

# Chil people embracing Protestantism: The impact of the political context in the Central Highlands from the early 20th century to the present

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## ABSTRACT

Protestantism is a religion that emerged and developed later than Buddhism, Catholicism and Islam. It was introduced to Vietnam in the early twentieth century after the arrival of these 3 religions. Previous studies examining the process of evangelization and the growth of Protestant followers often cited several reasons for people embracing Protestantism. These reasons include: 1) State leaders seeking to leverage Protestant missionaries for national development, 2) Individuals desiring a modern and inclusive religious belief system, 3) The impact of transnational ethnic relations, offering opportunities for Protestantism to expand, and 4) Economic disadvantaged individuals turning to Protestantism for assistance. Utilizing direct field data collected by in-depth interviews and participant observation in the community from April 2019 to April 2020 and in June 2022, the research aimed to explore the conversion of the Chil people to Protestantism; Specifically, the conversion from the traditional religion (polytheism) to Protestantism is a process taking place during the time, when this ethnic community has had the opportunity to interact with society outside of their traditional bon (from the early 20th century to the present), especially during the time they were forced to live in strategic hamlets built by the government of the Republic of Vietnam. Diverged from previous findings, the study showed that the primary factor motivating the Chil community to embrace Protestantism was the influence of the political context in the Central Highlands. This context was one of the important factors influencing the Chil people's conversion to Protestantism, and as a result, nearly 100% of the Chil people have now adopted Protestantism, making it the predominant religion in their community.

**Key words:** Protestantism, Chil people, political context in the Central Highlands

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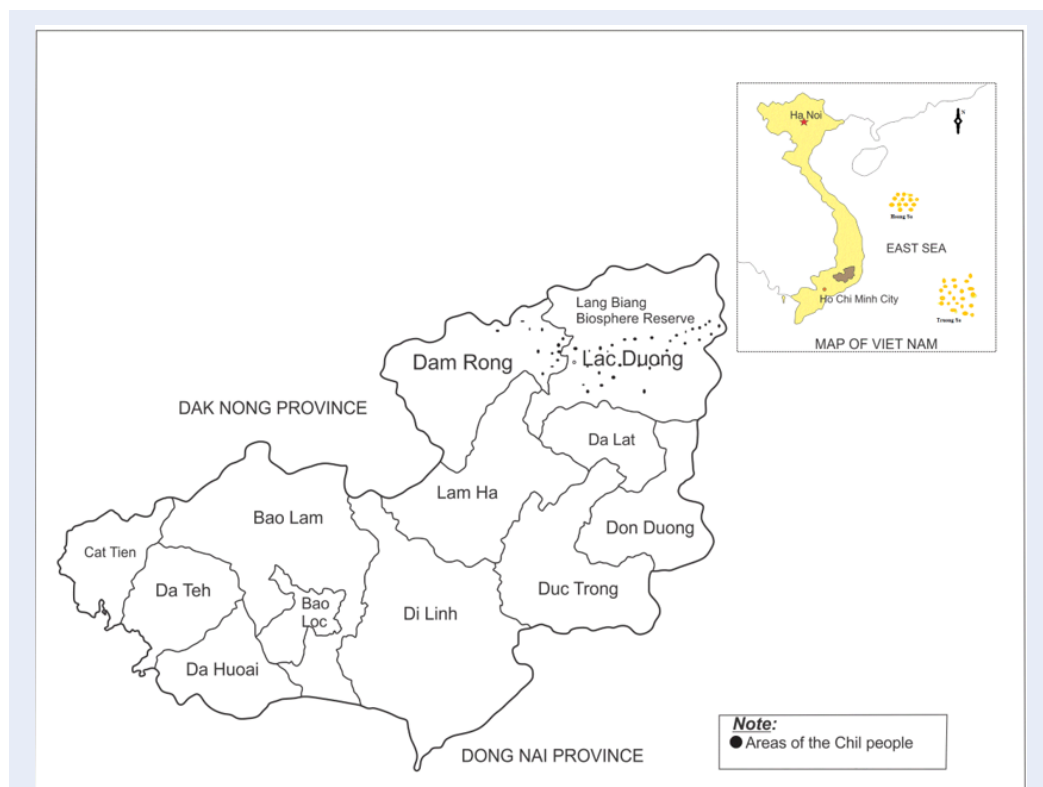
## INTRODUCTION

