

# Changing trend and the factors impacting on ritual practice of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune and district, Kon Tum province

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**Abstract:** *One of the core elements which have contributed to making the image and identity of every ethnic group is the belief. It is so because the faith and practice of belief reflect the worldview, philosophy and behaviour of ethnic group towards nature and society. However, in the trend of integration, globalization and active urbanization as today, the beliefs of local ethnic minorities of Central Highlands in general, and of Xơ Teng people of Xơ Đăng ethnic minority living in 8 villages Tu Mơ Rông commune and district of Kon Tum province in particular, have changed considerably by intermixed and complicated diversification, impacting on preserving and bringing into play the ethnic cultural identity. This paper focuses on understanding the changing trend and the factors impacting on the changes in practice of belief of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune today<sup>(\*)</sup>.*

**Keywords:** Belief, Change of belief, Xơ Teng people, Xơ Đăng ethnic minority.

## 1. Some belief characteristics of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông

- *Conception of universe:* According to traditional conception of Xơ Teng people,

the universe consists of 6 storeys: “Pai rap pleng / Pai rap to nei” (three storeys in sky / three others on earth). The six storeys of universe are divided into three worlds such as: the Heaven World (*Răp Pho - the World of Bo Bo seed*) that consists of two storeys which are the storey of Thunder God (xieng Tơ Ro) and the storey of two parallel gods Noa - Ja; the Middle World (*Răp Phi - the world of rice grain*), that is the world of humankind, of ghosts, of demons and deities; the Lower World (*Răp Pơ Lá - the world of broken rice grain*) that consists of

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(\*) Xơ Teng people are a local ethnic group within Xơ Đăng ethnic minority, one of seven ethnic minorities in Kon Tum. Up to Dec 2016, Tu Mơ Rông commune has 336 households, mainly of Xơ Teng people, settled in 8 villages, among which there are two Catholic villages. The data of this paper are the results of field survey of author and of the “Report on socioeconomic and defense-security situations of 2016 and plan for 2017” of Tu Mơ Rông commune.

three storeys which are storey of water god, storey of *Pơ lá* people and storey of *Man* layer of Lower World. Thus it can be seen that the conception of universe of Xơ Teng people has a certain difference in comparison with other local ethnic groups in Central Highlands, that was generally referred to by a French scholar in the work *Miraculous Land*. This scholar showed that the universe of Xơ Teng people consists of “seven complete systems” (Dam Bo, 2003: 409).

- *Conception of gods and spirits*: The system of deities of Xơ Teng people consists essentially of gods such as: thunder god, moon and sun god, god of banyan tree, water god, Ya Ka Đơ god (the god of childbirth),... According to Xơ Teng people, the system of deities is not divided yet into ranks. Besides that, in conception of Xơ Teng people, there are also other spirits, like ghosts for example.

- *Conception of human souls*: Xơ Teng people conceive the humans as being modelled in mud by Ya Ka Đơ god, each human having six souls. Xơ Teng people have no idea of metempsychosis and conceive that the soul is not immortal but disappeared after a certain time cycle. It can be said that this is one of the original features of faith of Xơ Teng people upon the soul, while most nations, especially the less developed communities, believe in eternity of souls, that they can return to reincarnate or metamorphose into another form after death (E. Durkheim, 1968: 227). Conception of universe, deities, souls as mentioned above shows that the traditional belief system of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune in the past and today is quite rich, represents deeply the polytheistic belief and the belief that the soul is all

things. The characteristics of these beliefs are expressed in traditional rites such as: 1) The rites related to professions, like choosing mountain field, clearing up the field, burning off field for cultivation, rice pruning, superfluous rice eating, first rice eating, depot rice eating; the rite of buffalo stable worship, the rite of praying for rain, the rites related to hunting and forging; 2) The rites related to community such as: village gate worship, flume worship, communal house worship, village change worship; 3) The rites related to life cycle of human as follows: ceremony of initiation, ceremony of passage to adulthood, wedding ceremony, sacrificing buffalo to pray for health, for peace, to drive evil ghosts away, to pray for the sake of soul; ceremony of funeral (sky burial funeral, ordinary death funeral, evil death funeral); the *kơ nã* ritual;... In general, these basic features of traditional beliefs and rites of Xơ Teng people were so far referred to by some studies, particularly by the study of Ngọc Anh (1960), of Nguyễn Kinh Chi and Nguyễn Đồng Chi (1937), of Võ Chuẩn (1993), and of A Tuấn (2015),... However, the trend of change and the factors impacting on this changing trend of today's belief of Xơ Teng people are still less interested.

