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### Cultural Changes of the Ruc Community in Minh Hóa District, Quảng Bình Province, Vietnam

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#### Abstract

The Ruc people are one of the local groups belonging to the Chut ethnic minority, residing in the mountainous region of western Quảng Bình province, Vietnam. In 1959, they were discovered living in caves deep in the forest, subsisting through hunting and gathering. After this discovery, the local authorities relocated the Ruc people to settled villages in Thượng Hóa commune, Minh Hóa district, Quảng Bình province. Since then, the Ruc have undergone significant transformations in their economic, cultural, and social life. The trend of cultural change in recent years among the Ruc has encompassed both positive and negative aspects. Therefore, studying and understanding their cultural

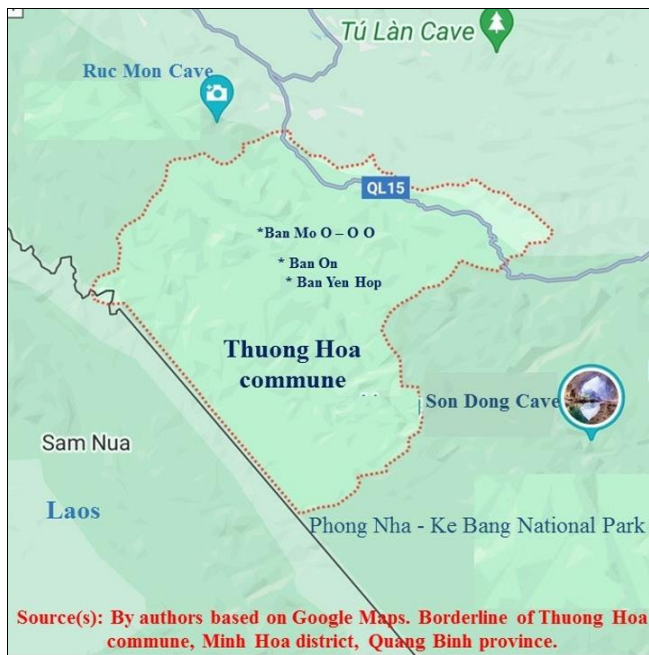
heritage, while also grasping the inevitable trends of the era, is essential and urgent to promote positive aspects and mitigate negative ones during the cultural transformation of ethnic minorities in this area. This article is based on in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted within the community through fieldwork. It focuses on clarifying the cultural transformation process of the Ruc community and discusses the factors influencing this change. To ensure that the Ruc integrate without losing their ethnic identity, the article offers several recommendations aimed at sustainable development for the community.

**Keywords:** Cultural Change, Society, Community, Ruc People

#### 1. Introduction

The Ruc people are one of the five local groups of the Chut ethnic minority, which include Ruc, Sach, May, Ma Lieng, and A Rem. They are primarily distributed in the western mountainous region of Thượng Hóa commune, Minh Hóa district, Quảng Bình province. As of April 2022, the Ruc population consisted of 144 households with 580 individuals, living alongside other ethnic groups such as Sach and Kinh in the villages of On, Yen Hop, and Mo O - O O in Thượng Hóa commune. The largest concentration of the Ruc people is in Mo O - O O village<sup>1</sup>. There are varying opinions regarding the existence and discovery timeline of the Ruc people. However, it is generally agreed that the Ruc were discovered and transitioned to a new lifestyle in the late 1950s. At the time of discovery, the Ruc lived deep in the forest with 34 individuals, residing in caves and using tree bark for clothing. They survived through hunting and gathering. After their discovery, local authorities made efforts to persuade and relocate this group to settled villages.

<sup>1</sup> Interview information from the Thượng Hóa commune authorities, April 2023.



Initially, the Ruc were quite shy and found it difficult to adapt to their new living environment. However, thanks to state-funded projects that invested in infrastructure such as electricity, roads, schools, and healthcare facilities, their living conditions gradually stabilized. Additionally, the policy of transitioning from upland rice cultivation to wet rice farming helped the Ruc gradually adapt to new livelihoods.

Given this context, the question arises: In what direction has the cultural transformation of the Ruc taken place in recent times? What should stakeholders do to help the Ruc integrate into the broader Vietnamese ethnic community in the current trend of industrialization and modernization without losing their ethnic cultural values? Through the study of "Cultural Changes of the Ruc People in Minh Hóa District, Quảng Bình Province, Vietnam," we aim to clarify the process of cultural change in the Ruc community in recent times and discuss the factors influencing this transformation.

