

## The home key returns to the villages

*(Written by Tran Thi Lanh during a field trip to the community forests on Mang Den plateau of the Central Highlands in October 2022)*

A long-awaited moment has finally come to the villagers living on Mang Den plateau on a very beautiful sunny day of 20 October 2022. More than 1000 hectares of forests in Mang Canh commune are now returning to the traditional territories of its villages.



At the historical Phong Lan junction

marking the traditional boundaries of natural forests between three villages in Mang Canh commune, Kon Plong district, we fully and emotionally witnessed an unforgettable moment when the villages officially receive their rights to use, manage and protect their community forests.

Mang Canh CPC's chairman Mr. Mau and other local officials, community forest protection team members, village elders, village heads and young key farmers stood around village elder A In, carefully listening to his explanation of ***“forestland boundaries of the five villages, which have been legally recognized for use, management and protection on 15 September 2022 under the Decision of the Kon Plong District People's Committee in***



***accordance with the Article 16 of the Forest Land Law No. 16/QH14/2017.”*** The village elder' old fingers were shaking when he slowly and emotionally moved them around different color-coded lines on the community forest map, showing the traditional boundaries of the Mang Canh's five villages, namely Kon Chenh, Kon Kum, Kon Nang, Kon Tu Ma and Kon Tu Rang. Below the map, there are newly-inked signatures

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and stamps of local authority at district and commune levels that legally recognize the M’Nam’s community ownership over their own forest.

We, CENDI staff and two French partners from SCCF who have accompanied CENDI to support communities in protecting their village forests under the Community-based Forest and Land Allocation program implemented in Mang Canh commune of Kon Plong district since 2019, feel so excited about such a great news. Our joint efforts made during a 10-year journey along with the local authorities and villagers of H’Re, M’Nam and Ka Dong ethnic groups through a series of field trips to a total of 19 villages taken around four seasons of the year were finally paid off. The M’Nam villagers welcomed this good news with their shining smiles and sparkling eyes. From now on, they will become much more confident to continue nurturing their own traditional sacred forests as the real owners.



It was so lucky for us to be there with the villages in those days. The spiritual ecosystems of Rung/Forest - Ray/Upland farm – Ruong/Rice valley field (known as “3R”) manifests its natural settings to the fullest in the heart the M’Nam, H’Re and Ka Dong ethnic people through the village elders’ inspiring stories on our way to visit the villages of Tu Thon and Tu Ret in Dak Nen, Vi Po E 2 and Vi Klang 2 in Po E, and Kon Tu Ma, Kon Chenh, Kon Tu Rang, Kon Kum and Kon Nang villages in Mang Canh. Local wisdom and knowledge, social, cultural and 3R-based eco-farming customs and practices keep staying long-lasting in the here and the now, and in the life and spirit of the villages.

We came back to Kon Tu Ma after a couple of days. Village elder A Bring, village head A Hung, village Party Secretary A Viet, former village Party Secretary A Deo and Mang Canh CPC Chairman Mr. Mau shared with us a series of interesting stories about the past and present of the village, which help us partly understand its history.

**Ngok means “high mountain peak ”** where reside the Nature Spirits of *Mit Rung* (wild jackfruit) tree (locally named Ngok Poong), *Dổi đỏ* tree (locally named Ngok Po), *Trâm đỏ* tree and salamander (locally named Ngok Pring) to bless the villagers to live peacefully.

Kon Tu Ma means an area where hedgehogs live in the caves along Dak SNghe stream. Kon Chenh means a large area where *Mua* flowers (*Melastoma candidum*) grow. Kon Tu Ma village had relocated four times around Dak SNghe stream over the time, however, the village name remains unchanged as it was in the very first days, where “the stone hedgehogs” and the village spirit still are there.

**Welcoming the Rice Spirit back to the village** is a ceremony that is often practiced by households by the end of the autumn (around September or October for the native rice species in Kon Tu Ma). At that time, on the overlapping forest roofs, leaves slowly change their colors from green to yellow, red and brown before falling down all over the forest. The dry leaves form layers of decay vegetation, covering the delicate surface of the Mother Earth with a light layer of nutrition, and from there the nutrients drift gently down into the valley, heralding a land holiday.

During the time, households are happy and busy with preparation to welcome the first rice bundle to their village. Chicken, herbal medicinal plants, plants roots with aroma, flowers, sweet fruits and traditional *Ghe* wine are the offerings to be dedicated to the Rice Spirit, which are often prepared one year prior to the ceremony. Together they make symbolic bridges with tree branches and white threads for the Rice Spirit to cross the river and come into the rice store.



At the field, the most beautiful and biggest ripen rice plants are picked by hands, bundled into a beautiful bunch, and gently put into a new basket. People silently walk, one after another. The husband carries a bamboo basket, while his wife takes a spool of thread. They walk in sacredness and pray in silence. Whenever crossing the stream, the wife gently builds a “bridge” with two white threads for the rice bundle to pass. Then the rice bundle is taken to the village gate, to the *Neu* tree standing in front of the sacred door of the house, into the sacred room, to sacred mortar and pestle to greet the Spirits of Forest, Upland and Rice Valley field that reside in the house. After that, the couple heads to the rice store. The wife comes first, followed by her husband. At the rice store, the wife continues to make two sticks tied with two white threads to let the rice bundle to climb up the ladder to then get into the rice store. The wife

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carefully takes the bundle out of her husband' basket and gently put it against a pillar standing opposite to the rice store's door. The bundle is prayed to stay peacefully in the rice store until the same date of the next year.

The village elder A Bring continued his story about the ritual practice of taking old rice out of the rice store to give room for the new rice to stay with the family through the year.

Another ritual that is very important to the M'Nam ethnic people is to worship the Water Spirit. Each year, in the very last days of the winter, all villagers from the old to the young wait for the moment when the village elder allows them to build *Neu* trees to worship the Water Spirit. This is also the time when young male and female meet each other, having dates and getting into marriage.

Listening to the village elders', we deeply understand the indigenous wisdom that quietly lives through the lives of the ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands for thousands of years in the harmonious inter-connection with sacred forests – their ecological home.



***“Decision on the community rights to manage, develop and benefit from five sacred forests”*** is the key implied by the village elder. ***It has truly come back to all 19 villages on Mang Den plateau and Mang Canh commune in particular.***

