

# Ancestry Worship by the Tay Ethnic Group in Krong Nang District, Dak Lak Province

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**Abstract:** *Traditional beliefs are among indispensable community activities, and a crucial part of people's spiritual life. The Tay people's ancestry worship, formed on the basis of the belief in immortality and ancestor's soul survival after death, always plays an important role in their spiritual life. The paper explores the typical forms of ancestry worship, and points out the changing trends in the Tay people's ancestry worship in Krong Nang District, Dak Lak Province in order to promote and preserve traditional cultural values of the Tay people today.*

**Keywords:** Beliefs, Ancestry worship, Tay Ethnic Group, Dak Lak Province

## Foreword

A faith is a religious belief - a cultural phenomenon. Traditional beliefs are an indispensable community activity and a necessary demand in people's spiritual life. The ancestry worship, formed on the basis of a belief in immortal souls of ancestors, plays the most important role in the spiritual life of the Tay ethnic group.

Krong Nang District is located to the east of Dak Lak Province, 50 km from the province's center along National Road 14 and National Road 29. The district is the residence of 23 ethnic groups. Ethnic minority groups migrating here from the North account for 18.61% of the district's

total households. The Tay community in Krong Nang (mainly migrating freely from Cao Bang, Bac Kan and Lang Son) has a total population of 13,129 people, residing in almost all 12 communes and towns, concentrating in the communes of Ea Tam (6,074 people), Ea Tan (1,533 people), Dlieya (1,471 people), Ea Dah (1,418 people) (Krong Nang District Office of Statistics, 2019).

Thanks to their concentration, traditional culture in general and the ancestry worship of the Tay in particular have been preserved quite well, though still experiencing inevitable cultural changes. Their ancestry worship contains many long-standing ethno-cultural values which are important

components of their spiritual culture and reflect the group's moral and aesthetic values, outlook on life, and worldview that need to be conserved. This paper<sup>1</sup> explores main forms of ancestry worship of the Tay in Krong Nang District, Dak Lak Province while pointing out the changing trends of the cult.

### 1. Concept of ancestors and the cult of ancestry of the Tay

Ancestry is the term used to refer to dead people of the same blood-line, such as great grandparents, grandparents, parents, who have a great influence on their living descendants' life. In the process of history, the concept "ancestry" has changed and developed, being applied not only within a

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is part of the author's 2019 essay "Ancestry worship of the Tay residents in Krong Nang District, Dak Lak Province". The analyses presented in the paper are based on results of research field-trips to Krong Nang District, Dak Lak Province (in the communes where the Tay residents concentrate, such as Ea Tam, Ea Tan, Dlieya, Ea Dah...). Ethnologic field-trips are our major method of research. Through a qualitative method, the author joined the local residents in order to observe activities and ceremonies in their daily life. At the same time, we also conducted in-depth interviews, oral histories, and panel discussions with suitable informants, especially those have good knowledge and prestige in the Tay community, such as sorcerers (Tào, Then, Pút), aged people, and local officials to obtain reliable information and compare documents for a comparative view of the cult of ancestry by the Tay in the past and at present. We surveyed their annual festivals and ceremonies, such as the Lunar New Year festival, the Day for Wandering Souls, funerals, marriages, and mourning-end ceremony. We took part in the early-year Northwest Folk Culture Festival held in Ea Tam Commune (on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month every year) to have an overview of the ancestry worship of the Tay in Krong Nang District.

bloodline or a family but also expanded to the community and society.

The cult of ancestry was founded on the belief in the immortality of ancestry spirits. That belief, in its turn, originated from human beings' instinctive aspiration for longevity. Human beings have sanctified their love and respect to the ancestry. Through the ancestry worship, humans express their views of death and the afterlife, mitigating their fear when facing the death, so that they could maintain psychological balance and social stability.

The ancestry worship is the most important form of faith in the Tay people's life, originating from the honour to predecessors' merits and closely associating to the belief in the immortality of human spirits in the afterworld. For the Tay, ancestors are thought to be guardian deities who bless their offspring with good health and happiness while protecting them from misfortunes. Descendants, in their turn, have to worship their ancestors soundly, otherwise they would be scolded by the latter.