Upon their discovery, the Ruc became a fascinating subject of research for many scientists, resulting in numerous works from various perspectives, particularly by ethnologists, anthropologists, and linguists such as Nguyễn Bình (1961)<sup>[3]</sup>, Mạc Đường (1963)<sup>[2]</sup>, Nguyễn Đình Khoa (1969)<sup>[4]</sup>, Phạm Đức Dương (1975)<sup>[12]</sup>, Nguyễn Văn Lợi (1988)<sup>[9]</sup>, and Tạ Long (1975)<sup>[13]</sup>. Notably, Mạc Đường's 1963 article "Tìm hiểu về người Ruc ở miền núi tỉnh Quảng Bình" emphasized the significance of studying ethnic groups of the Viet-Muong language group. He pointed out the complexity of the Ruc's historical origins, suggesting that they might be an ancient Viet-Muong group that separated from the larger community long ago, as the Ruc language is very close to Vietnamese and Muong, even containing older elements than the Muong language.

From the 1990s to the present, research on the Ruc people has focused more on their origins, language, survival techniques, and lifestyle. Prominent works include those by Võ Xuân Trang (2012)<sup>[19]</sup>, Trần Trí Dõi (1995)<sup>[17]</sup>, Nguyễn Văn Mạnh (1996)<sup>[10]</sup>, Tạ Long, Ngô Thị Chính (2004)<sup>[14]</sup>, Trịnh Thị Kim Ngọc (2015), and Nguyễn Thị Ngân (editor) (2017)<sup>[8]</sup>. These works provide detailed insights into the origins, population, residence, names, livelihoods, and both

material and spiritual culture of the Chut ethnic group, including the Ruc. Nguyễn Đình Hùng's article "Địa danh Quảng Bình với sự phản ánh quá trình di trú của các tộc người" offers a clearer understanding of the natural geography, historical formation, and development of the region. Phan Thanh Quyết and Nguyễn Thị Quỳnh Phương's 2017 article "Quản lý rừng dựa vào cộng đồng ở bản Phú Minh, xã Thượng Hóa, huyện Minh Hóa, tỉnh Quảng Bình" also discusses how the Chut people's lives have traditionally depended on the forest and highlights the challenges they face due to limited access to information and support projects.

Regarding the topic of religious culture, although the development of the Ruc people's life is somewhat slower compared to many other ethnic groups, their religious life is full of mysteries. Nguyễn Thành Vân (2015) argues that the Ruc's religious beliefs are strongly influenced by natural and socio-historical conditions, making their religion rich, diverse, and deeply polytheistic, with a belief in the animacy of all things. Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh (2002)<sup>[6]</sup> asserts that the Ruc are not primitive forest dwellers but have reached a certain level of civilization. However, historical circumstances have inadvertently pushed them back into a difficult life, risking the erosion of their cultural identity. Đinh Thanh Dự (2009)<sup>[1]</sup> suggests that the Ruc are descendants of the prehistoric Co Sa - Kim Linh people in the upper reaches of the Gianh River, one of the few remaining in our country after many historical periods. Trần Tấn Đăng Long (2019, 2022) notes that the Ruc have undergone significant changes in their livelihood compared to the past, thanks to the implementation of state development policies, environmental changes, and cultural exchanges. Today, the Ruc are gradually integrating into the Vietnamese ethnic community. This integration has created two opposing effects: On one hand, it allows the Ruc to access the outside world, learn, and acquire new knowledge to develop; on the other hand, it poses challenges as the Ruc's internal strength may not yet be fully prepared for the integration process.

Overall, the study of the Ruc community has attracted the interest of many researchers, exploring various aspects. Each study has helped to some extent to increase understanding of the Ruc people. However, to date, we have not found any research on the cultural changes of the Ruc in the current context. Building on previous studies and continuing to delve into research on the Ruc, we hope that the article *Cultural Changes of the Ruc People in Minh Hóa District, Quảng Bình Province* will serve as an important resource, providing a clearer understanding of this ethnic group and enriching the knowledge system about the Ruc in the data repository.

