environmental factors - particularly spatial separation within the riverine landscape - directly shape the organization and scheduling of the ritual. As the procession approaches the bride’s home, typically within several hundred meters, members pause to adjust their attire and reorganize their hierarchical formation. The matchmaker customarily leads, followed by the lineage elder, the groom, groomsmen, and other representatives of the patriline.

This act of sartorial adjustment and hierarchical ordering is not merely aesthetic. Rather, it functions as a mechanism of social adaptation within a structured kinship system. The shift from open movement in public space to formally ordered procession signals a transition from “free mobility” to “ritual interaction.” By reasserting rank and role before entering the symbolic territory of another lineage, the groom’s party minimizes the risk of symbolic disorder and affirms the legitimacy of alliance formation. In this sense, ritual choreography operates as an adaptive response to both social hierarchy and inter-lineage boundary maintenance.

Within the bride reception ceremony, several rites are performed, notably the lamp-lighting ritual, the ancestral rite, and the bowing ceremony.

The lamp-lighting ritual symbolizes the inauguration of a new domestic nucleus. In the cosmological framework of agrarian communities, fire represents life-sustaining energy. Lighting a pair of lamps signifies the balance of complementary forces (often interpreted through a yin–yang schema) and marks the establishment of a new hearth. Anthropologically, the hearth constitutes the core of the household economy: it is the site of food preparation, consumption, and the biological reproduction of the family line. Thus, this rite symbolically marks the formation of a new unit of production and reproduction embedded within a broader kinship structure.

The ancestral rite functions as a mechanism of spiritual incorporation. Through incense offerings at the ancestral altar, the bride formally petitions the ancestors of the groom’s lineage for recognition and protection. Within a

cultural ecological framework, ancestors may be understood as symbolic custodians of lineage resources—land, labor obligations, ritual authority, and social capital. The rite legitimizes the bride’s right of residence and her participation in the household economy, including her integration into systems of labor organization and redistribution of resources within the patriline.

The bowing ceremony represents the recognition of the newly established alliance by the living community. If the ancestral rite secures vertical integration with the lineage’s past, this ceremony ensures horizontal integration within the present social order. Through public acknowledgment, the couple is incorporated into networks of reciprocity and mutual obligation that sustain alliance formation beyond the two immediate households. This communal recognition guarantees access to broader systems of social support and resource exchange.

From the perspective of cultural ecology, as theorized by Julian Steward, the bride reception ceremony can be interpreted as a decisive rite of environmental transition. It marks the redistribution of human resources - specifically female reproductive and productive labor - from one ecological unit (the natal household) to another (the marital household). This transfer is fundamental to the continuity of agrarian household economies, where kinship structure, labor allocation, and intergenerational reproduction are tightly interwoven.

Accordingly, the Lễ Đón Dâu is not merely the emotional apex of the wedding day. It constitutes a structured process of ecological relocation and social reorganization, through which kinship ties are reconfigured, alliances are consolidated, and the circulation of labor and resources is stabilized within and between domestic units. In this sense, ritual practice operates as an adaptive strategy ensuring both social cohesion and ecological continuity in the Mekong Delta context.

The Tiệc Cưới (Wedding Banquet)

The Tiệc Cưới (also referred to as the Thành Hôn ceremony) is the final rite in the marriage process. It is the most significant ceremony conducted after the groom’s family selects an auspicious date and time, which the bride’s family considers convenient and formally accepts.

The wedding banquet provides an occasion for the two lineages to gather, celebrate, and offer blessings to the newlyweds. The wedding trays are typically elaborate, featuring numerous regional specialties, ranging from fresh seafood to traditional dishes such as lotus stem salad, fish hotpot. The Tiệc Cưới is not merely a feast; it is also an opportunity to express solidarity and cohesion between the two families.

The wedding banquet is regarded as the ritual that completes the process of alliance formation. It takes place at a carefully calculated moment based on natural cycles and the convenience of the community calendar (the selection of an “auspicious date”).

In essence, the banquet constitutes a form of ecological culinary practice. The lavish display of dishes represents the host household’s capacity to exploit and manage the natural environment. Regional specialties such as lotus stem salad, fish hotpot, and seafood do not appear randomly; rather, they directly reflect the wetland ecosystem and abundant aquatic resources of the Mekong Delta. Through the act of shared consumption (commensality), the two kin groups engage in the redistribution of economic surplus, transforming material resources (food) into social capital (solidarity), thereby ensuring mutual commitment and support between the two family networks in the future.