According to Decision No. 121-TCTK/PPCĐ issued on March 2, 1979 by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the Chil people, Xre people, and Lat people are considered local groups within the K'ho ethnic minority. As a result, the Chil people are not listed as one of the 54 ethnic groups officially recognized in Vietnam. However, the Chil people themselves identify as a distinct ethnic group with their own language, culture, and ethnic name. Currently, the Chil people primarily reside in Lac Duong district and part of Đam Rông district in Lam Dong province, Vietnam (Figure 1), with a population of 25,320 individuals across 5,430 households. According to the statistics from the Religion Committee of Lam Dong Province in 2020, nearly 100% of the Chil people are followers of Protestantism.

Prior to their conversion to Protestantism, the Chil people adhered to the traditional polytheistic beliefs. The process of religious conversion leading to the majority of the community embracing Protestantism re-

quired a significant shift. This conversion to Protestantism, not only among the Chil community but also in other ethnic groups in Vietnam and worldwide, has been studied and explained by various researchers. For instance, Hefner [1, p.18] suggests that the religious conversion represents a "walk from darkness to light" or a "radical" transformation that aligns with the social development of individuals and ethnic communities. It is viewed as a radical and complete change, often likened to a second birth or awakening [2, p. 112]. Robbins [3, p. 6-11], on the other hand, highlights the concept of "the waiting," which refers to the internal anticipation of converts, waiting for a future that is disconnected from the current causal trajectory, as observed in his research on the Urapmin community. Mosko [4, p. 215] argues that intrinsic factors, self-determination of the community, and the moral aspects of Protestantism are decisive factors in people's decision to convert from their traditional religion to Protestantism. In a specific study conducted by Saiyasak [5, p. 8-9]

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**Figure 1:** Map of Lam Dong Province, Vietnam and Areas of the Chil people in the Lam Dong Province (Source: Adapted from “Administrative map of Lam Dong Province” (<https://lamdong.gov.vn>))

in Thailand, the role of state leaders, such as King Mongkut (leader from 1851 to 1868), is mentioned. King Mongkut aimed to modernize Thailand, so he allowed Protestant missionaries to operate and facilitated their evangelization efforts. As a result, Protestantism has been present in Thailand since the late 19th century. However, the number of followers remains relatively low, as Protestantism’s beliefs differ from the traditional Theravada Buddhism practiced in Thailand. Bai and Kung [6, p. 672-3] also explain that the emergence and growth of Protestantism in China can be attributed to the government’s recognition of its significant contributions to the national education and healthcare systems. Consequently, the government permitted missionaries to evangelize and the people recognized the benefits, leading them to embrace Protestantism. In the Philippines, the development of Protestantism is explained by external political factors, particularly the influence of the United States (US). The research by Jones<sup>7</sup> indicates that the support from the US facilitated the work of missionaries and the growth of Protestantism within the local communities of the Philippines. “*Filipino Protestants conceived of and lived out their own religious identities*

*in their contexts, which have certainly been marked by American imperialism*” [7, p. 63].

In Myanmar, the emergence and development of Protestantism were mainly concentrated in the ethnic minorities living in the highlands, who do not follow Theravada Buddhism, including Karen, Chin, Kachin, Wa, Lahu, Pa-O, Lisu, and Akha. This is shown in the study by Pau<sup>8</sup>. The author emphasized that the success of evangelization in these ethnic groups is due to the missionaries using the local language and the Bible translated into the local language for people to understand easily. “*The Protestant missionaries were, to be said, successful in their transliteration of the Christian God into the vernacular languages of the hill dwellers in their traditional religious framework of animism*” [8, p. 288].

In Vietnam, anthropological research on why people abandon their old religion or traditional beliefs to become Protestants, especially ethnic minorities, is also varied. For examples, Salemin<sup>9,10</sup> emphasized the form of this religious “modernization” by stating that: Protestant conversion is in a way a form of religious “modernization”, which allows marginal groups to ally themselves with a prestigious world religion. The

occasion for conversion is often a collective and/or personal crisis... Protestant conversion was often attended by efforts at developing minority scripts and promoting literacy, thus meeting a widespread mythical expectation among peripheral minorities in Southeast Asia to find the lost script one day... Protestantism is nowhere the main or state religion in Southeast Asia, so conversion to Protestantism perpetuates religious difference and reaffirms ethnic boundaries distinguishing them from the dominant population [9, p. 19-20]; And, Highlanders were often motivated by the desire to become modern, and enacted such desires by joining ecumenes that embody modern universals, in particular revolutionary and Christian ecumenes, exemplifying oppositional pathways to modernity” [10, p. 388].