## 2. Research Methods

This article is based on qualitative research methods through survey results from field trips to the Ruc community in Thượng Hóa commune. We conducted three field surveys in Thượng Hóa commune, Minh Hóa district, Quảng Bình province, and carried out 25 in-depth interviews. Specifically, the first survey was conducted from February 15 to March 4, 2018, the second from July 20 to July 26, 2021, and the third from January 28 to February 3, 2023. During the information-gathering process, some informants were interviewed multiple times across different field trips. Besides interviewing Ruc households living in Thượng Hóa

commune to understand their cultural life, we also interviewed retired and incumbent district and commune officials, as well as officers from the Cà Xèng Border Guard Station, to understand the State's policies and their implementation concerning the Ruc community. Additionally, we interviewed researchers who have long studied the Ruc people. Throughout our research, we consistently compared and contrasted information from various subjects to ensure high reliability.

Moreover, we employed both synchronic and diachronic comparative methods, collecting and processing information from various sources such as statistical documents, reports, research works, scientific journals, and more to support our research writing. From these practical studies, solutions were also proposed to provide reference materials for relevant authorities and local governments in formulating sustainable development policies for the Ruc people.

Besides in-depth interviews, we also applied participant observation methods. Through this approach, we observed the activities and behaviors of the research subjects, notably livelihood activities such as rice farming, seed soaking, animal husbandry, fishing, and daily community activities.

### 3. Research Findings

#### 3.1 Material Culture

**Housing:** Prior to 1959, the Ruc people lived in deep forests and resided in caves. After being encouraged to settle in villages, their housing remained rudimentary and temporary. They commonly built houses from bamboo, rattan, small wooden trees, and thatched roofs, which lasted only a few years. Since 1980, through cultural exchange and learning, some Ruc households began constructing wooden houses similar to those of the Sách, Mày, and Kinh people. However, these were mostly single-story, simple structures with no floors, built on hillsides. The building materials for Ruc houses were sourced from the forest, with thatched roofs, typically consisting of one room and two doorways, two windows, and covering an area of about 20-30 square meters. After 2004, the government supported the construction of brick houses for the Ruc. Although small, these houses were made with concrete frames and tiled or metal roofs, with an area of about 25 square meters. Initially, the Ruc struggled to adapt to these concrete houses, finding them noisy during rain and hot in summer. Nevertheless, despite their discomfort with the new living conditions, the Ruc gradually accepted these changes with government support. Over time, families with better conditions also started to renovate and expand their homes, sometimes adding thatched houses nearby for convenience. Overall, Ruc communities have received support for housing and land, and today, younger Ruc households are beginning to build their own houses. Villages now integrate modern community buildings (concrete, cement) or modern schools, clinics, and administrative offices alongside their traditional homes.

**Clothing:** Historically, when the Ruc depended on the forest for clothing, they used tree bark to make shawls, shirts, skirts, loincloths, and blankets. Later, local authorities provided them with clothing. Due to past hardships, they used these clothes until they were worn out, often trading for new clothes. Nowadays, through interactions and trade with other ethnic groups, the Ruc have gradually adopted new clothing styles, heavily influenced by the Kinh. Ruc women now wear trousers and shirts, while older women wear

skirts. Men's clothing has also evolved to resemble Kinh styles. Alongside traditional cotton clothing, modern items such as suits, sweaters, ao dai, and even bridal attire have become common.

**Food:** Previously, the Ruc's staple foods included bột nhúc (a type of flour), bột đoác, yam, small game meat, and monkey meat. After settling, they were guided to cultivate rice, maize, sweet potatoes, and cassava for a more stable livelihood. As their living standards improved, their dependence on forest resources decreased. Bột nhúc is no longer their primary food source; instead, they consume a mix of cassava flour and cornmeal. Additionally, other foods have appeared in their diet, such as rat meat, stream fish, snails, crabs, shrimp, snakes, turtles, and frogs, caught from small streams. They also gather various vegetables like bamboo shoots, young leaves, mushrooms, banana flowers, and wild greens<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays, the Ruc grow additional vegetables such as beans, gourds, bamboo shoots, and riverbank bamboo shoots around their gardens. However, the nutritional quality of their diet is still not optimal. Modern cooking appliances such as rice cookers, gas stoves, electric hot pots, and even some industrial canned foods, bread, butter, milk, and instant noodles have appeared in their daily lives.