Thus, the Tiệc Cưới is not simply an occasion of entertainment; it functions as a structured mechanism for the redistribution of resources within and between kinship groups.

Post-Wedding Return Ceremony (Lễ Phấn Bái)

The Lễ Phấn Bái (also known as xá tội or lễ lại mặt) is performed on the third day following the bride reception ceremony. On this occasion, only the bride and groom return to the bride’s natal home to offer prayers at the ancestral altar and to ceremonially reopen the mâm trầu (betel tray).

This ritual operates as a mechanism of return, maintaining equilibrium within the structure of alliance formation. Although the bride has relocated to a new economic unit (her husband's household), the act of returning—accompanied by the betel tray—symbolically affirms that consanguineal ties and obligations to the natal household are not entirely severed. The ancestral invocation performed during this visit revalidates the couple's position within the generational continuity of the bride's lineage, thereby ensuring both moral and material support from both paternal and maternal sides.

Thus, the Lễ Phấn Bái should not be understood merely as a concluding rite, but as a mechanism for reinforcing the social survival network between two residential groups. It sustains relational balance within the kinship structure by preventing alliance formation from resulting in absolute rupture.

Distinctive Features of Wedding Practices in the Mekong Delta

Wedding Gate

The wedding gate is typically constructed from coconut leaves, banana trunks, coconut blossoms, areca flowers, and etc. These materials are locally sourced ecological resources. The wedding gate exemplifies a mode of adaptation grounded in the natural environment. Rather than relying on industrial or imported materials, residents of the riverine region maximize the use of abundant vegetation within the orchard ecosystem. The use of coconut leaves, banana stems, and areca inflorescences is not only economically practical but also reflects the integration of ritual space into the surrounding ecological landscape. The gate becomes a form of vegetal installation art, where the boundary between nature and culture is fluid.

Attire

Traditional dress áo dài and khăn đóng serves as a marker of social standardization and ritual formality. In a community that places strong emphasis on hierarchy and order, such attire affirms the ceremonial gravity of marriage and reinforces normative distinctions of status and propriety within the kinship structure.

Wedding Trays

Wedding trays are typically arranged in even numbers, ranging from four to twelve depending on the household's capacity. These trays commonly include tea, cakes, wine, and money. Beyond their material content, they function as instruments in the redistribution of resources between families, symbolizing reciprocity and economic cooperation within alliance formation.

Transportation

Means of transportation such as boats or xuồng ba lá (small three-plank sampans) are shaped directly by the hydrological terrain of the Mekong Delta. While overland bridal processions predominate in other regions of Vietnam, the dense river network of the Mekong Delta determines distinctive modes of movement. The use of boats represents a form of technological adaptation to a semi-flooded environment. The river functions not only as a source of livelihood but also as a cultural pathway, transforming the bride procession into a ritual journey on water and reflecting the riverine cultural orientation of the region.

Bánh Phu Thê (Husband and Wife Cake)

With its delicate form and sweet flavor, bánh phu thê is more than a wedding gift; it is a symbol of fertility and communal cohesion. Made from local agricultural products such as glutinous rice, coconut, and mung bean, the cake's soft and adhesive texture metaphorically represents the inseparable bond between husband and wife. In an agrarian society that depends heavily on human labor, such cohesion is essential for maintaining the stability of the household economy—the fundamental unit of production. Its square shape or wrapping in coconut leaves further evokes aspirations of harmony and completeness in conjugal life.

Overall, the distinctive features of weddings in the Mekong Delta are not merely aesthetic embellishments or arbitrary customs. They represent a direct reflection of the natural environment upon material culture. These

objects and rituals demonstrate the community's adaptive capacity in mobilizing local ecological resources to sustain not only material life but also spiritual and social continuity.

Specific Transformation

Within the cultural continuum of the Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta, the wedding has traditionally functioned not merely as a personal event but as a pivotal rite of passage marking adulthood and the attainment of social status. Under the accelerating forces of urbanization and socio-economic integration, however, this cultural institution has undergone profound transformations. These changes are neither isolated nor fragmentary; rather, they form a coherent process encompassing shifts in worldview, ritual structure, performance space, and material culture.