## **2. Changing trend in practice of traditional beliefs of today's Xơ Teng people**

- *Trend to lose some traditional rites*: The studies showed that the traditional rites in practices of belief of Xơ Teng people today have lost their ancient perfect whole. Many rituals have disappeared and this situation is common in all villages, especially in the two catholic villages. There are some examples of these lost rituals: sky burial and

evil death funeral. Some important rites like *kơ nã* ceremony also are not held by those of two Catholic villages. Some rituals rich in traditional cultural ethnic identity and high communal coherence such as flume worship, village gate worship and village change worship... are no longer practised in the villages like Tu Mơ Rông, Văn Sang and Đăk Neng. Some professional rituals have disappeared such as mountain field choice, clearing up and burning off the field for cultivation, forge worship, buffalo stable worship, especially the ceremony of “buffalo eating”, a meticulous ceremony of traditional sacrifice that is not practised in the Catholic villages now.

- *Trend to flexibility and simpleness in belief practices*: This trend is manifested in flexibility of time in traditional belief practices. According to ancient rules, the rites of profession, of personal or communal life cycle, all are related to each other and have to be held in conformity with certain steps, that is, one might not hold the ceremony of communal house worship if there had not previously held the superfluous rice eating and if in village there are still households that had not held the ceremony of *kơ nã* ritual, but now the ceremony of communal house worship may be held at any time of year, right after the communal house is newly constructed or repaired. Previously, it might not hold the ceremony of village gate worship and ceremony of sacrificing buffalo to pray for health before having cleared up the field and burned off field for cultivation, but now these two rituals have the trend to come close to the time of traditional New Year's Day;... Thus, the systematic and principled order of organization of traditional rites has changed considerably. While in the

past the organization of rites non-conforming to the prescribed times was strictly prohibited, now in the new conditions, the times of rites are moved to be more suitable to requirements of contemporary life. But, there is a concern that if the time of organization of rites is not reasonable, then the now flexibility of time may lead to the considerable fading of people's faith and values of traditional belief.

The time frame of rite organization is also flexible in the direction of simpleness. For example, the ceremony of initiation for a child is not necessarily practised on the third day after birth as previously, but if the child is born at hospital or if the mother and baby are not healthy..., then their family may organize this ceremony later. Similarly, in the past, the wedding was held only after the ceremony of first rice eating and after the ritual of opening rice depot, but now wedding may be held at every time of year; the rites of village gate worship, flume worship, buffalo sacrifice... were previously practised in a whole month long, but now they are reduced to some days.

The trend to simplification is also manifested through the changes of worship oration. In the past, the worship oration was represented in verses, having rhythm and poetic resonance, crystallized in aesthetic and rhetorical values, but now it becomes simple, announcing only the motive of organization of ceremony and the wishes which are to be prayed for. The decoration of ceremony is also simplified, having almost no traditional clothes.

- *Trend to secularization of belief practices*: First, there is a phenomenon of changing over from traditional belief in the role of

supernatural power to scientific explanations. For example, in the past, the whirlwind usually was seen as the action of lady-god *Ka đơ rô ve*, and the phenomenon of landslide in rainy months was considered as the actions of interminable war between various powerful mountain god villages..., but today many people see them as natural phenomena; previously, the exploitation of natural sources of benefit might be effectuated under the rituals to pray for fortune, but today, the hunting and logging are seen as usual jobs to satisfy the needs of human beings.

In traditional society, festival is a special moment of spirit, a space and time favour for humans to make contact with deities in order to pay their honour and admiration and pray to divine powers for the wishes of their own, their family and community. The characteristics of traditional ritual space are not as the same as previously. For example, in the past, the sacred space of a house is expressed by a system of signs consisting of the New Year pole/tree (*cây nêu*), the decorative fringe, the meticulously prepared offerings, but now this space is in essence like the ordinary space, except the New Year tree, other components being sparsely decorated. The secularity is also expressed by the fading of taboo practices in festival space; the shows as festivities and as wishes of fortune have almost disappeared in rituals today.