In the Tay people's worldview, spirits (called *khoăn* in their language) exist in human body. When a person dies, there is no body for the spirits reside, a *khoăn* will become a *phi* (ghost). Ancestry is called "*đăm*" or "*tổ đăm*" in the Tay language, meaning the origin/root; "*Đăm* in a plant is its main root, in the human society is ancestry" (Nguyễn Thị Yên, 2009: 438). Ancestry consists of concessive generations of dead people in a family. In the Tay society, when a person of the parent/grandparent generation dies, she/he will become a new member of ancestry, called *đăm máu* (new ancestor) or *đăm rỏ*.

In the Tay people's faith, ancestors reside in three places: the Heaven, graveyards and family ancestry altars.

*The concept of ancestors residing in the heaven (Heavenly spirits):* After a parent dies, his/her children ask the Tào masters (sorcerers) to conduct a ceremony to call and lead the deceased's souls to the heaven where they would live with other family spirits and ancestors. In the Tay's worldview, the Heaven is the upside-down world of the Earth, with its own ricefields, houses, forests, mountains, rivers, seas, fauna and flora. Spirits of dead people residing in the Heaven are also classified in conformity with specific regulations: young or unmarried spirits live in the prefecture of youths so that they could find out their life partners; old spirits live with their family predecessors; infant spirits would be reincarnated; sorcerers would become mandarins in the Buddhist/Deity worlds. In the Heaven, they also build houses, cultivate fields and raise domestic animals like in the earthen world.

According to some Tao masters in Krong Nang, "ancestors in the Heaven have resided there since the creation of the world. Each and every one wishes that, after their death, they could come to live with their ancestors in the Heaven for a hedolistic life, but to do so, they have to experience all required ceremonials. Therefore, Tào masters are invited to carry out these ceremonials for a dead person's spirit to follow the right paths, otherwise the spirit could never join the ancestors" (interview with Master Tao Van Thang, born in 1966, Ea Tam Commune). The Tay think that specific ceremonials are required to help spirits of dead people join

with their ancestors in the Heaven. When a person dies, their children inform all relatives and neighbors, then inviting Tào masters to conduct ceremonies to see the deceased to the afterworld. "The spirits of a new dead person are still impure and needs to be presented to the ancestry, otherwise they would be rejected or even punished by ancestors" (interview with Mrs. Trieu Thi Tuyen, born in 1960, Dlieya Commune). After the dead body is bathed by Tào masters with a kind of "pure" holy water and miracles, the dead person's spirits become clean and pure. Then, their family members must conduct an ancestry worshipping ceremony and make report to the ancestors about the death, asking the ancestors to take votive offerings and permit some other ceremonies for the dead person's salvation and entrance to the Heaven.

*Concept of ancestors residing in the altar (family spirits):* In the Tay people's viewpoint, after a person dies, their spirits still stays in the house to bless other members. For them, ancestors reside on the family altar, so the altar is very important to the living. It is a sacred place where ancestors are commemorated. It is placed in the central compartment of a house, for the ancestry worship which is maintained from generation to generation, as a "gate" of connection between the dead and the living. Family spirits are direct ancestors of a family, thus they must be worshipped at the altar on specific occasions in a year. When carrying out a ceremony, the Tay always ask their ancestors to join them in the belief that their ancestors will come home to witness and receive

the descendants' gratitude and grant them with good things.

*Concept of ancestors residing in graveyards (tomb spirits):* When a person dies, their body will decompose and melt into the soil. However, some of their souls/spirits still have affection for the body so much that hovering around the tomb - where the body is buried, thus the tomb is considered the house of the dead person. Therefore, when a parent dies, it is important for their children to soundly prepare the tomb for the parent so that the latter can enjoy good fortunes in the afterworld. As a result, the Tay place importance on selecting the good direction for a tomb and on taking care of the tomb.

The cult of ancestry of the Tay people in Krong Nang is popular in two forms: The ancestry worship at family level and at village/commune level, in which the first is the most importance, as a way to educate children about the origin, predecessors' merits and family traditions. In the Tay people's conception, ancestors are immortal and their spirits always stay nearby to bless descendants.