Shift in Cultural Consciousness: From Village Custom to the Coexistence of Legal and Customary Legitimacy

The most fundamental transformation occurs at the level of social perception concerning the legitimacy of marriage. In the traditional order, recognition by the village community - mediated through the proper performance of wedding rites - held supreme authority. Marital happiness, longevity ("to grow old together"), and fertility were widely believed to depend upon the correct and complete observance of customary procedures. The wedding ceremony thus functioned as the primary mechanism through which marriage was socially sanctioned, often carrying greater moral weight than written documentation.

In the contemporary period, the most significant shift has been the emergence and institutional authority of state law. Legally, a couple acquires formal protection upon registering their marriage. Yet an intriguing duality persists in the cultural consciousness of many residents of the Mekong Delta: even with a marriage certificate in hand, social recognition as husband and wife is often perceived to occur only after the public wedding ceremony has been held.

This transformation, therefore, does not represent a wholesale replacement of custom by law. Rather, it reflects a process of coexistence and mutual reinforcement. In many cases, the wedding ceremony is organized after legal registration, producing a dual foundation of legitimacy - juridical validation through state law and moral-cultural validation through communal ritual. The contemporary marriage thus rests upon a "double anchoring": legal rationality on one hand and customary affirmation on the other, illustrating how traditional normative systems adapt and persist within an expanding modern institutional framework.

Ritual Restructuring: Simplification and Adaptive Adjustment

If traditional weddings were characterized by a dense sequence of rituals extending over several days, contemporary weddings in the Mekong Delta are experiencing a pronounced process of streamlining. This transformation arises primarily from the need to adjust ceremonial practice to the tempo of industrial life and modern social organization.

Rather than unfolding over multiple days with numerous elaborate procedures, the structure of the wedding has been reduced and standardized into five principal rites: the preliminary visit, the engagement ceremony, the betrothal gift presentation, the bride reception, and the post-wedding return ceremony. Additional elements are now contingent upon the specific agreement between the two families. This restructuring reflects an adaptive recalibration of ritual density in response to constraints of time, labor mobility, and economic rationalization.

The intervention of local authorities through regulations promoting a "civilized lifestyle" has also played a significant role in shaping this transformation. Ceremonies such as the preliminary visit, engagement, and bride reception are encouraged to be organized in a simple and efficient manner, avoiding ostentation and waste while maintaining solemnity and celebratory spirit.

This development indicates that ritual change is not solely an endogenous cultural evolution but is also guided by institutional frameworks. In other words, the restructuring of wedding practices reflects a dual process:

internal adaptation to shifting socio-economic rhythms and external regulation by state governance. The contemporary wedding thus emerges as a negotiated form - situated at the intersection of tradition, modernity, and institutional oversight - demonstrating the capacity of ritual systems to reorganize while preserving core symbolic functions.

Spatial Transformation: From Domestic Space to Service-Oriented Venues

One of the most visible transformations in contemporary wedding practices is the shift in the spatial organization of the wedding banquet. Traditionally, within the agrarian landscape of the Mekong Delta, expansive garden compounds and household courtyards served as the primary venues for self-organized feasts. These events were deeply embedded in community reciprocity, characterized by collective preparation and neighborly cooperation, reflecting a subsistence-based household economy and dense local solidarity.

In recent decades, however - particularly in rapidly urbanizing centers such as Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên, Phú Quốc, and Long Xuyên - the organization of wedding banquets in commercial restaurants has become widespread and increasingly dominant. This relocation of ritual space from the domestic sphere to service-oriented venues reflects broader processes of urbanization, monetization, and the commodification of life-cycle ceremonies.

The transformation of space entails a parallel transformation of ritual script. When the ceremony moves from the sacralized environment of the family home to the managed environment of the restaurant, new performative elements are introduced. The bride and groom frequently enact Western-inspired symbolic gestures such as wine pouring, cake cutting, ring exchange, and public kissing before assembled guests. These practices, mediated by global cultural flows, coexist with older ritual forms but shift the aesthetic and experiential emphasis of the event.

Consequently, the wedding banquet undergoes a functional reorientation. Rather than serving primarily as an occasion of commensal redistribution within a kinship structure, it increasingly operates as a social event oriented toward peer networks, professional connections, and broader circles of acquaintances. The couple's interaction with friends and colleagues becomes central, and the banquet space functions as a platform for expanding and consolidating social capital beyond lineage-based alliance formation.

This spatial shift from domestic to commercial venues thus signals more than a logistical adjustment; it reflects a structural reconfiguration of ritual ecology. The wedding becomes embedded within a market-mediated environment, where household-based production yields to service provision, and communal labor exchange gives way to monetary transaction. Yet even within this service-oriented framework, the wedding continues to perform its core function of social integration -albeit within a transformed landscape shaped by urban modernity and global cultural circulation.