- *Trend to restore the traditions and absorb new factors of belief*: Along with policy of restoration of traditional festivities in order to contribute to preservation and promotion of cultural values, many festivals are studied and restored. Some festivals are organized with scenarios and restoration by

State agencies; the others are restored by local cultural entities themselves in communal environment. The restoration of festivals has had certain impacts on awareness of cultural entities, especially the youth, giving them the chance for more understanding communal culture, promoting their trust and love for ethnic cultural values. Through exchanging and contacting with other ethnic cultures, the belief and belief practices of Xơ Teng people have the trend to absorb new components such as: the ceremony of life cycle is changing in the way of combining the traditional ceremony of initiation with ceremony of first birthday anniversary (one-year-old anniversary); the ceremony of full moon celebration and celebration of birthday of Kinh people are adopted; some families make the altar, settling the picture of the dead and incense-burner at home;... The adoption of new components into rituals is also manifested by introduction of new offerings into worship such as: rice vodka, money and other modern utensils. The Catholic villages have some changes in religious beliefs by adopting in addition some certain new belief practices in accordance with Catholic faith, such as: organizing ceremony of cleaning up the graves annually on November, making confessions in the rite of initiation of baby,...

### **3. Factors impacting on the changes of belief today**

- *Impacts of process of changing economic structure*: The traditional economic structure of Highlands in general and of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune in particular basically is still the economy of mountain field cultivation. However, after more than 30 years since the VI<sup>th</sup> Congress

of Vietnam Communist Party (1986), the renovation work has brought significant changes to these lands, especially to the economy of Xơ Teng people along with movement of country.

First of all, there appears the diversity of types of economic ownership; the village's ownership of lands and forest is reduced, while the personal and household ownerships of these resources have the trend to increase, but not satisfying yet the requirements of a traditional mode of production based on exploitation of natural resources. Therefore, although not suffering the pressure of immigrants for seeking new economy and free immigrants to Highlands in recent years, but the traditional economy of mountain fields is still impacted by the change of ownership and its fast changes. This fact impacted obviously on the preservation and promotion of cultural values of belief life of people, especially the agricultural belief.

Essential economic activities of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune today are still agricultural production. Therefore, the agricultural land area is very high, being about 1,485 ha, making up 26.33% of total natural land area of commune. In recent time, Tu Mơ Rông commune has deployed many projects of changing crop plants and domestic animals, increasing productivity, leading to change the economic structure and crop land area, according to which the mountain rice lands have been reduced, instead of which there being the lands for productive manioc, hybrid maize and industrial crops like rubber tree, coffee tree, bollywood tree,... Up to 2016, mountain land area is about 34.3 ha, while manioc land area occupies 150 ha, 103 ha being

wet rice land, the rest is area of other short-term industrial crops. Thus, the people have participated in production process of commodities, being no longer pressed by the old habit of accumulation of foods; many traditional material values being also broken; similarly, the traditional exchange activities also changing considerably.

Especially, since 1986, the district towns, inter-communal towns or centres have been developed, so the traditional way of communication with Laos and Quang Nam province to the south of Xơ Teng people has been closed. Today they only go down to Kon Tum city for shopping and exchanging products when having real needs, because all the towns, the communal and inter-communal centres and even villages have shops for them to buy things and products of Kinh people, satisfying the basic needs of local people, leading their material life to change more and more, with new introduced value system that has contributed to change and complete the old values,... Hence, the scale of festivals, together with other cultural characteristics of Xơ Teng people, have progressively changed. For example, in the past, the evaluation of personal and family positions within community were based on number of precious gongs, old jars and economic potential of a household sufficient for usual organization of buffalo sacrifice... but today these conditions have been replaced by other ones such as: the solid house, TV set, motorcycle, telephone,... These changes of conditions for people to satisfy their living in modern society have brought many opportunities for human development, but the most interesting risk here is that people little by little forget traditional cultural values that have

constituted their ethnic identity to adopt inadequately the new components.

- *Impacts of the changes of natural environment:* The model of economic development of the Highlands in general and of Tu Mơ Rông commune in particular is the growth in the width, mainly based on investment capital of State, on assistance from outside, on exploitation of local natural resources in an unreasonable economic structure with very low quality human resources. The promotion of natural potential for economic development in recent time has created and is creating the great “pressure” of natural environment on the sustainable development of this region, because all economic activities here are related to the use and exploitation of lands, especially to the change of forest land into industrial crop land,... The development of industrial crops in large area and settled on mountain slope is one of the facts causing the erosion and degeneration of soil, the devastating floods, the considerable reduction of forest and ecosystem at Tu Mơ Rông area,... This means that the natural environment for certain traditional beliefs has disappeared, because the traditional communal fund of lands was reduced, and the technique of alternating the crops on mountain slope was replaced by fixedly settled cultivation, then the rituals related to old cultivation conditions have also disappeared. Forests surrounding village that play the role of buffer zone, with many socioeconomic, defence and security functions and with natural beneficial sources for community, have now disappeared, so the rites related to these forests are no longer practised. The sacred zones are usually seen as exploitable zones;

the massive exploitation of forest products recently has strongly impacted on the belief that “the soul is all things” and on the polytheism of Xơ Teng people, so today they exploit the forest products without practising the rites and respecting the taboos as previously, because they think “surely there are no longer gods here”, they even exploit the forests at upper sources, at cemeteries without any fear, while in the past these acts were the taboos.