## **2. Present-day forms of ancestry worship conducted by the Tay in Krong Nang District**

### **2.1. Ancestry worship in families**

*Objects of worship:* The cult of ancestry plays the most important role in the Tay people's spiritual life. The cult, practiced within families, reflects consanguineous relations. The Tay worship ancestors of three generations (parents - grandparents - great grandparents, in the same altar); ancestors of the fourth generation and

earlier are worshipped in the same incense burner.

According to the Tay from Bac Kan migrating to Krong Nang, ancestors worshipped in the family altar are those of nine generations. The tenth-generation ancestors and earlier are no longer worshipped. In an altar, there are three thuribles. The middle one is for the ancestry of the five closest generations. Ancestors from the sixth to ninth generations are worshipped in the same thurible of the Kitchen God (*Táo quân*), placed on the right<sup>1</sup>. The left-hand one is for the Midwife Goddess (*Mé va*). A Tay resident in Krong Nang said: "We teach our children that they must be grateful to their ancestors. We, those from Cao Bang and Bac Kan worship ancestors of at least 6-7 generations. Actually, we worship all generations. All thuribles are still in the altar, forever. It is said that ancestors of the ninth generation and earlier will move to the field, but nobody knows whether they move there or not, nobody can see, so their worship is maintained by children, generation after generation" (interview with Mr. Hoang Duy Chinh, born in 1951, Ea Tam Commune). It is possible to conclude that the Tay people, in general, cannot confirm whether spirits of their ancestors, after nine generations, still stay in the family altar or not, thus the multi-generation ancestry worship (*đăm trên*, the family ancestry) is popular.

*Place of worship:* The family ancestry altar is very sacred, the place where family

<sup>1</sup> However, in many families, the right-hand thurible is for Buddha while that for the Kitchen God is placed in the kitchen.

ceremonials are conducted. The altar is fixed at the most solemn site or in the central compartment of a house. In the altar, there are thuribles and votive offerings only. Some families decorate their altar very elaborately and the altar is made of high-quality wood and carved meticulously. But the ancestry altars in some families are quite simple (made of some pieces of wood, hang on the wall). The Tay people think that ancestors reside in the family altar which is the gate of connection between the dead and the living, “the middle thurible is the sitting place of ancestors, the place where ancestors sit whenever they go home” (interview with Mrs. Tran Thi Hoa, born in 1948, Tam Giang Commune).

*Rites of worships:* In general, the rites are not complicated, mainly for reporting to the ancestry specific things at certain moments of the ceremony and asking for support from the ancestry. The officiating priest must be the host of the family, representing the family to report and invite the ancestors to take votive offerings.

*Votive offerings:* Different ceremonies require different votive offerings, the most popular are chicken, ducks, pork, liquor, tea, rice, incense sticks, and votive papers. Normally, a tray of votive offerings presented to the ancestors is quite simple. In the center of the tray is a boiled rooster (with its blood and inner organs) and a piece of boiled pork (about 0.5-1 kg). There are also five bowls full of rice, five pairs of chopsticks, five cups of liquor, and five cups of tea. For the worship ritual, the Tay people burn incense sticks at the altar, praying their ancestors to take votive offerings, and planting an incense stick

into the boiled chick and the piece of pork each, “so that the ancestors can receive all votive offerings” (interview with Mr. Hoang Van Dong, born in 1967, Dlieya Commune). Within a round of incense, they pour liquor and tea for the ancestors three times, “each time pouring some liquor /tea into ten cups for the ancestors to drink while taking food” (interview with Mr. Hoang Van Dong, born in 1967, Dlieya Commune). When the incense is about to die out, they burn votive papers and pray the ancestors to receive and bring the offerings to the afterworld.

*Time of worship:* The Tay usually practice the ancestry worship on traditional holidays (regular occasions) and ceremonies (irregular rituals). Traditional holidays are fixed in a year. In a lunar year, they conduct the cult of ancestry in such holidays as the Lunar New Year (Tết Nguyên Đán), the Thanh minh Festival (on the third day of the third lunar month), the Memorial Day (14<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh lunar month), and the Double Five Festival (the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month). On these days, Tay families slaughter pigs, chickens and ducks to prepare good food for their ancestors and to feast all family members.

