

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINOUS PROVINCES OF VIETNAM

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1. On traditional religious beliefs

In general, the traditional religious beliefs of ethnic minority groups in the Northern mountainous provinces are influenced strongly by ancient religious elements. They are Animisms and Totemism. Beside ancient religious elements there are the presents of Taoism, a part of Confucianism and Buddhism. Whether we analysis traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in national cultural way or religious way we find that the religious activities of these ethnic minorities as follows;

1.1- The worship of ancestor

The worship of ancestor is a symbolic belief of all ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces. According to conception of many ethnic groups, ancestors are the deads who are forefathers and fathers. They established the causes of families and of communities, their descendants carry out customary laws of communities. Ancestors always help and support their descendants in the life. So their descendants have to memorize the merit of ancestors and worship them.

It is noted that, not all ethnic groups have common concepts of their ancestors. Thái people often write the names of the deads in family annals. Hmông people and some other ethnic groups have not writing system so they only keep the names of the deads in their mind. When worshipping the deads, Thái people invite all the deads but Hmông people only invite who they remember. The ancestor of Dao people is manifested by extensive aspect and narrow one. For extensive aspect, Bàn Vương is considered as creator of each family, of each line and of Dao people. For narrow aspect, ancestors consist of parents, grandparents, forefathers. Dao people worship nine generations. Pu Péo people worship three generations (parents, grand parents and great grandparents). Giáy people worship all deads. La Hủ people only worship parents when their family has the sick they worship three generations. Xinh

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Mun only worship two generations (parents and grand parents). For them, the deads from great grandparents to the past are the ghosts of field or the ghosts of village. Hà Nhì people in some regions only worship parents but in other regions they worship parents and grandparents. The ancestral category of Lô Lô people is divided into 2 parts. The near ancestors are from the third to the fifth generations; the distant ancestors are from the sixth generation to the past.

In the house of ethnic people there is ancestral altar. According to the view of ethnic people, the ancestral altar is placed in solemn place of the house. Tày people often place the ancestral altar in the high place. It is decorated beautifully. The ancestral altar of Giáy people is placed in the middle room where they worship Kitchen god and Heaven - Earth. In the ancestral altar of Pu Péo people there is not a incense burner but it has some glazed terra cotta jars, each glazed terra cotta jar symbolizes each generation so all altars of Pu Péo people has at least three glazed terra cotta jars. Hà Nhì people fasten the altar up the pillar in the room of house owner. The altar of Hà Nhì people is very simple, it is a bamboo cylinder or basket , in it there is little alcohol yeast. The altar of Xinh Mun is placed in the corner of the room.¹ The ancestral altar of Dao people is decorated the most sophisticatedly. The ancestral altar of Dao people is cube , it is placed in the middle room (if the house has three rooms) or in the living room (if the house has two rooms). It is placed in the high place. In the altar there is an incense-burner, next to incense –burner there is cup of water. In front of incense –burner there are three cups of wine. Around the altar there are instruments of sacrifice, for example: drum, bell, horn... Inside of altar people stick the drawing of saints and gods. Some regions the altar of Dao people is divided into three storeys: Supreme, Middle and Inferior. In some regions, Dao people's altar is very simple, it is a board with a lean-to by bamboo and it is hung up against wall². The place where worship ancestors is called *Cung'v Pox Zienus* by Hmông people. The altar of Hmông people is very simple, it is rectangular piece of paper and stuck on the wall of the middle room where have religious and belief activities. In some regions, the altar of Hmông people is made by wood. It is called *xinhx khaz*, it is placed in the

¹ The Institute of Ethnology. *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House , Hanoi, 1978 p. 72- 411

² Vương Duy Quang *The religious and belief life of Dao people in Vietnam*. Scientific report, 2006, p. 9

middle room. On the altar there are three incense burners or three joss -stick pots. Only men can go near altar.

The rite of ancestral worshipping is carried out many times a year. Ancestors are worshipped in new year, in wedding ceremony, in funeral ceremony, in the rite of new rice, in the rite of giving the name to a baby, in the rite of grown -up, in the rite of new house etc. In some regions, Tày and Nùng people worship their ancestors in the first day and the fifteenth day of the lunar month. The ancestral worship is carried out by father- house owner. The ancestral worship is very simple but solemn. The worship of Bàn Vương creator is meticulously prepared by Dao people. This rite is the most costly rite in traditional belief activities of Dao people.