The research by Ngo<sup>11</sup> on Protestantism in the Hmong community in the Northern mountainous region emphasized the “transnational dimensions” such as “ethnic and transnational dimensions are crucial to an understanding of the conversion of the Hmong to Protestantism in Northern Vietnam” [11, p. 332]. Truong [12, p. 96-7] argued that the conversion to Protestantism in the Cham community in the central region is due to 1) poverty in the community; 2) rapid economic, cultural, and social transformation in the community; 3) the unsuitability of the old religion (Brahmanism) in the new context; and 4) Protestantism has a practical way of missionary work, simple rituals, and strict organization and timely help to low-income families, which attract Cham people to follow. Recently, the research by Mai [13, p. 74-7] showed the Chil community’s choice of Protestantism in Lam Dong is a rational choice because they previously followed the traditional polytheistic religion, but this religion was no longer suitable for their life, so decided to convert to Protestantism.

Thus, to become Protestants, previous researches have pointed to many reasons, including the rational choice of the community<sup>13</sup>, the impact of government and State leaders<sup>5-7</sup>, poverty<sup>12</sup>, or towards inclusiveness modernity in religion<sup>9,10</sup>, and ethnic and transnational dimensions<sup>11</sup>. However, when researching the Chill people in Vietnam, we found that these factors are not the main reasons for the Chil to become Protestants, and the real and important cause is the influence of the ethnic political context and the position of Protestants in Vietnamese society. Discovering these causes is thanks to the source of field data that we collected directly in the Chil community and used different research methods.

## METHODOLOGY

To explore the factors that influence the Chil people to become Protestants, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in this community in two periods. The first period lasted from April 2019 to April 2020 for the primary data. We also carried out the second ethnographic fieldwork to make the archival data in June 2022. The data collection methods included participatory observations, in-depth interviews with key informants, and informal conversations with many Protestant residents in the community. During the fieldwork, we lived at Chil people’s houses and joined their daily activities, and went to fields to observe how they worked and went to churches and chapels every weekend to observe them pray. The data were recorded as field notes, then synthesized and analyzed in the article’s content. With the in-depth interviews, we selected five people as key informants, of whom three were considered essential because they were pastors and their fathers were also pastors and village elders while living in strategic hamlets. The oldest person was 60 years old, the youngest was 52 years old, and the other was 57. The other two were believers, but they were the village elders of the community between the age of 50 and 54. All five were male. We also spoke to many more people (both men and women) who were Protestants during the fieldwork and were couples between the ages of 40 and 55 in a nuclear family in the community.

The in-depth interviews were focused on the ethnic history and issues related to the process of becoming Protestant of the Chil people that they witnessed or heard from their fathers. All these interviews were done in Vietnamese,<sup>a</sup> and an interpreter (a local collaborator) was added to convey the words that the informants spoke in Chil because it was difficult to express in Vietnamese. Each interview typically lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and took place in the informant’s home. After that, there were two more interviews with the same informants for additional information and the duration from 45 to 60 minutes. The total number of interviews of these five key informants was 15. All interviews were recorded by a smartphone with the informant’s permission, then transcribed and analyzed in the article. Chatting with ordinary believers in the community took a short time from 15 to 30 minutes at their homes, fields, or coffee-shops. Some conversations took place while they were working in fields, before attending the church or chapel, or after attending a service at home. The topics were usually mentioned around the history of

<sup>a</sup> Vietnamese is the national language

people and their family history. The questions asked often to focus on demographics and conditions to become a Protestant, the number of Protestants in their family and the family line, the practices of religion in the family, the economic life of the family, etc. All conversations were in Vietnamese, were not recorded, and only noted in the field notebook. This data source is used to analyze the religious context of the current Chil community and family. In addition, the research has also used secondary data sources from previous studies, books, and journal articles by Vietnamese and foreign authors.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The process of introducing and developing Protestantism in the Chil community