- *Impacts of the changes of state management institutions and family model:* According to current administrative division, the village complex of Xơ Teng people is divided into different hamlets and groups as follows: Tu Mơ Rông village is divided into three groups, Đăk Chum II<sup>nd</sup> village is split into two hamlets as Đăk Chum II<sup>nd</sup> and Đăk Chum III<sup>rd</sup>,... Without being in a common village, each group and each hamlet have their own relatively independent activities, so the role and influence of village patriarch have effects only in the group and hamlet where he lives. While for ancient Xơ Teng people, although having a common original village, but if their divided hamlets were settled separately from each other and no longer sharing the same water source, then they are not be seen as the same villagers... Thus, the ancient tight coherence of village community has faded. Therefore, coming to the village of Xơ Teng people today, one can find no longer the sacredness of the village gate, where previously were statues of heros guarding the peace of community; the habits related to common fate of village community do not necessarily oblige the individuals to participate; there are no sufficient human resources and materials for

constructing the communal houses, so these houses little by little lose their previous grandiose magnificence, now being left as “small as a storehouse of my family in olden times” (after the words of Mr. A Sóm, an old man of Đăk Chum II<sup>nd</sup> hamlet). Similarly, the long house of a Xơ Teng family now is divided for various nuclear families. Although the habits related to settlement formality in long house are still kept, but the young married couples always like to live separately into nuclear families. The household splitting has dispersed the inherent human resources of long house and the economic potential serving the rites, causing the original but costly ceremony of buffalo sacrifice to be a big problem for nuclear family.

- *Influences of outside religions and beliefs:* With the guideline of enlarging the God's country, Catholicism came to Vietnam in about XVI<sup>th</sup> century, but only after 3 centuries later it penetrated into the region of Ba Na and Xơ Đăng peoples in Kon Tum, having been associated with the names of various French priests such as Kueno, Michen, Duelos,... The period from the end of XIX<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of XX<sup>th</sup> century is a period of strong development of Catholicism of Xơ Đăng people in Đăk Tô region, with the names of parishes and Catholic villages, like Diên Bình, Tân Cảnh Kon Ho Ring, Đăk Chờ,... In 1960s, in the region of Xơ Đăng people there exist 20,312 Catholic believers (Priest Gioakim Nguyễn Hoàng Sơn, 2013), with two villages of Văn Sang and Đăk Neng in Tu Mơ Rông commune, being representative for the belief change of Xơ Teng people from traditional belief to Catholic belief before 1975. The

presence of Catholicism here was and is a factor that has had great influence on belief life of Xơ Teng people.

It is easy to see that in the two Catholic villages there are many changes of traditional cultural activities, such as the abolishment of traditional ceremony of sacrifice, because the blood of animals is no longer considered as symbol of life, of proliferation; the ritual system related to human soul is also not practised as previously, that is, instead of praying *Jă Ka Do* god to give a soul to baby, the family prays God the Father for this favour; the agricultural rites that have high communal coherence are still maintained annually, like ceremony of celebrating the first rice harvest that is held not in fixed time in the traditional villages, while in Catholic villages it is fixed periodically on 25 October annually; The New Year tree in traditional belief was always associated with festival of buffalo sacrifice, but in festival of the two Catholic villages today, this New Year tree is raised as a decorative thing, giving the aesthetic effect to common festival of village. The gongs in cultural traditions were associated with the rites related to buffalo sacrifice, but now in the Catholic villages they are simply the traditional music instruments, possibly being played in any occasion of family or community, like in: wedding, celebration of new house, celebration of first rice... without obedience to old prescriptions. The Catholics still participate in common rituals of community and do not refuse to eat sacred offerings, but they make excuses for not practising the ritual of moisturizing with the sacred blood,... This situation expresses somewhat the integration of

Catholicism into local traditional culture when it was imported in spiritual life of Xơ Teng people.

