

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

The second

II Some problems are emerging in process of integration and development

:2.1 The period of renewal and regulating in religious activities

The ethnic culture in general and the religious belief of ethnic minorities in particular are not immutable elements, they can change and regulate. They can be influenced by the development of life. When regulating, these cultural and religious elements which are not suitable to contemporary life will be rejected or changed. In Vietnam, the period of renewal influences strongly the development of our country as well as of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces. In other words, the life of ethnic people has changed when ethnic people have liberties. New cultural elements often influence them so they regularly change awareness of the world and human. However, in long period of subsidy, the changes of awareness of ethnic people are not clear. When open - door policy has been carried out the living condition and awareness of ethnic people change clearly so their belief and religious needs also change, the living customs of ethnic communities have also been regulated.

Firstly, among active influences we find that the living conditions of ethnic people is raising. Because of effects of health and education (by government) the role of shaman is reducing. Many patients are cured by doctors in hospital. When we asked people in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province that How did they cure the sick in their family? We received answers as follows

Invite shaman: 54, 55%

Invite healer: 7, 58%

To cure by Vietnamese traditional medicine: 53, 53%

To cure in hospital: 96,97%

These indexes are worth incentive because 5 years before, few Hmông people go to hospital (they make up 20%) so many Hmông people believe in shaman (they make up 90%)¹

Secondly, although we have great achievements in open-door period, we have to bear their reverses. When social economy in urban centres, in plains and valleys develops strongly and the life of people change quickly but the economy in the mountainous provinces changes slowly. For example, almost Hmông

¹ Vuong Duy Quang: Report of the investigational results of contagious danger of HIV in Hmông and Dao people in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province

villages are poor so their cost and prolix belief activities are regulated. According to Hmông custom, the son has to kill a cow to show gratitude to his father (or mother) when his father (or mother) die. Because of difficult condition the dead's children offer a cow to him (or her) together. The cost and prolix etiquettes of funeral ceremony are rejected.² For Dao people, the worship of Bàn Vương is simpler than before. In this rite Dao people only offer two pigs to deities Bàn Vương. The cycle of this rite is shorter than before. The rite of title conferment of Dao people has many levels from low to high³. At present Dao people only carry out the 3rd level. It is *Quang Tang* rite with three lamps- It is compulsory rite to recognize maturity of man. But belief and religious needs of rich people is different from poor people. The Dao rich people often want to carry out cost and prolix rites because they want to affirm their role in community. Economic renovation makes the life of Nùng and Tày people richer so their traditional belief and religious activities which were fallen into oblivion are restored. Among them there are many rites, for example the rite of praying for rain, the rite of lồng tồng.

2.2 The penetration of new elements and changes of spiritual life of ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces

2.2.1 On some ethnic people accept Catholicism

In the second half of XIX century Catholicism was introduced in the Northern mountainous provinces by Kinh Catholics who emigrated and live in these provinces. Tuyên Quang and Đông Chương parishes were established in 1893 and in 1895. These parishes belonged to Hưng Hóa and Bắc Ninh dioceses. In 1876 Cao Bằng had 300 Kinh Catholics. Priests of Dominica order struggled with each other for influence in these provinces. In 1913 Lạng Sơn diocese was established (it consisted of Lạng Sơn, Cao Bang and Hà Giang provinces). It was difficult for priests to change belief of ethnic people. French and Spanish priests based on Kinh Catholics to carry out missionary work and they had to overcome many difficulties to live with local people. After many years the missionary work of Western priests achieved initial results. Before the August revolution 1945, thousands of people in from Lạng Sơn diocese to Sơn La- Lai Châu parish followed Catholicism. But almost Catholics were Kinh people and small parts of Tày, Nùng and Chinese people (in Lạng Sơn diocese). Before 1954 in Tuyên Quang, Hà Giang, Sơn La, Lai Châu there was not any Catholics⁴. In 1905 a Catholic church was built in Sa Pa. In 1921 5 Hmông families in Hầu

² According to investigational documents of writer in Meo Vac district, Hụ Giang province, in May, 2002

³ Lý Hanh Sơn, The main rites in life cycle of Dao Tien in Ba Be distict, B³/₄c C^hn province. Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003 p. 155

⁴ Hoàng th^hp B^ých Ng^âc. Catholic problems in ethnic people in the Northern mountainous province at present. The scientific report in October, 2002