Protestantism was introduced to the Chil community in Lam Dong during the 1930s when an American missionary couple, Herbert A. Jackson and his wife came to Da Lat to set up evangelization headquarters for ethnic minorities in this area<sup>14</sup>. K'sol (Xre people) was the first ethnic minority person indoctrinated by Priest Jackson in 1930. He was an intelligent and agile person, who was fluent in K'ho, French, and Vietnamese<sup>13</sup>. He worked as an interpreter and taught the K'ho language to Priest Jackson, so he used to be close and listen to Priest Jackson preaching Protestantism, and then became a Protestant himself. As a Protestant, K'sol stayed at the evangelization headquarters in charge of teaching the K'ho language to missionaries and translating the Bible into the K'ho language. He was also the first person of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, who ordained a pastor in about 1932<sup>15</sup>. After becoming a Protestant, K'sol introduced some Chil people working as hired laborers in Da Lat to Priest Jackson so that they could meet and listen to Protestantism. They later went to Bible classes together to become future missionaries.

The first class taught by Priest Jackson was recorded with many Chil people attending it, including Ha Chu A, Ha Sao A, Ha Krong A, Ha Kring, Ha Brang, Ha Tieng, Ha Huy, Ha Bang A, Ha Bang B, Ha Kê, Ha Ha, Ha Doi, and Ha Krong B [15, p. 5]. After completing these classes, they became missionaries. They returned to preach Protestantism within their *bons* (Chil community residence units). Each year, they were required to join new evangelization and a classroom of the way of evangelism for two months, and then returned to continue their evangelization in the community. Therefore, the Protestant evangelization process achieved efficiency in the Chil community. The number of Chil people following Protestantism

constantly increased from about 10 in 1930 to 2,000 in 1950 and to 3,300 Protestants in 1955<sup>16</sup>. The Chil people were among the ethnic minorities with the largest number of Protestants in the Central Highlands at that time<sup>17</sup>.

After 1954, in the South of Vietnam, although Ngô Đình Diệm's government did not encourage the development of Protestantism, the intervention of the American government made conditions more favorable for Protestant activities. Thus, Protestantism continued to thrive in the Chil community with nearly half of the Chil population being Protestants, including 34 Chil pastors and preachers [18, p. 44]. From 1961, the Republic of Vietnam and the US government implemented the "Staley-Taylor plan" and built strategic hamlets (in 1962) to gather people into living there. The Chil people and other ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands were forced to leave their traditional residential areas to move into strategic hamlets. This also created a favorable opportunity for Protestant missionaries to promote their missionary work among the Chil. At this time, missionaries did not have to undergo the hardship of traveling to remote regions in the mountains and forests, where Chil people lived in *bons* but only came to strategic hamlets to indoctrinate. As a result, more and more Chil people followed Protestantism. By 1965, the number of Chil people following Protestantism had increased to more than 10,000 compared to 3,300 people, who had attended the baptism before [16, p. 81].

After 1975, due to the change in political institutions, some Protestant dignitaries, who had been involved in political activities before and after 1975, were sent to a re-education camp. In addition, the Protestant dignitaries of ethnic minorities involved in the FULRO movement<sup>b</sup> were also compelled to go to a re-education camp. Therefore, the Protestant religion in the ethnic minority areas was no longer publicly active. However, some Protestant groups continued operating clandestinely within the community. Until 1986, especially after Resolution No. 24 - NQ/TW on strengthening the State's regulation of religion in the new situation issued by the Politburo on October 16, 1990, religious activities in general and Protestantism in particular began flourishing again. By 2001 Protestantism was recognized as a legal entity by the Vietnamese State and allowed to operate in Vietnam so Protestantism also rapidly developed again in the Chil community.