Transformations in Material Culture: Attire and the Preservation of Memory

The changing profile of weddings in the Mekong Delta is also vividly reflected through the lens of material culture, particularly in attire and visual representation.

Regarding dress, transformation has occurred along the lines of what may be termed "cultural parallelism." In lineage-centered rites such as the engagement ceremony, traditional identity continues to be strongly preserved through the wearing of the áo dài. However, the contemporary áo dài has undergone aesthetic modification: brighter colors, more elaborate dragon-and-phoenix embroidery, and refined tailoring reflect modern tastes while retaining symbolic continuity. In contrast, within the space of the modern wedding banquet, Western cultural influence becomes predominant. Brides frequently choose white wedding gowns featuring diverse silhouettes and intricate tailoring, often changing styles in accordance with international fashion trends.

This coexistence of traditional and Western attire reveals cultural flexibility: core ritual moments maintain visible markers of ethnic identity, while performative and socially oriented segments of the ceremony accommodate global aesthetics. The wedding thus becomes a site where local identity and transnational modernity intersect within a single ceremonial sequence.

Technological development has further reshaped how weddings are experienced and remembered. The desire to preserve memory has elevated photography and videography into indispensable components - effectively new ritualized practices within the wedding process. Unlike the simple documentary photographs of earlier decades, contemporary couples - particularly in urban centers - often invest in professionally staged pre-wedding photo sessions at scenic locations. The wedding becomes not only a rite of passage but also a curated visual narrative, designed to produce singular and aesthetically refined memories.

Taken together, these transformations illustrate a broader movement from “tradition” toward “modernity,” from relative insularity toward openness, and from ritual density toward procedural simplification. Although forms of organization have changed—through the reduction of ritual components, the relocation of banquets to commercial venues, and the adoption of Western bridal fashion - core values remain intact. Essential rites such as the *lễ gia tiên* (ancestral ceremony) and the post-wedding return visit continue to be observed with seriousness and reverence, reaffirming filial piety and the centrality of family cohesion.

The ongoing transformation of weddings in the Mekong Delta therefore demonstrates not cultural erosion but adaptive resilience. It exemplifies the capacity of Vietnamese riverine communities to negotiate modern influences while sustaining foundational principles of kinship solidarity and ancestral continuity.

Causes of Transformation

From the perspective of cultural anthropology - particularly when applying the lens of cultural ecology as developed by Julian Steward, as outlined in the theoretical framework—the transformation of wedding practices in the Mekong Delta is not a random or accidental phenomenon. Rather, it constitutes a dialectical process of human adaptation to changing environmental conditions, economic circumstances, and social structures.

Viewed through this analytical framework, ritual change must be understood as embedded within broader ecological and socio-economic transformations. Weddings, as a central life-cycle institution, are particularly sensitive to shifts in modes of subsistence, patterns of resource distribution, and configurations of kinship organization. Consequently, their contemporary modification reflects the dynamic interaction between cultural continuity and structural adjustment.

The following section provides an in-depth analysis of the core factors that have driven these transformations.

Ecological and Economic Shifts

The first foundational cause underlying the transformation of wedding structures lies in the transition from a traditional wet-rice agricultural civilization to an increasingly industrialized and urbanized mode of life. In the past, the Mekong Delta was commonly portrayed as an ecologically generous region, endowed with abundant natural resources and characterized by a subsistence system that afforded relative material sufficiency and seasonal leisure. This ecological context enabled households to organize multi-day wedding ceremonies featuring elaborate ritual sequences and large-scale feasts held within the domestic compound.

Within a predominantly agrarian household economy, labor rhythms were structured around agricultural cycles rather than industrial time discipline. As a result, ritual expenditures - in terms of time, labor mobilization, and material resources—could be redistributed across extended kin networks without severely disrupting subsistence activities. Weddings thus functioned not only as marital rites but also as mechanisms of alliance formation and symbolic redistribution of resources within the broader kinship structure.

However, under contemporary conditions of economic integration and market expansion, the tempo of everyday life has undergone substantial transformation. Wage labor, migration, and urban employment impose stricter temporal constraints, rendering the earlier mode of ritual “leisure” increasingly untenable. This shift constitutes a direct cause of ritual compression, as ceremonial forms are recalibrated to align with new socio-economic realities.