1.2- The religious beliefs relate to agriculture

As already stated, almost ethnic people in the Northern mountainous regions are farmers. Ethnic people who live valleys grow wet rice but those living in high mountains do fields. So their belief rites are related to their economic activities. Ethnic people have following rites

1.2.1. The rite of praying for good harvest

The rite of praying for good harvest is an important agricultural belief of ethnic people. The ethnic minorities call this rite by different names but the aim of this rite is to pray Heaven- Earth and deities for good harvest. This rite is often carried out after lunar New Year. Ethnic people usually carry out this rite before new crop. According to each region or each ethnic people this rite can be carried out at the end of the third lunar month or at the beginning of the fourth lunar month. We deal with two typical rites of praying for good harvest

Lồng Tồng festival of Tày, Nùng people: it is harvest festival of ethnic groups basing on agriculture of wet rice.

According to the view of Tày and Nùng people Lồng Tồng means “ go to the field” and Lồng Tồng means “ drum”. This festival is taken place from the first lunar month to the second lunar month. In holiday, families place big feast next to field where Lồng Tồng rite is carried out. An old and prestigious man is selected to pray heave, earth, deities and ancestors for good harvest and good luck . After rite they plough field to begin new crow.

After the rite, people carry out folk games. The festival is over by family meal of all people in the community.

Shíp Khắt lòng đao miến rite of Dao people. It is the typical harvest festival of ethnic groups basing on milpa. *Shíp Khắt lòng đao miến* means “pray Heave and Earth. According to Dao people this festival is to pray Heave and Earth – supernatural influence, deities and ancestors for good harvest.

According to custom, this rite is carried out in the first lunar month or from at the end of the third lunar month to the beginning of the fourth lunar month. This ritual has many names. Normally, families prepare big feast including chicken, steamed glutinous rice, wine and votive money then they place this big feast in *Đềng, Miu* where tutelary god is worshipped or in field. In some regions, Dao people organize this ritual once every two or three years, villager contribute offerings. Although this rite is carried out in different ways, the etiquette of praying Heaven – Earth and deities is the most important. In this etiquette, the sorcerer in the name of whole villagers prays Heave- Earth, God of agriculture, ancestors of Dao people and other deities to help and support villagers so they have good harvest and their life is happy. After praying, villagers offer gifts to Heave- Earth, God of agriculture, ancestors of Dao people. They burn votive money and toss two coins for prophecy. At the end of the rite all families enjoy offerings in the place of this rite³

In some ethnic groups, belief of praying for good harvest is very simple. The rite of praying for good harvest of Khơ Mú people is associated with custom to “teach” rice how to multiply in the field”. Mường people carry out farm-work initiation ceremony for praying good harvest. Thái people have custom to welcome the early peal of thunder . This peal of thunder signals that the cold winter’s days end and new crop begins. Lô Lô people carry out the rite of praying for good harvest in the place where they worship God of the soil. According to their custom they are off work three days after praying for good harvest. Pu Péo people carry out the belief of praying for good harvest in *Pat ong* rite from the 3rd to the 13th of the first lunar month. In this rite Pu Péo people pray heaven- earth and their ancestors to have happy life⁴. Beside the rite of “going to the field” Nùng people in Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng

³ Vương Duy Quang *The spiritual culture of Hmong people: tradition and at present*. Culture and Information Publishing House and Cultural Institute, Hanoi, 2005 p. 95

⁴ Vương Duy Quang *The spiritual life of Dao people in Vietnam*. Scientific Report, 2006 p. 12

province have “fireworks” rite. In this rite people pray timely rains and favorable weather⁵.

1.2.2. The rite of worshipping rice soul

Ethnic groups consider rice soul as God of rice. This God has an important role in good harvest. So that almost ethnic groups have the rite of worshipping rice soul to pray for prosperity. According to ethnic groups and regions this rite is carried out in different times. It is very simple and carried out by each family. Dao people often hold this rite before crop is over⁶. In some regions of Thái people the rite of worshipping rice soul is called the rite of “thanks to rice soul”.