- *Impacts of exchanges and acculturation in the context of development and international integration*: In today general trend of the world to integration and globalization, the cultural exchanges between regions, areas, ethnic groups are actively developing. The fact that inter-communal centre is at the same time the district capital, both settled in Tu Mơ Rông commune from 2005 to 2010, is a favourable condition for cultural exchanges between Xơ Teng people and other ethnic groups, especially the Kinh people. Besides that, the development of media channel system such as radio station, television, internet... has contributed to break the seemingly separate space of olden Tu Mơ Rông region, opening the conditions for access to values of other cultures. Now 100% of hamlets and villages have loudspeakers of communal radio and television station; most families have TV set for access to new information and cultural fluxes; smartphone and internet connection are significant channels in service of cultural penetration, especially for the young;... The inter-ethnic marriage and fluxes of the young leaving village for study and job are also “bridges” to bring the new cultures into local lands. These phenomena lead to change belief awareness in general and traditional belief practices in particular.

- *Subjective factors of cultural entities*: In deploying the policies of socioeconomic development for mountain rural area, the administrators are usually concerned about a great challenge that a part of people became passive, with an expectant attitude.

Therefore the “entity” factor is seen by many as a problem for sustainable development, but the reality shows that the movement of Xơ Teng people in current society is faced by the problem of gradual degradation of internal forces, while being strongly impacted by the forces of many external factors.

First of all, it can be seen that the oral transmittance and live performances are making the inherent strong internal vital forces of traditional beliefs risk weakening in modern social conditions. It is because that now all of the things have fast penetrated into daily life, among which there are modern and useful techniques, while the influences of old men in today Xơ Teng villages are considerably narrowed gradually. That’s why, the transmittance and reception of faith and of belief practices from generation to generation are degraded, disrupted. On the other hand, belief is a social phenomenon, changing incessantly with society, so while the other religions incessantly develop their dogmas and their erudite missionaries, but the folk-beliefs of Xơ Teng people have not these advantages. The traditional faith does not make the changes and complements corresponding to satisfy the spiritual needs of people in the face of social evolutions; the intellectual standards of Xơ Teng people are still low, so they quite lack those intellectuals who would know deeply the beliefs and the role of traditional beliefs in order to be able to orientate the belief activities of communities and individuals.

Together with that, the awareness of people themselves on precious cultural heritages is still insufficient; the values of traditional beliefs are not satisfactorily



understood. Therefore, today there are more and more people who think that organizing rituals with buffalo sacrifice is obsolete and costly; precious gongs and jars are sold or exchanged for useful utensils for the living needs of individuals and families, so in all the Tu Mơ Rông commune now remain only 12 gong sets (3 sets with 12 gongs and 9 sets with 7 gongs); the communal houses are no longer decorated with sacred things of village such as drums, gongs, jars, sacrificed buffalo heads, big hunted animal bones... but instead of these there are the slogans, banners and contemporary certificates of merits of hamlet or village; the inner space of house on stilts of a family is also no longer decorated with gongs, jars, drums and worshipping pole... that previously exposed the position and pride of family head; it is also illusionary if someone wants to see here the image of old men in loin-cloth, of old women with naked chest, with precious stone necklace under the white hair, sitting in peace to “eat tobacco”;... These above-mentioned evolutions show that, those men who can keep the link between present and tradition have also been changed; the clash between the past and the present has somewhat broken the image of primitive mountain area of Tu Mơ Rông with original cultural values; the fact that many cultural components in the past are hard to refind has contributed to create a certain gap and missing in these lands and people.

#### **4. Some comments instead of conclusions**

Studying the belief life of ethnic groups in Vietnam is always one of subjects that interests many scientists. The results of studies not only contribute to point out the traditional cultural physiognomy, but also

more clarify the changes and trend of movement of belief practice in modern society. The research results on belief of Xơ Teng people in Tu Mơ Rông commune show that this field has many deep human cultural values, reflecting especially the unity of ethnic communal consciousness, nurturing the communal coherence, contributing to preservation and promotion of ethnic cultural identities, satisfying spiritual needs of every individual and community,... However, the impacts of economic changes, of the change of social institutions and ecologic environment, have led and are leading to the deep changes of belief life of this ethnic group in both the form and contents, among which, essential changes are manifested in gradually losing certain conceptions and rituals of belief as well as simplifying the traditional worship rituals.

This changes are to satisfy the spiritual needs corresponding to contemporary socioeconomic development and be chosen by Xơ Teng people themselves. But this reality has somewhat caused the cultural disruption between tradition and modernity, impoverishing the cultural human values of individuals and communities in belief conception as well as in traditional belief practices. Therefore, real situation is putting a demand that the appropriate authorities must continue to carefully study, deeply understand the belief needs of people in order to build the policies, solutions and models of practising spiritual life corresponding to local reality, contributing to preservation and promotion of traditional belief values in service of today more effective construction of new rural areas for Xơ Teng people community □

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