<sup>b</sup>FULRO (Front Uni de Lute des Races Opprimees) The united front of the oppressed ethnic groups founded in June 1965 at the First Indochina Conference held by N. Sihanuck (the King of Cambodia)

### The brief of the political context in the Central Highlands

Before the nineteenth century, the Central Highlands was regarded as an autonomous region inhabited by local ethnic minorities. These ethnic groups lived in secluded *bons/buons*, which are traditional dwelling units of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. The village elders and shamans were responsible for managing these *bons/buons*, with the authority divided between the traditional authority held by the village elders and the charismatic authority held by the shamans [Fieldwork documents, 2020]. During the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945), the Central Highlands received protection from the dynasty, but the ethnic minorities in the area continued to live in their autonomous *bons/buons*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, after the French took control of Vietnam, the Central Highlands came under the administration of the Quy Nhon Ambassador (since 1889). The French authorities conducted several expeditions to this region, and the discovery of the Lang Biang Plateau was considered a significant achievement. Doctor Alexander Yersin was the pioneer who discovered this plateau in 1891, and he suggested that the French Colonial government should establish a resort city there. Consequently, the French started focusing on the exploitation and management of this land.

In 1900, Governor-General Paul Doumer visited the region and decided to build a resort city in the area currently occupied by Da Lat. He officially proposed the management of the plateau by establishing a management office in Tra Mi in 1901, which served as a stepping stone for the formation of the Kontum Residency in 1907. Da Lat town was established and authorized by the French Mayor named Cunhac in 1917. Furthermore, Dak Lak province was established and authorized by the French ambassador named Sabatier in 1923. Plantations were subsequently established in these highlands [19, p. 401-449].

After World War II, the French Colonialists signed the Upper Indochina Paper (*Pays Montagnards du sud Indochinois - PMSI*) on May 27, 1946, granting autonomy to the ethnic minorities in the mountains.

From 1954, the political landscape in the Central Highlands underwent significant changes. The government of the Republic of Vietnam was established, with Ngô Đình Diệm as the President. This government controlled the southern part of Vietnam from the 17th parallel onwards. To prevent the development of the Liberation Army of South Vietnam, which belonged to the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North, and to sever contact

between the army and citizens in the South and highlands, President Ngô Đình Diệm collaborated with the United States government to construct approximately 11,000 to 12,000 strategic hamlets in the South and the Central Highlands in 1962, forcibly relocating people to these hamlets. However, when President Ngô Đình Diệm was overthrown in 1963, the number of strategic hamlets built was 7,205<sup>20</sup>, with the majority concentrated in the Central Highlands, where many ethnic minorities resided [21, p. 315-323]. Subsequently, the name of the Strategic Hamlet was changed to "Ấp Đời Mới" (New Living Hamlet) in 1964 and later to "Ấp Tân Sinh" (Tan Sinh Hamlet) in 1965, but the essence remained unchanged from the previous Strategic Hamlets.

After 1975, the regime of the Republic of South Vietnam collapsed, and Vietnam was reunified, entering a period of transition to socialism. The strategic hamlets ceased to exist, and some local ethnic minority communities returned to their old *bons/buons* to settle down and reclaim their previous lands for cultivation. During this time, the *bons/buons* of the local ethnic minorities were reorganized into *thons/aps*, according to the State administrative units. Some *thons/aps* coincided with the boundaries of traditional *bons/buons* (in the case of large *bons/buons*), while others consisted of a collection of two or three different *bons/buons* (in the case of small *bons/buons*). When the *bons/buons* were transformed into *thons/aps*, their management became the responsibility of the State. The administration and affairs of the *thons/aps* were handled by full-time staff, specifically the *thon/ap* heads elected by the communities for a term of two and a half years<sup>22</sup>.

Notably, after 1975, the FULRO movement became quite active in the Central Highlands, opposing the contemporary Vietnamese State. This movement, which at times included participation from ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, reached a force of up to 10,000 people<sup>23</sup>. However, due to the resolute struggle to protect the revolutionary achievements and territorial unity of the Vietnamese State and its people, this movement gradually lost its activity in the Central Highlands by the end of 1979 and eventually ended in the mid-1990s [24, p. 27].

Additionally, since 2000, there have been a few protests related to land, religious issues, ethnic issues, and so on. However, the Party and Vietnam State have satisfactorily resolved all these matters. The people continue to exercise their citizenship according to the current constitution and laws of the Vietnamese State.