Living in a harsh climate, especially with cold winters, the Ruc have a habit of drinking alcohol and smoking heavily. They commonly consume doak wine, made from the kapác tree found in their vicinity. Nowadays, the Ruc also use wine from the Kinh people.

#### 3.2 Spiritual Culture

##### Worship and Taboos

Regarding religious beliefs, although the Ruc people's living standards may have developed more slowly compared to other ethnic groups, their spiritual life contains many mysteries. In the past, due to their forested environment, the Ruc had a strong belief in the presence of forest spirits. Consequently, when practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, they often performed rituals to honor these spirits. Since 1995, due to policies prohibiting forest clearing for farming, the Ruc have stopped planting upland rice and instead grow maize, sweet potatoes, and cassava. From 2010 onwards, under the guidance of border guard forces, the Ruc in Mo O - O O village began cultivating wet rice. With the transition from upland rice to maize, sweet potatoes, cassava, and wet rice, traditional agricultural rituals have ceased. Instead, every 2 to 3 years, the Ruc organize a community peace ceremony to pray for favorable weather and to demonstrate community solidarity. Additionally, the Ruc practice ancestor worship during the Tet holiday and on death anniversaries.

In the past, the Ruc had many taboos, such as women giving birth in shelters on the forest edge made by their husbands, avoiding sitting in the corners of the house, not hanging mosquito nets indoors, or not entering the house if bitten by a snake. Before 2017, the Ruc community had a shaman (Mr. Cao Ong) who used magic spells and incantations to treat illnesses and protect against wild animals. He could treat injuries, bleeding, and snake bites, each requiring different chants. According to community beliefs, the

<sup>2</sup> HP, male, 78 years old, Ruc ethnic group, Mo O-O Village.



shaman could only cure diseases related to spirits, not genetic illnesses, which required hospital treatment. Today, many ritual practices in agriculture and magical healing methods, as well as certain taboos, have disappeared due to changes in the farming environment and external influences, particularly from the Kinh culture.

### **Community Festivals**

The Ruc community festival (Forest Spirit Worship Festival) is held every 3 to 5 years. The Ruc from Mo O - O O, Yen Hop, and On villages in Thuong Hoa commune take turns organizing the peace ceremony to ward off misfortune, bad luck, and disease, and to pray for community well-being. However, due to the difficult living conditions, the festival is not held annually. The most recent festival was held in January 2022 (December in the lunar calendar), with village elders leading the peace ceremony. The scale of the festival, whether large or small, is determined by the village elders and heads, who consult the villagers and decide on each family's contribution. The collected funds are used to purchase festival supplies, often including one or two pigs, a few chickens, and rice. Festivals in Ruc culture reflect the interaction between humans and their environment, fulfilling various functions that ensure community stability and development. For the Ruc, festivals provide spiritual support, strengthen communal bonds, and maintain and reinforce social relationships.

### **Marriage**

The Ruc traditionally practice free marriage. In the past, couples went through four steps before marriage: The engagement ceremony, the betrothal ceremony, the wedding, and the bride's reception. The engagement marks the beginning of the marriage process, with the groom's family bearing all costs. After gaining the bride's family's consent, the groom stays at the bride's home for three nights to see if they are compatible before proceeding with marriage. The betrothal follows, where the groom's family presents gifts to the bride's family and asks for the groom to stay as a son-in-law. After the bride's family accepts the gifts, the groom lives with them for one to three years. The wedding ceremony takes place at the bride's home after one to three years, depending on the families. The wedding gifts vary according to the families' circumstances. The final step is the bride's reception, where the bride moves to the groom's home for three days, bringing rice, clothes, bedding, and a crossbow. After three days, the couple returns to the bride's parents with a bronze pot and four chickens. The family, including the son-in-law, places the pot on the stove, and the father-in-law announces to the household spirits that the couple is now married. Today, due to integration with other ethnic groups, Ruc marriage customs have changed significantly. Men no longer have to stay as sons-in-law for three years, and wedding gifts are flexible based on each family's situation. Recently, besides endogamous marriages, the Ruc also marry within other subgroups of the Chut people and with the Kinh.

