

Wooden Funeral Sculpture Program

PRESERVE AND PROMOTE THE CULTURAL BEAUTY OF BAHNAR & JRAI TOMB HOUSE STATUE

INFO SHEET FOR ARTIST

A. About Wooden Funeral Sculpture:

- Generally, **Wooden Funeral Sculpture** is the wooden sculpture displayed outside the tombs **during “lễ bở mả”** - the funeral festival, the last festival for the dead in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. After that, the wooden funeral sculptures together with the tombs, are left in the forest. For the Jrai and Bahnar people, the wooden funeral sculpture is a **spiritual practice** associated with their unique cultural features and the people’s beliefs.



- These sculptures are the **“joys of life”** that the alive wish to give to the dead: the wooden funeral sculpture is designed in pairs, representing resistance to death.

Besides, they are arranged according to the life cycle of a human: man and woman dating → man and woman making love → pregnant woman → fetus → infant → person holding their face ⇒ core stages of living.

- From a **religious perspective**, “lễ bỏ mả” is a magnificent, mourning funeral ceremony to bid farewell to the dead.
- From the **cultural perspective**, “lễ bỏ mả” is one of the most significant cultural festivals in the Central Highlands, synthesizing many cultural features and beliefs of the people here. This spiritual practice also represents the relationship not only human to human but also human to nature, in particular, the forest. People would leave the wooden sculptures and tombs in the forests as they believed humans come from the forest, so now, they shall return to the forest.
- **Representing the life and death belief** among peoples in the Central Highlands: “Death”, in their beliefs, is a new beginning in a different world, thus, the wooden funeral sculptures are carved to follow the dead to that world and serve them. “Lễ bỏ mả” is supposed to be full of joy event when the people are relieved that the dead has returned peacefully to the Mother of Nature.
- **A unique art** of the Central Highlands: a carefree and non-industrialized art: there are no professional artists, but art is something anyone can do whenever they want. Or they can do so when appointed by the god to satisfy the “burning desire to express”¹.

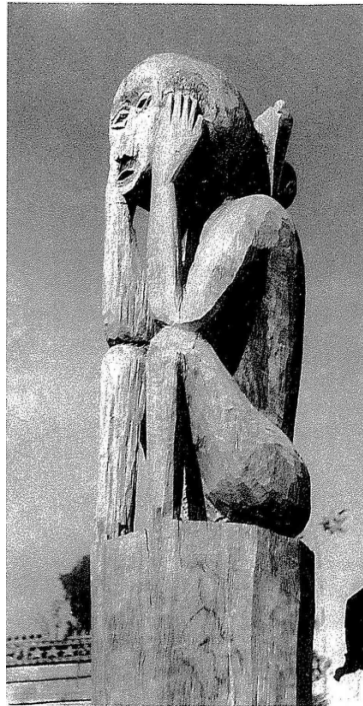
B. Different types of wooden funeral sculptures:

1. ***Mourning emotions***: People sitting with their elbows touching their knees, hands embracing the sad face, or group of people comforting each other
2. ***Sexual matter and lineage maintenance***: Men and women with magnified genitals, sometimes they are in mating status, or there are some pregnant women

¹ Nguyễn Ngọc, “Tượng gỗ rừng già.”

3. *Daily ceremonies/activities*: Daily activities such as pounding rice, carrying farm products, babysitting, folk games..., and activities in ceremonies such as drum beating, and dancing...
4. *Portrait/Monster*: Portraits with long ears, jagged teeth, and distorted faces
5. *Animals and Gifts*: They preferred animals that could be easily seen in life such as mountain turtles, lizards, rabbits, peacocks, owls, and dogs... to mythical creatures. Besides, there were some sculptures in the shape of buffalo horns, elephant ivories, and pots. ²

⇒ Those five groups of the topic were unevenly distributed throughout the region: While groups (1), (3), and (5) could be found in any cemetery, group (4) was less common and their distribution seemed not to follow any rule. In particular, group (2) was a unique topic that only appeared in the residence of the Jrai Arap subgroup in the last century.



The mourning emotion (1)

From Bahnar Roh Subgroup, Mang Yang District, Gia Lai Province ³

² Ho, “Wooden Funeral Sculptures of the Jrai and Bahnar in the Vietnam Central Highlands- Conservation or Destruction,” 16-17.