For the Tay, ancestors are considered as tutelary gods who play an important role in bringing about and maintaining a family’s prosperity. Thus, whenever there are important events in a family (marriage, funeral, house building, a child getting one month old, congratulation of longevity, far-away business trip), they always present offerings or burn incense to report to and ask for the ancestors’ support. Besides, when a family faces bad lucks (accidents, illness),

they will consult sorcerers for divination. In case the fortune-tellers say that the family is scolded by their ancestors, they must prepare votive offerings and ask the sorcerers to conduct the pardon-begging ceremony at home. The ceremonies on those occasions are called irregular events. Because of Buddhist influences, on the first and the fifteenth days of every lunar month, the Tay also arrange a tray of fruits in the ancestry altar and burn incense to pray for their ancestors.

### ***2.2. Ancestry worship at hamlet level (cult of the Earth God)***

In the Tay's conception, an Earth God is the being who is credited with establishing the hamlet and protecting villagers; he is considered by villagers as the ancestor of the hamlet.

*Object of worship:* Due to their agricultural traditions, the dependence on natural factors (weather, climate, soil), and the animistic faith, the Tay believe that supernatural forces can have impacts on the community's life. According to them, forests and mountains, fields, soil, rivers and brooks are all under the management of gods. Therefore, they must ask for the permission of gods when they want to clear land for cultivation. There are both good and evil genii. Evil gods are not worshipped regularly but at the time when human beings and domestic animals are unsafe only. Meanwhile, good genii always bless and protect people and they are worshipped soundly not in families but also at community level.

The most typical for the cult of ancestry at hamlet/commune level by the Tay residents in Krong Nang is the worship of the Earth Gods who are the protectors of village,

forests and mountains, land, crops and domestic animals. The Tay people believe that these gods are credited with building and protecting villages, so that after their death, they are deified as the community's tutelary gods and worshipped. "A plot of land has its own God, a river has its deity. Thus, we reside in a region, we must worship its Earth Gods to ask them for support and protection so that we can have a peaceful life" (interview with Mr. Hoang Van Thang, born in 1966, Ea Tam Commune).

*Place of worship:* The Earth Gods - a supernatural force deified - are worshipped in shrines. Most of these gods have no name and are called as "Earth Gods". Their place of worship is usually located at the beginning or in the end of a village, beneath a big plant or at the foot of a mount, where many people go back and forth. Villagers will build a small shrine, with a thurible. On the Lunar New Year festival or the crop-praying ceremony, families bring their offerings to the shrine. When a villager dies, a new baby is born, or a new house is built, the villagers will burn incense to make report to the God and pray for peace.

*Votive offerings and time of worship:* Votive offerings are not different from those for the ancestry worship in families (glutinous rice, chicken, liquor, cakes, incense, and votive papers). Many Tay families in Krong Nang still maintain the practice of presenting votive offerings to the Earth God on the last day of a lunar year and asking them to joy the upcoming Lunar New Year festival. Normally, each hamlet has its own regulations on

conducting the worship of the Earth God on a certain day early in the year. The Earth God-worshipping ceremony of Tay hamlets in Ea Tam Commune, Krong Nang District, takes place on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month (at the same time of the Viet Bac folk culture festival). Families can jointly or separately prepare votive offerings presented to the Earth Gods for a new year of good weather, bumper crops, and healthy and happy villagers. After the ceremonial, votive offerings will be shared by all villagers in a common early spring meal (or in groups of families).

*Rites of worship:* When all families bring votive offerings to the shrine of the Earth Gods, the sorcerers will conduct the worshipping rituals to thank the Gods and pray for bumper crops, healthy domestic animals, happiness and prosperity. “In a new year, we expect the Earth Gods to continue support villages and the commune, so that people are healthy enough for profitable production activities, diseases are driven away, pigs and cows grow fast, villages have greater and greater happiness” (interview with Master Hoang Van Phai, born in 1974, Ea Tan Commune).

### **3. Some changing trends in the ancestry worship of the Tay in Krong Nang District**

*Community ceremonials gradually lost in oblivion:* One of the community ceremonials of the Tay people is the worship of Earth Gods. In the past, each Tay village had a date for conducting the ceremony at the shrine of Earth Gods; and all villagers would gather here for a public meal after finishing all rituals. However, at present, this practice is no longer maintained. Community ceremonials

are no longer popular in the life of the Tay residents in Krong Nang. Very few of Tay hamlets keep the shrines of tutelary gods, and rituals and festivals have been changed significantly, losing their community factors and becoming the individual or family-level practice.