### **Childbirth Customs**

In the past, the Ruc lived in remote areas without access to hospitals or clinics, so childbirth was managed within the family. Traditionally, Ruc women gave birth in the forest. They believed that giving birth indoors would bring bad luck to the family and community. Therefore, women had to follow this custom to avoid negative consequences for themselves, their families, and the community. Today, with healthcare services reaching Ruc villages and increased

awareness of reproductive health, many traditional practices have changed. Ruc women now use healthcare services and give birth at medical facilities. However, some customs persist, such as the husband avoiding others' homes when his wife gives birth, and the mother not sitting on the grandparents' bed. Recently, some Ruc families have even begun organizing full-month and first birthday celebrations for their children, inviting relatives and neighbors to join in the festivities.

### **Funeral Customs**

When a family member passes away, the Ruc people prepare a chicken and a bowl of rice to place on the deceased's head as an offering. If the family is not well-off, relatives may contribute gifts, such as eggs or chickens. The Ruc believe that these offerings invite the deceased's spirit to partake if they are present. The bowl of rice placed on the deceased's head is not to be consumed. After eight days, the rice is dried and kept for three years before being discarded. During these three years, if someone in the village suffers from stomach pain, fever, mental illness, or possession, they burn some of this rice in the fire, mix the ashes with water, and give it to the sick person to drink, believing it can cure their ailments. This custom was widely practiced among the Ruc in the past.

According to Ruc tradition, the deceased must be buried on the same day, except when someone dies in the evening, in which case the burial takes place the following day. When a death occurs, all family members must be present unless they are far away in the forest. The funeral is considered a community duty. Three nights after the burial, the Ruc offer rice, chicken, and wine as part of the ritual. This offering is not to abandon the grave but to open the tomb's door, praying to the deities for a spacious resting place for the deceased. The Ruc believe that on the third day, the deceased has not yet turned into a spirit and still eats and drinks as usual. Therefore, they offer regular meals and keep a fire burning for warmth until the eighth day to prevent the spirit from feeling hungry or cold.

On the final day, the Ruc perform the "end of mourning" ceremony, known as the "end of grief" ceremony. This takes place on the eighth night and early ninth morning, held privately within the family to inform the ancestors that everything is complete, allowing everyone to return to their normal lives. Nowadays, Ruc funerals have evolved somewhat. For instance, instead of burying the deceased immediately, they wait for relatives to gather. Under the influence of Kinh culture, eulogies are now included in the funeral rites. Additionally, new customs such as visiting, lighting incense, and cleaning ancestors' graves at the year's end have emerged.

### **Language**

The Ruc community has only a spoken language, lacking a written script. Historically, due to their isolation from the outside world, the Ruc communicated solely in their ethnic language. Later, with the arrival of the Kinh people and increased interactions with local authorities and officers from the Ca Xeng Border Post, the Ruc began to use Vietnamese for communication. Ruc children are taught their native language by their parents and grandparents from birth but do not learn to write in Ruc. At school, they do not study the Ruc language but follow the official curriculum with Vietnamese as the primary language. Additionally, the Ruc and other ethnic groups living in Thuong Hoa commune use a common language to communicate. Thus, although the

Ruc do not have a written script, they are capable of using three languages in their interactions: Ruc, the communal language, and Vietnamese.

#### 4. Discussion and Issues Raised

Culture is a product of human society, created and shared by people to serve life. Some old cultural elements that are no longer suitable will gradually disappear, and new cultures will emerge to replace them promptly. In the case of the Ruc community, their cultural practices have gradually changed to adapt due to policy factors, ecological environment, and cultural exchange since their development from 1959 to the present. The Ruc people have experienced changes in both material and spiritual culture, which have somewhat distorted the traditional culture of the Ruc community. However, these changes are in line with the developmental trends of the era and the changes in natural, economic, and social conditions in their residential areas.

Over time, the traditional cultural values of the Ruc community have changed to adapt to social realities. These changes are influenced by many factors. Since they were discovered and settled in villages, the Ruc have been impacted and influenced by Kinh culture, especially by policymakers who have oriented the development path for the Ruc. Projects such as road construction, building houses, schools, and clinics, bringing electricity to the community, shifting from slash-and-burn agriculture to wet rice cultivation, and training in crop and livestock programs have all contributed to these changes. Additionally, changes in living space and farming environment have also led to cultural changes among the Ruc. Modern technological factors, especially through media channels like television, radio, and social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, have also impacted the Ruc community.