After harvesting rice, they place big feast on stack of thatch and pray the God of rice. Then they make man of straw. It symbolizes rice soul. They please man of straw to their house and place it on the paddy cylindrical bamboo tank so that rice soul “sleeps” in winter and early peal of thunder will awake rice soul. Khơ Mú people think that when sowing and cropping rice, rice soul incorporates in rice mother (i.e. mistress of house). Rice mother is the first person to sow and crop rice. In rite of cropping farm produce they invite rice soul to their houses and they place sacred rice- ear on gourds, pumpkins, potatoes and pray their soul to increase vital power of rice. La Hủ people worship rice soul when they sow rice but the main worship is carried out in crops⁷

1.2.3. Rite of new rice

This rite manifests deep gratitude of ethnic people to their ancestors and deities who help them to have good harvest. When rice become ripe Thái people pick some rice ears to hang them on the wall of altar, then they invite god of house to witness. At last, members of family gather to celebrate crop⁸. Dao people also carry out this rite in the harvest. The head of family gathers fresh

⁵ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p. 105, 83, 161, 380, 255

⁶ According to investigative documents of writer in Quảng Uyên district, Cao bằng province in October 2006

⁷ Vương Duy Quang *The spiritual life of Dao people in Vietnam*. Scientific Report, 2006 p. 12

⁸ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p 161, 106, 361

rice plants for the rite of new rice to thank his ancestors for all their help⁹. Beside above rites, ethnic people who live high land have other agricultural beliefs concerning farming, forest such as rite of seed sowing, rite of open the forest, rite of worshipping god of milpa...Ethnic people who live valley have some belief activities. Thái people in the Northwestern region worship ghost of field, the god of river and god of stream. Mường people carry out rite of worshipping God of earth at the beginning of farm work..

1.3. The religious beliefs concerning community

The unity of community is basic power for ethnic minorities to exist and develop. This power helps ethnic minorities to overcome natural challenges and threats from abroad. The religious belief concerning community plays an important role in creating the power of unity.

When studying ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces we find that the worship of god of village is very popular. According to the view of almost ethnic groups, the God of village is founder of village so he usually helps and defends his villagers. God of village can control the life of villagers. When he is angry he makes a lot of difficulties. Mường people consider God of village as tutelary god. Tutelary god is worshipped in communal house in village. Thái people think that their fates and the fate of landlord depend on the fate of symbolic house on stilts. This house is built when landlord is in power. Tày people consider God of village to be kitchen gods, God of the soil. They build temples in their village to worship them¹⁰. Dao people worship the God of village in *Đềng* or *Miu*. *Đềng* or *Miu* can be a shack, it is build by villagers. *Đềng* or *Miu* can be small cave in the mountain. Hmông people worship God of village in the foot of tree or in the small cave in the mountain. Hmông people attach much importance to worship of God of village. They often worship God of village in New Year or when they have an important work.

Although belief of family is less important than belief of community, it is an interested problem of ethnic people in Northern mountainous provinces especially Hmông people. Hmông people think that people who are in the same

⁹ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam* (The Northern provinces) Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p 161

¹⁰ Vương Duy Quang *The spiritual life of Dao people in Vietnam*. Scientific Report, 2006 p. 13

their family should be the “same their ghost” i.e. people who have the same belief in the rite of funeral, in the rite of pig ghost, in the rite of buffalo ghost. They do not distinguish between branches. But other ethnic groups define clearly position of branches and the place of worship of each family.

1.4. The religious belief concerning the cycle of lifetime

According to cultural characteristics of each group or each region, the religious beliefs concerning the cycle of lifetime in the Northern mountainous provinces have different manifestations. Almost ethnic groups have following rites such as the rite welcomes a baby; the rite relates to the process of mature and the funeral ceremony.

+ The religious belief concerning childbirth and child parenting

Ethnic people have taboo customs concerning foetus and childbirth (Dao women are forbidden to pin needle on their shirt when they are pregnant. Hmông and Dao women have not right to give birth in their own parents). Some ethnic groups have rite of praying for both mother and child doing well. When baby was born they have the rite of giving the name to baby. In this rite they often pray god of house, their ancestors and other deities to support and help baby. They choose name of baby carefully because they want that this name fits baby perfectly and this name does not infringe upon taboo words of their family.