Instead of maintaining an extensive sequence of complex rites, communities have consciously streamlined wedding practices, condensing them into five essential ceremonies: preliminary visit, engagement ceremony, transfer of betrothal gifts, bride reception, and post-wedding reciprocal visit. The selective retention and elimination of ritual elements reflect not cultural loss per se, but strategic adaptation.

This transformation substantiates the central proposition articulated by Julian Steward: culture operates as an adaptive instrument through which human groups respond to environmental and economic pressures. As the economic environment shifts - from agrarian subsistence toward market-oriented production and urban-industrial organization - ritual culture necessarily undergoes structural simplification in order to remain socially viable.

Changes in Residential Space and Community Relations

The second major factor reshaping wedding forms is the transformation of residential space, more specifically the process of urbanization. In earlier periods, the spatial configuration of southern Vietnam - characterized by open landscapes and expansive rice fields - provided an ideal ecological and social setting for erecting temporary wedding pavilions within the domestic compound. Such spatial abundance facilitated the mobilization of neighbors and extended kin to participate collectively in food preparation and logistical arrangements, thereby reinforcing dense patterns of community solidarity embedded within the local kinship structure. Weddings functioned as communal events in which labor exchange and resource redistribution were enacted through reciprocal participation, strengthening alliance formation at both household and village levels.

In contemporary contexts, particularly in rapidly urbanizing centers such as Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên, Phú Quốc, and Long Xuyên, residential space has become increasingly constrained. The contraction of domestic spatial capacity has rendered home-based wedding feasts less feasible, making restaurant-hosted celebrations an increasingly normative and pragmatic alternative.

This spatial relocation - from the private household to the commercial restaurant venue - constitutes more than a geographical shift; it reconfigures the structure of social interaction within the wedding ritual. Under the restaurant model, the household economy's direct organization of food production and labor mobilization is replaced by service-based transactions mediated through the market. Consequently, forms of communal labor exchange give way to monetized service provision, altering the modes of redistribution of resources and participation among kin and neighbors.

Simultaneously, a range of performative and symbolically staged rituals has been incorporated into wedding ceremonies, including champagne tower pouring, cake cutting, and ceremonial toasting. These acts, often inspired by globalized wedding aesthetics, substitute for the former atmosphere of collective cooking and neighborhood collaboration. Rather than signaling cultural rupture, such transformations reflect adaptive recalibration to urban spatial constraints and the increasing commodification of ritual life. In this sense, the wedding becomes a site where alliance formation persists, yet is expressed through new symbolic registers compatible with an urbanized, service-oriented socio-economic environment.

Cultural Acculturation and the Trend toward Individualization

The third underlying cause stems from processes of cultural exchange and acculturation in the era of economic liberalization and global connectivity. Contemporary weddings are no longer shaped solely by inherited customary norms; they are also profoundly influenced by Western cultural models and transnational aesthetic standards.

This dynamic is most visibly expressed through dress and visual representation. Core rites such as engagement ceremony continue to preserve the traditional áo dài, albeit with stylistic innovations—brighter chromatic palettes and embroidered dragon-phoenix motifs that signal both continuity and reinterpretation. However, during the reception banquet, the modern bride typically prioritizes the white wedding gown (soiree), often elaborate in design and aligned with international fashion trends. The coexistence of the áo dài and the Western

bridal gown illustrates not a rupture, but a layered process of symbolic negotiation in which global aesthetics are selectively integrated into local ritual frameworks.

Beyond material culture, shifting value orientations further reshape the wedding institution. Whereas earlier weddings functioned primarily as affairs of the lineage and extended kin group - embedded within a broader kinship structure and oriented toward alliance formation between families - contemporary weddings increasingly foreground the experiential dimension of the bride and groom as individual subjects. The ritual focus thus partially shifts from collective affirmation of inter-household ties to the personalization of marital narratives.

Practices such as professional photography, cinematic videography, and outdoor photo sessions at scenic locations have become indispensable components of the modern ceremony. These activities are oriented toward the production and preservation of intimate memory, often framed as creating a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience unique to the couple. In economic terms, the household economy allocates substantial resources to image-making and symbolic display, reflecting a reconfiguration of ritual expenditure toward self-representation rather than solely toward communal redistribution of resources.