In Krong Nang, people pay attentions to restoring the crop-worshipping festival (praying village/commune ancestry for bumper crops) in order to revive the sense of origin through the Viet Bac Folk Culture Festival in early spring (on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> days of the first lunar month every year). However, there are many changes, rituals are no longer an important part while festive events are enriched with modern activities of amusement. Thanks to the modernization and globalization, a number of scientific and technological advances as well as mass media have been introduced to each and every hamlet. People now can access to numerous sources of information (books, newspapers, radio, television, Internet), means of entertainment, and cross-regional cultural exchange. As a result, community cultural events are no longer the only activities attracting people like in the past. Spiritual factors in festivals have faded away and the demand for spiritual activities is no longer urgent enough. These are fundamental reasons of people’s greater indifference to traditional festivals in general and the cult of ancestry in particular.

*Change of family ceremonials:* At present, strong cultural exchanges between different regions and different ethnic groups have more or less changed the organization and practice of ceremonials in the ancestry worship by the Tay people in Krong

Nang. Generally, votive offerings are still traditional ones. However, because of economic development, the rituals have been supplemented with modern offerings: Votive papers are various in colors and designs. Apart from votive costume and money, there are also such items like bikes, phones and televisions, and of course the spendings on votive papers increase.

The modernization of votive offerings is an inevitable trend, reflecting the diversification in the process of acculturation of the Tay in the modern time. Besides, in the cult of ancestry by the Tay in Krong Nang at present, there is a tendency of *simplifying formalities* in many families, especially in the longevity congratulating and funeral ceremonials. In general, the traditional process of rituals is still maintained, but with much simpler steps.

*Restoration and development of family ceremonials:* If community ceremonial activities have been reduced, family-level rituals tend to be restored and developed in the areas of the Tay. This fact can be explained that, the ancestry worship contains many practices and customs which have become long-standing cultural elements and styles in the Tay people's spiritual life which are not easily changed. At present, cultural and material life of the Tay community has considerably changed. However, their traditional longevity-congratulating ceremonies, funeral or worship rituals during festivals, though being influenced by new elements, are still maintained. The Tay pay a great respect to their traditional ceremonials and practices. At the same time, when people's living conditions are improved, honors will

change manners. This is another reason for the restoration of family ceremonials.

The restoration and development of the ancestry worship nowadays not only originate from the education of piety, benevolence, and gratitude to predecessors but also from spiritual demands. The organization of worship rituals helps to satisfy people's faith and mitigate their vague worries of unstable things in the daily life. It is the coherence of spiritual elements and practices that has helped to preserve traditional ceremonies of the Tay in the face of penetration of modern cultural factors in their spiritual life. It is possible to say that family ceremonials of the Tay are a profound manifestation of beliefs and traditional viewpoints of morality, way of living, and sentiments.

Obviously, in the face of economic development and scientific and technical advances, such community ceremonials like the worship of the Earth Gods tend to be lost in oblivion among cultural and belief activities while family-level rituals have been restored and further developed. This reflects humane values in the ancestry worship and faiths of the Tay people in Krong Nang.

Besides, in the past, the Tay also worshipped ancestors of clans and those of the country (Uncle Hô and Hùng Kings - as cultural influences from the Kinh people). However, when moving to Krong Nang, the Tay mainly migrate in families rather than in clans, so the cult of clan ancestry is not popular. And the Tay group in Krong Nang does not celebrate the Hung Kings' anniversary nor worship Uncle Ho like their peers in Cu M'Gar District.

## Conclusion

The cult of ancestry helps to meet the spiritual demands of the Tay people, bringing about mental relief and social stability. In the modern life, though change is an inevitable tendency, the role of the ancestry worship for the Tay in Krong Nang is still unchanged. It is still preserved and maintained in the process of development. At the same time, it has experienced some complex changes. It is necessary to have consistent solutions from the local authorities to raise people's awareness in eradicating negative and out-of-date element while preserving and making full use of traditional cultural values of the ancestry worship conducted by the Tay people in Krong Nang District □

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