³ Trần, 17.



Naked Sculpture (2)

From Bahnar Konkodeh Subgroup, K'bang District, Gia Lai⁴

⁴ Trần, 40



Showing the orgasm (2)

From Bahnar Konkodeh Subgroup, An Khê District, Gia Lai⁵

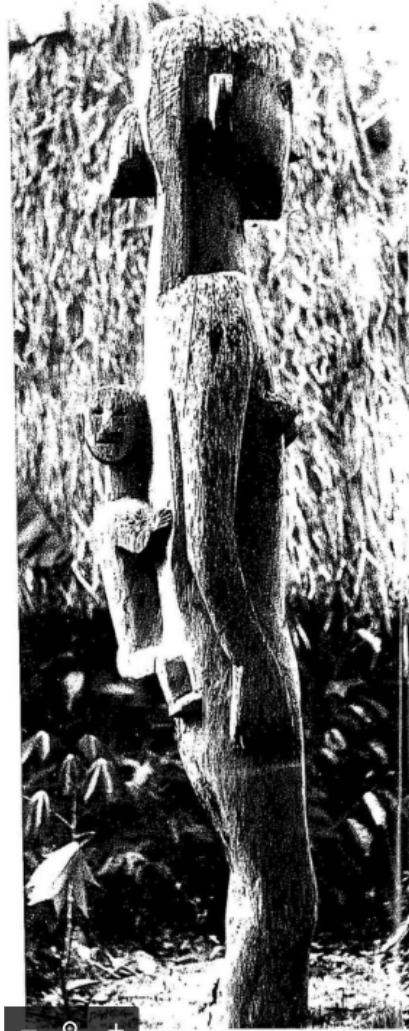
⁵ Trần, 48



Pregnant woman (2)

From Bahnar Konkodeh Subgroup, An Khê District, Gia Lai⁶

⁶ Trần, 47



Mother carries her kid (3)

From Bahnar Konkodeh Subgroup, K'bang District, Gia Lai⁷

⁷ Trần, 20



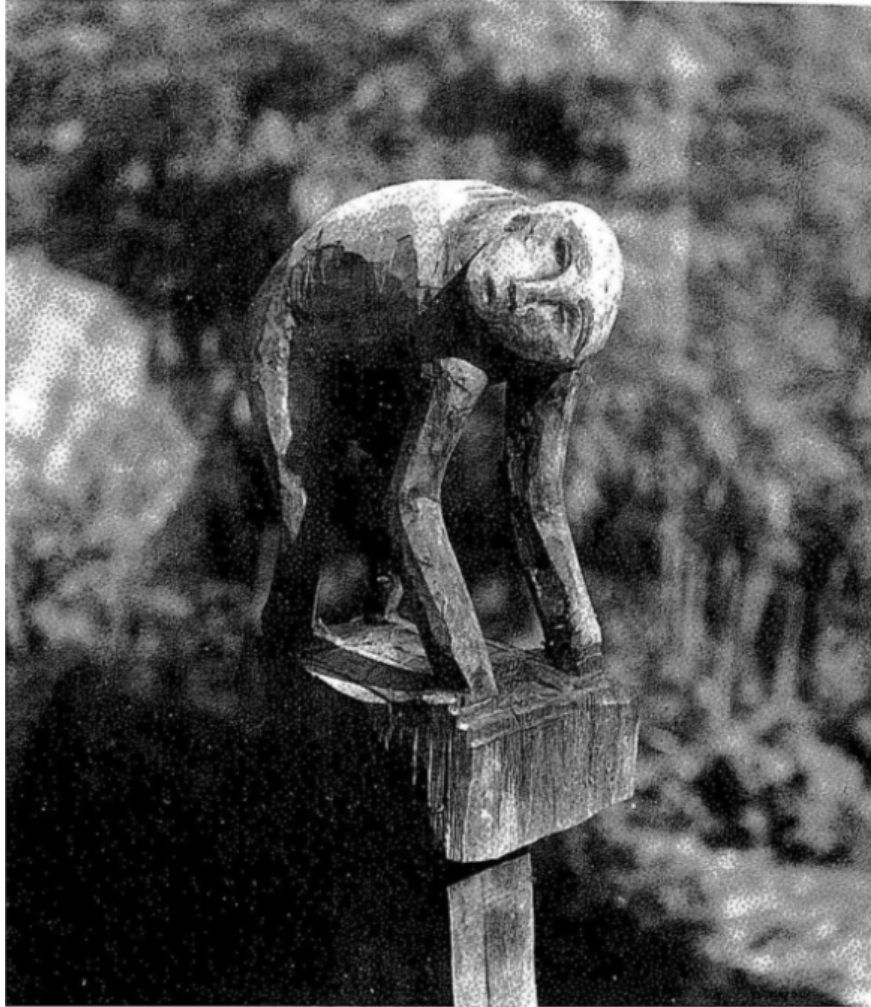
Holding hand (3)
*From Bahnar Tolo, Kôngchro*⁸