### The impact of the political context on the Chil's conversion to Protestantism

With the above political context, there were important impacts on the Chil becoming Protestants. This is demonstrated through the following stages:

**1) Before 1960:** Although the Central Highlands was established with administrative facilities, the Chil people and other ethnic minorities still lived in their *bon's* isolation for the first half of the 20th century. The Chil was less influenced and less dominated by the political state than lowland people and only endured a perfunctory intervention of local officials because of being considered a remote community [Fieldwork documents, 2020]. Their traditional economic activities mainly rely on the natural forest conditions, with the lifestyle of self-sufficiency, hunting-gathering, and swidden and nomadic practices being predominant. When Da Lat was built, the French needed local human resources to create resorts, so they mobilized ethnic young people to serve them. Many young people from ethnic groups, including Chil, Xre, Lat, et al, left their villages and engaged in contact with the outside world. Some of these young people, considered more agile and intelligent than others, were selected to be trained or to study languages, such as French and Vietnamese while remaining fluent in their mother tongue. The French employed these young people to interpret or manage employees. One such person was K'sol, mentioned above. He was very good at French, Vietnamese, and K'ho language, so he was chosen by Priest Jackson as his interpreter.

Through this work, K'sol came into direct contact with the belief of Protestantism by listening to priests preach and interpreting religious documents. Because of these things, K'sol converted his religion from the traditional religion (polytheistic religion) to Protestantism and then became the first Protestant pastor in the ethnic minority community in the Central Highlands. After that, he introduced many people working in Da Lat to Priest Jackson. These people were also preached and indoctrinated in Protestant beliefs to become Protestants and missionaries in their community.

This example showed that the political context affected the religious conversion of these people. When Da Lat developed into a resort city and had a strategically important position in the Central Highlands both economically and politically, it attracted and mustered many social classes, including politicians, missionaries, civil servants, multi-class laborers, many ethnic groups, et al. Chil, Xre, Lat laborers, et al also left their residential areas to move to Da

Lat to make a living. Therefore, they had the opportunity to contact, listen to preaching, and learn and then convert their religions to become Protestants like K'sol, Ha Chu A, Ha Sao A, et al. They were not only Protestants themselves but also became pastors and missionaries, taking on the task of spreading the faith in the community. These missionaries, along with the Western missionaries, were all very active in their work.

Western missionaries had often specific missionary strategies. Firstly, they chose key individuals or people who were intelligent and could communicate in Western languages, especially French in the local ethnic minority community to contact and learn local languages. Then, they hired these people to translate the bible into local languages and advised local people to become Protestants, as in the case of Moug Shway-pwen in Thailand<sup>5</sup> and K'sol in Lam Dong. When these people became Protestants, they were the core person of the Protestant mission in the local community. The second was the translation of the Bible into the dialect language for local people to understand Protestantism better. That was always done by Western missionaries when preaching in Southeast Asian countries. The third was to set up an organization to build and train human resources to develop missionary work in the locality.

When local missionaries took on the task of religious indoctrination among the community, they often told stories that claimed to be related to God to the community and had behaviors accompanied by words that were considered more dignified and knowledgeable about social life than other prestigious people in the community. They did not smoke and drink alcohol, etc. In daily life, they were no longer afraid of ghosts and dark forces that harmed their lives because they believed that God protected them. This was very different from their belief in the traditional religion, which was the polytheistic religion. They believed in supernatural forces such as the gods, ghosts, and devils. They had many rituals regarding these gods, which were performed with many offerings and sometimes construed as a waste of money and family assets. Rituals were practiced by shamans. The local missionaries were very different from the shamans. For example, when someone in the family was sick, the missionaries prayed to God without offerings, and sick people took medicines, but the shaman used many offerings to make offerings to gods, which did not have any effects. That created conflicts between the missionaries with the shamans.

In the Chil people's traditional society, elders and shamans had special authority. The village elder was

an older person who always manifested his experience and comprehensive knowledge of customs and practices in the community and had much more prestige than others as well as was trusted by the community. The village elder in the traditional society of Chil people was also the head of the lineage, whose role and social position directly affected not only people's lives in his lineage but also the other lineages in the village. When some problems occurred beyond the family and lineages, including a land dispute between village residents, incest, stealing, house burning, murder, etc., the village elder would conciliate by the customary law of the community [25, p. 76]. The shaman also had a vital role in affecting the community in traditional society. He considered himself to have "supernatural" power and to be able to interact with gods and deities to express people's wishes in the village by performing rituals. He could also cure by worshiping and praying to gods.