Thào and Lao Chải communes followed Catholicism. In 1925 33 Hmông families followed Catholicism. At that time, missionary work spread in Hmông people in Trại Tấu, Nghĩa Lộ province (now Yên Bái province). From 1945 to 1954 the missionary work in Hmông people was halted because of the influence of the anti- French resistance war. When the restoration of peace, the number of Hmông Catholics did not increase. From 1990s up to now Catholicism in Sa Pa and in Trại Tấu seems to restore and develop⁵. In December, 2007 in Sa pa there were 1.681 Hmông Catholics and in Trại Tấu there were 5.109 Hmông Catholics. These figures prove that Catholicism develops rather quickly in Hmông community. But hardly it developed in other ethnic communities. According to datum of Committee for Religious Affairs of Yên Bái province, In December, 2007 the number of ethnic people who followed Catholicism as follows 29 Dao, 108 Tày people; 107 Thái people; 64 Mường people and 1 Chinese. According to the report of police station in Lạng Sơn province, the number of Catholics in this province is very few: 120 Tày people; 1349 Nùng people; 27 Chinese and 3 Mường people.

2.2.2 Dao people in Bắc Sơn with Protestantism

Protestantism came in Vietnam later than Catholicism. In 1911 the first basic of The Christian and Missionary of Alliance (CMA) was established in Đà Nẵng. In 1924 Vietnamese Protestant Church was established. In the first time, Protestantism operated mainly in the provinces and towns in plain. The Protestant missionaries tried their best to develop Protestantism in mountainous regions. One of these trends was the present of missionaries in Lạng Sơn province and missionary work started to carry out in ethnic minorities. But it was difficult for missionary to carry out missionary work in Tày, Nùng communities because Tày and Nùng people reacted to Protestantism. In 1939 missionaries changed their missionary direction . They carried out missionary work in Dao community in Bắc Sơn district and 5 Dao people in Trần Yên commune became Catholics. In 1940 tens of Dao people became Catholics. Then Protestantism developed in Vu Sơn commune and Tân Sơn commune then Bắc Sơn Protestant Church came into the world. According to the reports of appropriate authorities in 2001 in Bắc Sơn there were 258 families (about 1335 people) to follow Protestantism⁶. However, the development of Protestantism in Bắc Sơn district has been not flowing. In 1950 -1968 Bắc Sơn Protestant Church met many difficulties because many Catholics in Trần Yên, Tân Tri, Vũ Sơn, and Đông ý seemed not to be interested in Catholicism and religious activities.. Some people in management board prayed God while were

⁵ Vương Duy Quang. The spiritual culture of Hmông people in Vietnam in the past and at present. Information and Culture Publishing House and Culture institute, Hanoi, 2005 p. 224- 232

⁶ Vương Duy Quang. Bắc Sơn Protestant Church: the past and at present.. The scientific report, 2002

praying ancestor even some of them were sorcerers in rite of treatment⁷. However, we find that the development of Protestantism in Bắc Sơn province has been a graph of advance. Protestantism only develops in Dao people. The Dao population is less than Tày or Nùng population. Protestantism only develops in villages around Khau Kiêng mountain. Protestantism hardly develops in other Dao villages⁸.

2.2.3 The phenomena of Thìn Hùng, Vàng Chử sect and Protestant influence to Hmông, Dao and other ethnic people at present

In 1987 in many Hmông regions there was phenomenon “*xưng vua*” (it means to proclaim oneself king). This phenomenon started from Yên Hương commune, Hàm Yên district, Tuyên Quang province; Phì Nhừ commune, Điện Biên district, Lai Châu province; Chiềng Cang commune, Sông Mã district, Sơn La province. After listening to radio FEBC about good future some Hmông people were active to propagate Vàng Chử. They believed that Vàng Chử would save Hmông people from misery and anyone who followed Vàng Chử would have a happy life. Anyone who does not follow Vàng Chử would be killed by tiger. The uneasy and tense atmosphere was rising in Hmông community. Many Hmông people were advised that they should pay money, cigarettes, red cloth and leave to worship of their ancestor and wait for Vàng Chử. In 1990 Vàng Chử movement developed in districts such as Bảo Yên, Bảo Thắng, Bắc Hà in Lào Cai province. In 19912 this movement developed in some districts in Hà Giang province such as: Bắc Quang, Hoàng Su Phì, Xín Mần, Vị Xuyên. In April, 1997 17 Hmông households in Sủng Thái commune, Yên Minh district followed Vàng Chử. So Vàng Chử phenomenon was present in Đồng Văn Plateau. This region has been the native land of Hmông people in Vietnam.

While Vàng Chử movement was taking place in some regions, Hmông people were propagated that Jesus was Vàng Chử's son. They went to Catholic churches in Tuyên Quang, Trại Tấu, Yên Bái, Sơn Tây. In 1993 some people who followed Vàng Chử made contact with Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region). Since then, Vàng Chử movement was influenced by Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region). In the middle of 1994, in the Northern mountainous provinces there were 62.000 believers of Vàng Chử. In 1998 Vàng Chử movement spread in 56 districts of 13 provinces with about 70.000 believers⁹.