+ The belief relates to process of maturity

This is manifested in two main rites such as the rite of maturity and wedding ceremony

The rite of maturity

According to the popular conception of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces any man has to experience the rite of maturity. After this rite he has right to take activities of community. In other words any man who does not experience the rite of maturity is not recognized adult although he has children. For Dao people, this rite is very important. The man who experiences this rite to be given a certificate written by Dao writing. He has right to take part in religious and social activities in accordance with Dao customs. Dao people call this rite *Lập tỉnh* (*Lập tỉnh*, *Lập tịch*) or *Cấp tỉnh* (*Cấp*

tính...), *Quáng tang*, *Chay sáy* or *Phùn vòng*¹¹. Hmông people call rite of maturity *Bê lăul* it means the rite of giving formal name to a Hmông man.

Wedding ceremony

Wedding ceremony is an important landmark to affirm the maturity of each member in community. According to different customs this ceremony has different ways but almost wedding ceremonies of almost ethnic groups have born patriarchal stamps. After studying we find that when bridegroom family meets the bride he has to carry out procedure of “nhập cửa” or “nhập ma” for bride. It means that he pray his ancestors, the god of house and other deities to recognize bride to be a member of husband’s family .

After wedding ceremony bridegrooms of Khơ Mú and Pà Thẻn people have to live in bride’s family a period of time. Khơ Mú bridegrooms even have to change their family names into their wives’ family names. Only wife lives in husband family she will bear her husband’s family name, at that time she prays husband’s ancestors¹².

+ The religious beliefs relate to the death

Almost ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces think that the dead completes his duty in the world and he returns to the world of ancestors so the living has to carry out funeral ceremony to see off the dead. The funeral ceremony of Hmông and Dao people is finical

According to Dr. Lý Hành Sơn, the funeral ceremony of Dao people consists of many belief etiquettes. Immediately after the dead breaths his last, the livings carry out the rite of giving a coin of silver into the dead. It means that mandarins in the hell can not ask the dead and the dead has metal to defend him. After this rite the livings divide family prosperity for the dead. Then the livings attend a funeral and carry out burial ceremony . Finally, they realize the rite of informing their ancestors about the dead and they pray their ancestors to help the dead. When funeral ceremony is over Dao people carry out *Piuốp miến* rite. The aim of this rite is to lead the soul of the dead to the land of

¹¹ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p 161, 82, 160, 195

¹² Lý Hành Sơn: *The main rites in the life of Dao Tuyền people In Ba Bể, Bắc Kạn* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p. 104, 159, 160, 194, 339- 340

his ancestors. After this rite descendants of the dead can wear mourning head band and carry out the rite of coming out of mourning.¹³

When Hmông person breathes his last, his relatives will fire 3 shots to announce that in their family there is a dead. Then relatives of the dead carry out the ancestral worship and inform ancestor about the dead. His relatives will pray ancestor to accept the dead. It is difficult for Hmông dead to meet their ancestor. Hmông livings have to carry out the rite of showing the way for the dead. This rite will help the dead to overcome 9 hardships. The dead is worn linen clothes so his ancestors recognize him. The rite of showing the way is an important rite in obsequies of Hmông people. Beside this rite there are other rites, for example, the rite of play a wind instrument. The aim of this rite is to lead the soul of the dead to meet the ghost of house, the ghost of door, the ghost of kitchen. This rite also drives away the soul of Chinese people; the rite of attending funeral; the ceremony of lowering dead's coffin into the grave; the rite of offering rice to the dead. In order to show gratitude to their parents Hmông people often carry out *Nhunx Dangz* rite after their parents die for three years. This rite ends all activities of obsequies. This rite is similar to funeral ceremony but nobody lie in "the house of the dead".

The funeral ceremony of Pu Péo people is different from the funeral ceremony of other ethnic groups. When father or mother dies, Pu Péo people slant jars of worshipping. When carrying out funeral ceremony they do not cook rice by stove but they have to make cooking fire by stone and put in the middle room. Pu Péo people believe that the dead will reincarnate so his footmark will print on ashes which are sprinkled in the door. After burying the dead, his family will choose good day to place new jar of worship, erect other jars and funeral ceremony is over¹⁴.

(Tobe continued)

¹³ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978 p. 104, 159-160; 194, 339-340

¹⁴ The Institute of Ethnology *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam (The Northern provinces)* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978, p. 253