The shaman believed that the disease was caused by ghosts and demons, which needed to be worshiped. To be cured, the client had to prepare offerings to ward them off. In addition to using rituals to treat diseases, the shaman also undertook other tasks, including ritual punishment or thanksgiving (yang), etc. People in the community, who committed things such as encroaching on sacred forest land, polluting water supply, and getting pregnant before marriage, incest, etc., would be "reprimanded" by gods or would be subjected to rituals of punishment, and had to use the valuable offerings as killing buffaloes, pigs, chicken, straw liquor, etc., to worship the gods [Fieldwork documents, 2020].

Since then, the role and position of missionaries had become more special in the community, whereas the role of village elders and shamans had been reduced. Therefore, they were the first people to oppose the Protestant mission in the Chil community.

The missionaries became a new source of inspiration for the community, especially their relatives. These relatives became the first Protestants in the community. They started to learn Bible as well as perform Protestant rituals, and gave up traditional rituals. That was the first factor achieved in the missionaries' progress of religious evangelization and became the local missionaries' strategy. Therefore, despite being deprecated by the village elder and shamans, the religious evangelization and conversion continued starting with missionaries' families and spreading out through the community.

Nevertheless, in the early 30s, the French colonial government feared the development of Protestantism that would influence the political situation in Indochina,

so did not allow widespread missionary work in this area and prevented the development of Protestantism in the Chil community but priest Jackson always encouraged Chil missionaries to do their duty. By the late 1930s, under the influence of the democratic movement in France, the ban on religious activities was revoked in Indochina, so Protestantism in Vietnam was again developed [26, p. 375]. Thus, the missionaries in the Chil community were freer to do their work. They along with their family members continued preaching to develop the number of Protestants in the community.

**2) From 1960 to 1975:** After 1960, the Republic of Vietnam's government built a series of strategic hamlets in the Central Highlands. The Chil people were forced to remove from their bon/buon to live in strategic hamlets. As the elders in the community recalled, there were moats with bamboo stakes dug around strategic hamlets, which were fenced with barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards [Fieldwork documents, 2020]. They had no freedom to go out of strategic hamlets. Their movements would be monitored. Chil people's houses in strategic hamlets were built with bamboo trees and corrugated iron roofs.

The strategic hamlet was divided into many areas. Each area was occupied by the same lineage families or people who previously lived in the same village. To control and manage a strategic hamlet, a hamlet head was appointed by the government, along with assistants such as a hamlet deputy head, police officer, etc. They were Chil people trusted by the government and used to previously serve in the military and had to be literate to carry out bureaucratic tasks for the government [25, p. 74-7].

In the context of being grouped in this way and living away from their traditional residence areas, the Chil people quickly converted to Protestantism because priests and Protestant missionaries went to strategic hamlets to help the people in many ways, including charity work, education, health care, etc. The people came to believe that Protestantism would bring many benefits to their lives because when they lived in this area to face many difficulties such as leaving their traditional farming area and starting many things over. They even had to cultivate friendships with other ethnic groups to request arable land but they did not also have enough food to live on.

Therefore, the aid and charity from priests and Protestant missionaries in strategic hamlets provided the relief that the Chil people needed and gave the missionaries an advantage in attracting more people to

Protestantism. As a result, most Chil people living in strategic hamlets converted to Protestantism.

**3) After 1975:** Protestant activities in the Central Highlands and in the Chil community were restricted. In particular, after the Protestant dignitaries, who participated in the FULRO movement against the achievements of the Vietnamese revolution, were arrested and sent to a concentration camp, this made other Protestants even more afraid and affected the general life of Chil Protestants.

In Lam Dong, the government banned sixty-two out of sixty-nine Protestant churches from being active, and only allowed seven churches to open on Sunday morning for rituals [27, p. 11]. Hence, there was no conversion within the Chil community at that time. The people who became Protestants just did religious activities at their homes or in some confidentially organized small groups in the community. Others, because of fearing the government, had to reconvert to their old religion (polytheism) and avoided contact with Protestants for fear of getting involved in political matters.

Protestant activities in Vietnam were only improved when the 24th Resolution of the Central Government on “Enhancing religious affairs in the new situation” was issued, and when Protestantism was recognized as a legal entity in 2001, opportunities for developing Protestantism returned. Chil people, who had left the religion, were encouraged to return to Protestantism by pastors and deacons in the community, and others also gradually continue to convert to Protestantism. Consequently, by that time, nearly 100% of the population in the Chil community in Lam Dong had become Protestants.