In 1994 some Dao people in the Northern mountainous provinces began to accept Thìn Hùng. Some Dao groups who were living in Mường Tè, Sìn Hồ, Tam

⁷ idem

⁸ idem

⁹ Vuong Duy Quang: the change of Hmông people's attitude in the Northern mountainous provinces where are influenced by Protestantism

Đường, Than Uyên, Mường Nhe districts of Lai Châu and Điện Biên provinces had left ancestral worship to follow Thần Hùng. In 2000 256 Dao households with 794 people were living in old Lai Châu province to follow Thần Hùng. In Lao Cai, the development of Thần Hùng movement happened from 1994 to 2002. 53 Dao households in Bat Xat district followed Thần Hùng movement; 5 Dao households with 25 people in Sa Pa followed Thần Hùng movement; 4 Dao households with 28 people in Gia Phú commune, Bảo Thắng district followed Thần Hùng movement¹⁰. In Cao Bằng province there were many Dao people to follow new faith. In 1998 the trend of following Thần Hùng developed strongly in Bảo Lâm, Bảo Lạc and Nguyên Bình districts. The development of Thần Hùng movement was similar to Vàng Chử movement in Hmông community. In 2001, in the whole Cao Bang province there were 361 Dao household with 2.235 people to follow Thần Hùng. Majority of these people lived in Bảo Lạc, Nguyên Bình and Bảo Lâm districts¹¹

Sine 1998 Vàng Chử movement was influenced strongly by Protestantism but the number of Vàng Chử believers was lessening in Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Sơn La and Lai Châu provinces¹².

In 2004 there was a gap between Protestant believers in the Northern mountainous provinces. Some of them followed Triune God; some of them followed Vàng Chử; others left Protestantism. In October, 2006 there were 70.331 people with 12.937 households to followed Protestantism¹³. Hundreds of Protestant churches came into the world in Hmông villages, some of them registered for their religious practice.

After 2000, Thần Hùng movement was influenced strongly by Protestantism. But Thần Hùng movement only developed in Dao small communities who had followed Thần Hùng – Protestantism before. Since 2003 some Protestant churches were established. Actually Protestantism has developed in Dao community since 2006.

In 1998 Protestantism also developed in other ethnic people such as Thái, Tày, Sán Chẻ, La Hủ ... In fact, very few people followed Protestantism. According to data of Northwest Steering Committee, in March, 2007 in Điện Biên and Bắc Cạn province there were 22 Sán Chẻ households with 121 people to follow Protestantism; in Hà Giang province there were 4 Pa Then households with 160 people to follow Protestantism; in Hà Giang province there were 160

¹⁰ idem

¹¹ The Committee for Religious Affairs of Cao Bang province: Some resolutions and policies regarding religions of ethnic people in Cao Bang province

¹² Vương Duy Quang: Protestantism in the Northern mountainous provinces: reality and necessary problems. The Scientific report in October, 2003

¹³ The Steering Committee of Tụy B³/₄c province: the datum regarding Protestantism in Tụy B³/₄c province

Protestant believer; in Điện Biên province there were 4 Thái households with 25 people to follow Protestantism; in Lao Cai and Hà Giang there were 10 households with 60 people to follow Protestantism¹⁴.

2.2.4 The appearance of strange beliefs or “strange religions” and of Dương Văn Minh sect.

In history, hardly any strange beliefs or strange religion appeared in the Northern mountainous provinces. When Vietnam has entered open –door period, some strange religions have appeared in these provinces. Firstly, Vàng Chữ movement has appeared in Hmông people. The Thìn Hùng movement has appeared in Dao people and this movement was influenced by Protestantism as we said above.

Because of blind trust 53 people in the Northwest committed suicided in October, 1993. They thought that the death would help them to have happy life¹⁵. In 2007 appropriate authorities in Hà Giang and Cao Bang provinces found that a part of Hmông and Dao people followed strange religion. It was called *Sán sư khế tọ*. Nobody knows the origin of this religion. They only know that this religion was established in 2001 and existed secretly in Dao and Hmông small groups. In 2007 this religion became publicly. Believers of this religion mainly have lived in three districts Yên Minh, Đồng Văn, Mèo Vạc in Hà Giang province¹⁶. In these districts there were about 2.174 believers. Bảo Lâm district, Cao Bằng province there were about 1000 believers. According to believers, they followed this religion to abolish ghost and devils. This religion has not scripture. In 2007 another strange religion was appeared in La Hủ group in Lai Châu province. This religion is called *Sẻ chủ ha li lù gia*. It originated from Vietnamese – Chinese border. In 2002 some La Hủ people came Bum Tở commune, Mường Tè district to propagate this religion. Believers of this religion thought that when they were living they were defended by Sẻ Chủ. *Sẻ Chủ* would help them to go to heaven when they died. There were 42 La Hủ households with 137 people to follow this religion¹⁷.