⁸ Trần, 28.



Playing drum (3)
*From Bahnar Tolo, Kôngchro*⁹

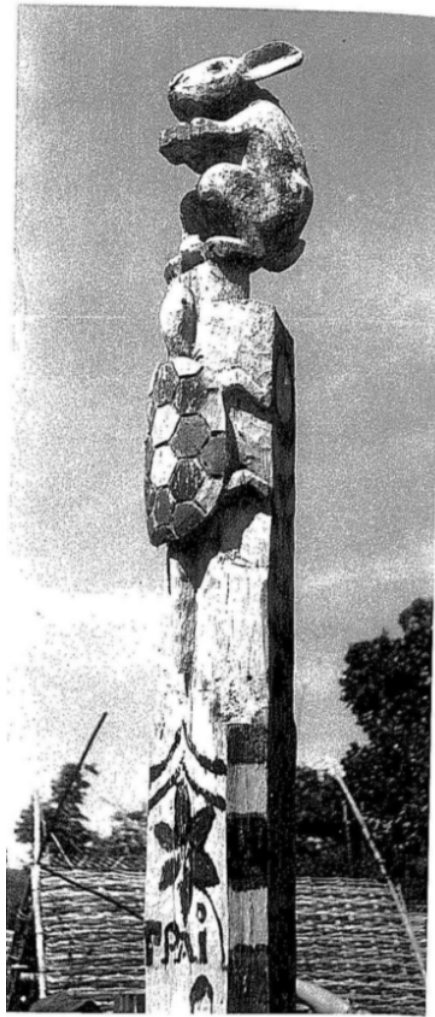
⁹ Trần, 24.



Monkey Sculpture (5)

From Bahnar Konkodeh Subgroup, An Khê District, Gia Lai ¹⁰

¹⁰ Trần, 39.



Turtle and rabbit (5)

From Bahnar Roh Subgroup, Mang Yang District, Gia Lai Province ¹¹

C. What is “Lễ bỏ mả” - The Funeral Festival:

- **Functional perspective:** is a funeral practice freeing the living and the dead from all ties to each other so that the dead can go peacefully.
- **In essence:** the most jubilant and longest festival (3-5 days) of the festivals in the Central Highlands. The villagers danced, beat gongs, and ate the last meal with the dead.

¹¹ Trần, 43.

- **Cultural perspective:** combining many cultural traditional activities: gongs, the architecture of the Central Highlands' tombs, cuisine,...¹²



D. The core values of wooden funeral sculptures

a. It is **the shared language** between the living and the dead.

"The destiny of a wooden funeral sculpture. The wooden funeral sculpture is sent as an intact gift to the dead person, not through being buried or converted. Creating the wooden funeral sculpture is to send the dead all the happiness of a lifetime."

- Chu Van Son -

¹² Ngô, "Lễ hội truyền thống Tây Nguyên," 14-15.