Taken together, these transformations indicate a gradual shift in value orientation from collectivism to individualism within the life-cycle ritual domain. While the wedding continues to serve as a mechanism for legitimizing marriage and sustaining inter-familial bonds, it simultaneously becomes a stage for the articulation of personal identity, emotional authenticity, and aesthetic self-expression—hallmarks of late-modern social organization.

The Impact of Institutions and Regulatory Policies

Finally, the role of social institutions and state regulatory policies in reshaping wedding culture cannot be overlooked. The transformation of wedding practices has not occurred solely as a spontaneous or bottom-up process; it has also been subject to normative orientation and institutional guidance. State authorities have promulgated regulations on the implementation of a “civilized lifestyle” in wedding organization, encouraging ceremonies that are solemn, joyful, wholesome, and economically restrained.

These regulations stipulate that procedures such as preliminary visit, engagement ceremony, and bride procession should be conducted in a “simple and concise” manner. Such policy interventions establish a new legal and moral framework that encourages communities to eliminate outdated customs and conspicuous displays of wasteful expenditure. In anthropological terms, this represents the formalization of ritual governance, wherein the state becomes an active agent in redefining acceptable forms of ceremonial practice.

Moreover, the institutional separation between marriage registration (the legal dimension) and the wedding ceremony (the affective and spiritual dimension) signals the expanding presence of the rule-of-law state in marital life. Legal marriage is validated through civil registration, while ritual marriage continues to operate as a mechanism of social recognition within the community. Despite this juridical differentiation, in popular consciousness the wedding ceremony remains central to legitimizing the conjugal bond before kin and society, reinforcing alliance formation between families and reaffirming the embeddedness of marriage within the broader kinship structure.

Viewed through the theoretical lens of cultural ecology articulated by Julian Steward, the transformation of weddings in the Mekong Delta should not be interpreted as rupture or rejection of tradition. Rather, it constitutes an inevitable process of cultural evolution driven by adaptive necessity. The deeper causes lie in human responses to new temporal pressures imposed by industrial society, the spatial contraction associated with urbanization, the aesthetic expansion fostered by globalization, and the behavioral recalibration encouraged by regulatory policy.

Although ritual forms may be simplified, restructured, or supplemented with newly imported elements, the ultimate purpose of the wedding endures: the public recognition of marital union and the collective aspiration for conjugal well-being. In this sense, continuity persists at the level of social function, even as external forms undergo structural transformation.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive review of the survey and analytical process confirms that Vietnamese weddings in the Mekong Delta are not merely cyclical life-cycle events, but constitute a dynamic cultural institution that vividly reflects the social landscape and moral consciousness of southern inhabitants. As a ritual nexus, the wedding articulates kinship structure, alliance formation, moral obligation, and symbolic redistribution of resources, thereby serving as a critical site for the reproduction of social order.

The transition from traditional to modern forms - manifested in the simplification of elaborate rites, the relocation of ceremonial space from the household to commercial service venues, and the incorporation of Western aesthetic elements - should not be interpreted reductively as cultural rupture or erosion. Rather, when examined through the lens of cultural anthropology and the theory of cultural ecology advanced by Julian Steward, these shifts represent a flexible and necessary adaptation mechanism. They reflect the community's response to the pressures of urbanization, market-oriented economic restructuring, and transformations in household economy and family organization.

Residents of the Mekong Delta, shaped by a riverine civilization characterized by openness and pragmatism, have actively engaged in processes of selective retention and recalibration—filtering inherited customs while preserving their ethical core—to construct a ritual model compatible with the accelerated tempo of industrial life and contemporary norms of civility. In this adaptive process, the wedding continues to mediate intergenerational continuity and inter-household reciprocity, even as its external configuration evolves.

Crucially, although the formal “outer layer” of the ritual has undergone modification, its axial value system remains resilient. Core rites such as ancestor veneration ceremony and post-wedding reciprocal visit are still conducted with solemnity, reaffirming enduring moral principles of filial piety, ancestral remembrance, and the cohesion of extended kin networks. The coexistence of civil marriage registration (legal validation) and the wedding ceremony (customary legitimation) illustrates a nuanced accommodation between national legal frameworks and local normative orders.

In sum, contemporary weddings in the Mekong Delta may be understood as a symphonic convergence of past and present. They demonstrate the vitality of Vietnamese culture—continuously transforming in order to endure, yet steadfast in safeguarding its foundational values. As such, the wedding ritual remains an anchoring institution, sustaining social recognition and conjugal legitimacy amid the ongoing flux of globalization and socio-economic change.

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