We should pay attention to the birth of Dương Văn Minh sect. On August, 1st, 1989 Dương Văn Minh went into a trance. After recovering consciousness, he said he had met Jesus and “ in 2000 the earth and the sun will be touched each other. All people will die. All those who follow Dương Văn Minh will go to heaven. In the Heaven Hmông people will have their state. They will have happy life...”.

¹⁴ idem

¹⁵ See Ha Lý : Question and answer about religion and religious policy (book for ethnic people) National Culture publishing House, Hanoi, 2003 p. 7- 10

¹⁶ See Report of Hụ Giang province on Management affair of State regarding religion in 2007 – 2008

¹⁷ See Report of Lai Ch@u province on Management affair of State regarding religion in 2007 – 2008

Dương Văn Minh movement happened at once publicly and secretly. Some fellow-workers of Dương Văn Minh wrote slogans in Hmông writing and Chinese writing to affirm that “ Savior –Dương Văn Minh will be born at 12 pm on 1st August, 1989” and they invited people to see the birth of Dương Văn Minh in his father in-law’s house in Yên Hương commune, Hàm Yên district. Anyone who wanted to see the birth of Dương Văn Minh had to hand money, cigarette, tea and sugar to Dương Văn Minh. In May, 1990 Dương Văn Minh was sentenced to 5 years’ imprisonment by Hà Tuyên People’s Court because he practiced superstitious activities and appropriated private properties of people. Nobody knows where Dương Văn Minh lives after he came out of prison. At the beginning of December, 2000, Dương Văn Minh was present in Yên Hương commune and he sent 4 application forms to government and proposed that “ Dương Văn Minh belief is the unique and eternal belief”. His impetus wanted to open Dương Văn Minh sect. Dương Văn Minh intended to hold a ceremony of his enthronement in December, 2000 or in January, 2001 but his intention was unsuccessful. In 2001 some Hmông and Dao people followed Dương Văn Minh. In Tuyên Quang there were 1544 people; in Cao province there were 2718 people; in Bắc Cạn there were 39 people; in Thái Nguyên there were 465 people; in Hà Giang there were 1300 people to follow Dương Văn Minh¹⁸ .

The event of Dương Văn Minh seemed to be sunk in 2001 but it was restored in 2006. In May, 2007 some Hmông people celebrated 46th anniversary of Dương Văn Minh birthday in Yên Lâm commune, Hàm Yên district, Tuyên Quang province. They declared that Dương Văn Minh will make his followers happy. About 2000 people followed Dương Văn Minh, they mainly lived in Cao Bằng, Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, Bắc Cạn provinces. After recovering, Dương Văn Minh sect seemed to be more complicated.

III Some remarks

We have seen the picture of religious beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces in the past and at present. We find that traditional religious beliefs have the stamps of Animism, Totemism, Shamanism and Taoism. The view of animism is base for various worships and for rites relating to all aspects of life including economic activities and social relations

We can affirm that the ancestral worship and the rites contribute to traditional culture of ethnic groups. When we speak of Tày culture we often talk about *lồng tồng* festival or we speak of Dao people we often talk about the rite of title conferment. These elements create cultural character of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous provinces .

¹⁸ See Vuong Duy Quang the Spiritual culture of Hmông people in Vietnam: the past and at present. Information and Culture Publishing House and Cultural Institute, Hanoi, 2005 p. 208-220

The acceptance of outside elements has contributed to change spiritual life of some ethnic minorities in the mountainous provinces. Specially, the appearance and development of Catholicism and Protestantism have caused the cultural conflict. Many contradictions have been emerged such as, the contradictions between animism of traditional religions with Catholic teachings, between polytheism with monotheism. In process of integration and development, many complicated questions relating to religious belief of ethnic people have been emerged. They have influenced strongly daily life of ethnic people. The appearance of strange beliefs and religions has made religious beliefs diversified. It has showed unstable elements in spiritual life of ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces.

It is noted that the penetration of new elements and regulation of internal elements have made some parts of ethnic people to leave traditional elements and to accept some new elements. This process has made many different responds to cultural problems. Although there are many changes, almost ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces have still upheld their traditional religious beliefs and their cultural characters, especially their spiritual culture. The importance of national character has been affirmed in lines and policies of Vietnamese State, especially in the 5th Resolution of Central Committee in July, 1998. Our Party has brought forward cultural strategy in the period of developing industrialization and modernization in order to build Vietnamese culture with strong national identity. It is an important policy to help ethnic minorities to uphold and develop their culture in new period. /.