- The Central Highlands people worship the forest, so they consider the forest a primeval place as well as a super-birth place. And the tomb statue is used by them as a language - the language of life speaks to the dead: a wooden philosophy. The statues are always carved in pairs as a symbol of joyful attachment, dancing together to the hymn around each tomb as an antagonistic manifest towards death, which is normally considered to be grief and sadness. The shapes of the wooden statues all brim with the naive but significant belief about the beauty of living.

b. It is a **discourse** for a huge **religious belief**

The process of making wooden funeral sculptures is not to buy and sell but is done as a form of spirituality. They seem to give the log in their hand another life: the life of a statue, and endowed it with another form: the form of a sculpture. Only by looking at the statue can one feel the sadness behind it because parting with a loved one is never an easy event to face. Because they fear that their grief will affect the process of liberation of the dead, they send their grief to statues, typically a statue of a person holding his face with his hands resting on his pillow.

c. It is an **illustration** of life

Each group of Bahnar or Jrai people can, through the way they choose the subject of the statue and how they sculpt it, depict the geographical conditions, climate, and problems they face in their daily lives. For example, images of men or women with naked bodies and enlarged genitals were found only in a branch of the Jrai ethnic group living in areas with extremely harsh climatic conditions. Survival was their primary concern when the number of babies dying from diseases and wild animals was very large.

6. Problems related to the tomb statue

6.1. The influence of Christianity

- During the Doi Moi period (Renovation), people in the Central Highlands simultaneously followed a new and modern international religion, Protestantism. This

religion considers its previous religious practices superstitious and the traditional cultural way of life backward and immoral.

- Partly because these ethnic groups want to "be recognized as modern rather than old-fashioned."

- 2001: When they protested for land ownership and religious freedom, the Vietnamese government funded a program to study the epics of the Central Highlands ethnic group, with a budget of 1 million dollars, but it did not make much impact.

6.2. The culture of the Central Highlands after Doi Moi (Renovation)

- Background:

+ The Kinh people went to the Central Highlands to grow coffee, ..., achieved agricultural achievements (the second largest coffee producing area, ..., the hot spot of globalization process)

+ Forests turned into plantations and gardens by millions of immigrants; The Central Highlands people had to give up their right to use land

- The heavy influence of the Kinh ethnic group's cultural encroachment makes it difficult for the Central Highlands people to preserve and maintain their culture and traditions. his creed.

→ "Doi Moi (Renovation) made this land integrate clearly and quickly into the sovereign territory of Vietnam in terms of economy, demographics, and culture. This transformation rapidly changes the culture and living environment of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, who have to give up many of their traditional livelihoods and practice their beliefs.

6.3. Modernization: Living culture or heritage?

- With the gong culture of the Central Highlands: becoming a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, but the majority of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands have converted to Protestantism and are willing to forget about gong music as superstitious remnants of the past they had left behind. (p42)

- Forced to perform gongs at Hung Temple, festival organizers believe that the ethnic minority culture in the Central Highlands is similar to that of the Vietnamese over 2000 years ago.

→ “As the contemporary ancestors of the Kinh, the syncretism of the Central Highlands is denied, and instead, they are seen as living past.” (synchronicity: horizontal view, everything about something else elsewhere, at the same time)

- Culture under the lens of consumption.

- Longing to reminisce about a slow pace of life in a hectic age

+ Nostalgia makes disappearing cultural practices and monuments precious and heritage labels to prevent social eddies.

- "People kill what they love", Oscar Wilde

- “Even with the globalization and localization of heritage nostalgia, it is clear that We only love what we have killed,” Oscar Salemink

- The fact that funeral sculptures are given more importance and focus in part probably comes from the fact that the Central Highlands culture is considered a living past. The homogeneity of the Central Highlands peoples is denied when they are forced into a framework representing ancient values. The change in beliefs makes ritual activities such as the burial ceremony no longer available. However, people still try to apply epic images to the Central Highlands and perform gong dances even though they are not suitable. appropriate to its original context.

=> There should be a point to speak up for the modern and flexible aspects of the tomb statue. It is not just a rigid statue representing a certain creed that belongs to the past. It has very vivid aspects that we can exploit today.

E. Similar cultural practice from other cultures:

1. Maori people: [Māori Culture: What is a Marae?](#)



The marae at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds has an ornate interior design | © Urban Napflin / Alamy Stock Photo

2. Torajan people: [Tau-Tau: Effigies of the Dead in Tana Toraja](#)



Tau-tau States | © Indonesia Travel

3. Hawai'ian people: [Hawaiian Sculpture or Tiki – Where to Find Them in Kauai](#)



Tiki Sculpture | © Makana Charters

4. Native American people in Canada: [The First Nations of the Pacific Northwest](#)



Haida Mortuary Pole | © Don's Maps