In the development process of ethnic groups, cultural assimilation often occurs in two forms: Natural assimilation and forced assimilation. Natural assimilation is the voluntary acceptance of culture among ethnic groups, typically occurring between larger, more economically and socially developed groups and smaller adjacent groups. As a result, the smaller ethnic groups may adopt all or part of the culture of the more developed group. Assimilation differs from cultural exchange in that cultural exchange is the acceptance and integration of another group's culture into one's traditional culture, whereas assimilation is the pure borrowing of the more developed group's culture, often diminishing traditional cultural elements. Forced assimilation involves imposing and coercing a community to accept a culture unwillingly. In recent years, with the development of the market economy, the trend of assimilation, primarily natural assimilation, has been strong in Vietnam's ethnic minority areas.

In the Ruc region, natural assimilation is occurring vigorously. In the low valleys, the Ruc (about 600 people) live adjacent to the Kinh and Sach people, leading to natural assimilation. Some Ruc individuals even identify themselves as Sach and vice versa, making it difficult to distinguish between the two groups. Natural assimilation with Kinh culture in the Ruc area is also strong, aligning with the concept of modernizing the culture of ethnic minorities. Natural assimilation occurs in all aspects of life, from material to spiritual, such as adopting production processes and techniques, housing methods, household appliances,

food preparation methods, types of music and dance, and even religious beliefs. Natural assimilation is essentially positive, fostering cultural integration and transformation towards modern civilization. However, it also has negative aspects, such as the loss of ethnic cultural identity. Therefore, effective measures are needed to adjust assimilation trends to limit negative impacts. Forced assimilation occurs in some cases during the implementation of sedentary and settlement policies or programs 134 and 135, such as in Mo O O O and On villages of the Ruc people. Concrete houses with iron roofs, far from production areas and water sources, or relocating people into resettlement areas without their consent, are manifestations of forced assimilation. This has negative implications, reducing ethnic cultural values and affecting the people's psychology and life.

From our field surveys, we found that most Ruc people do not pay attention to preserving their ethnic cultural values. They only recognize their ethnic identity. This is a matter of concern for the Ruc community. The Ruc are adapted to forest life; however, when the forest no longer provides a main source of income for the community, the cultural diversity of the Ruc is threatened. Therefore, we believe that preserving the cultural values of the Ruc and creating new cultural elements in the current integration context play a significant role for local authorities and policymakers. To help the Ruc integrate without losing their cultural values and ethnic identity, solutions are needed to improve their literacy and develop economic thinking to their best capability. Local authorities should promote the community's ability to engage in forest-related activities, such as reforestation, tree care, and biodiversity conservation linked to livelihoods.

An equally important factor in maintaining the Ruc identity is their language. Language is the essence of each ethnic group. However, in the current trend of integration and development, the Ruc language is at risk of "disappearing" since they do not have a written script, and very few people can fluently use their native language. Therefore, the state needs policies to preserve the Ruc language, considering it an important task to contribute to maintaining the ethnic group's cultural values. Additionally, local authorities must truly understand the needs of the Ruc community to devise appropriate and effective policies to help them adapt and develop sustainably in the current context. For the younger generation of the Ruc, the government should invest in education from the beginning, helping them access new sources of knowledge from humanity.

#### 5. Conclusion

The Ruc community, which started as a very small group of 34 individuals in 1959, has developed into a relatively stable community today. Development policies and programs have significantly influenced the various aspects of the Ruc people's lives over the past decades. This development process has also led to the integration of the Ruc community into the cultures of other ethnic groups, particularly adopting the cultural practices of the Kinh people. Although the Ruc have benefited from state preferential policies, these policies have primarily focused on economic development and improving living standards, with less attention given to preserving the Ruc language and cultural diversity.

As a result, the Ruc face numerous challenges in the process of integration and development alongside other ethnic

groups in Vietnam. To help the Ruc integrate and develop within the context of both the local and national community without losing their cultural values, we believe that the State and policymakers must gradually combine local knowledge with scientific knowledge to guide the Ruc's development towards integration. It is essential not to focus solely on scientific knowledge while neglecting the local knowledge that has been integral to the Ruc throughout their historical progression. Additionally, it is crucial to regularly maintain and enhance the ethnic language, as language embodies the treasure trove of folk knowledge and ethnic ideologies. Furthermore, local authorities and the community should invest in establishing cultural institutions linked to more frequently organizing traditional festivals at risk of disappearing, helping the Ruc community enrich their spiritual life.

## 6. Disclosure statement

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