The above analysis shows that the political context is one of the important factors affecting Chil people becoming Protestants. Depending on the specific political context, Chil people’s conversion to Protestantism varies. If the context is suitable, there are many Chil people to become Protestants and if not suitable, they can get out of Protestantism to reconvert to their traditional religion.

## CONCLUSION

It has been found that the Chil people in Vietnam embrace Protestantism due to their struggles in comprehending the complex political landscape of the Central Highlands when establishing connections with the external community. While residing in secluded villages, the influence of traditional village elders and shamans held significant sway, resulting in limited adoption of Protestantism despite the presence of

zealous missionaries in their villages. However, as they moved away from these traditional villages and began residing in strategic hamlets during the war era or in the post-war period, their exposure to a broader political context led to a decline in traditional power structures. Additionally, socio-economic pressures played a role in this transition. Accordingly, the Chil people swiftly embraced or renounced Protestantism, depending on the prevailing political conditions. This dynamic process serves as the primary catalyst behind the Chil people’s conversion to Protestantism.

It is important to note that the Chil people represent a minority group within the local K’ho community. Historically, they have maintained minimal contact with their counterparts in other countries as they have not migrated beyond Vietnam’s borders. They reside within Vietnam and hold Vietnamese citizenship, meaning that they are continuously influenced by political changes over time, as well as alterations in state policies concerning economy, culture, religion, and other aspects. These factors constantly shape their decisions to adopt, abandon, or re-adopt Protestantism, as seen in the present.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL STATEMENT

This study was conducted in the Chil Protestant community in Lam Dong province, Vietnam from 2019 to 2020 and in 2022. The data collection was carried out according to the principle of ethnic fieldwork, with the agreement of the people, and without conflict in the data collection process in the community.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors state no conflict of interest and there are no data associated with this article.

## AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Huynh Ngoc Thu and Le Thi My Ha completed this article as a co-author.



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# Người Chil trở thành tín đồ đạo Tin Lành: Sự tác động của bối cảnh chính trị ở khu vực Tây Nguyên từ đầu thế kỷ XX đến nay

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## TÓM TẮT

Đạo Tin Lành là tôn giáo ra đời và phát triển muộn hơn so với Phật giáo, Công giáo, Hồi giáo... trên thế giới và tôn giáo này được truyền vào Việt Nam từ đầu thế kỷ XX, cũng muộn hơn các tôn giáo kể trên. Nhiều bài viết khi nghiên cứu về quá trình truyền đạo và phát triển tín đồ của tôn giáo này đã giải thích rằng người dân theo đạo Tin Lành là do: 1) Lãnh đạo Nhà nước muốn lợi dụng những người truyền đạo Tin Lành để phát triển đất nước; 2) Người theo đạo Tin Lành muốn tiến đến một tôn giáo hiện đại, toàn diện trong tín ngưỡng của mình; 3) Đạo Tin Lành phát triển là do vấn đề quan hệ dân tộc xuyên quốc gia, tính xuyên quốc gia là cơ hội cho đạo Tin Lành phát triển; hoặc 4) Người nghèo nên cải đạo sang Tin Lành để được tôn giáo này giúp đỡ. Tuy nhiên, khi nghiên cứu về việc người Chil theo đạo Tin Lành, bằng việc phân tích dữ liệu thực địa được thu thập trực tiếp từ cộng đồng (bằng phương pháp phỏng vấn sâu và quan sát tham dự), bài viết phát hiện nguyên nhân khiến cộng đồng này trở thành tín đồ Tin Lành, không giống như những lý do đã được đề cập trong các nghiên cứu trước đây. Nguyên nhân chính khiến họ trở thành tín đồ Tin Lành là do sự tác động của bối cảnh chính trị ở Tây Nguyên của Việt Nam. Hiện nay, gần 100% người Chil ở Tây Nguyên trở thành tín đồ Tin Lành, và tôn giáo này đã trở thành tôn giáo chính trong cộng đồng người Chil.

**Từ khoá:** Tin Lành, người Chil, bối cảnh chính trị ở Tây Nguyên

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