

## THE FORMATION AND CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE TAY AND THE NUNG IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** *When studying on religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung in Northern mountain zone in Vietnam, the author remarked that sorcerers (a kind of shamanist) of the Tay and the Nung have so similar points as those of the Thái, the Kinh, and the Zhuang (in China). The author states that the formation and changes of religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung is closely related the exchanges with imported religious beliefs from many outsiders such as the Zhuang (Guangxi, China) and the Kinh from North Vietnam. Those contribute greatly to the formation of a unique but various of religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung in Vietnam.*

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The Tay and the Nung are the two ethnic groups which share similarities in language and customs. As these two ethnic groups have a close relation with other groups of the Thai language speaking ethnic groups, we will study the formation and changes in the religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung in comparison to those of the Thai in the Northwest of Vietnam and the Zhuang in Guangxi, China.

### **1. Sorcerers and religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung during early times**

In primitive societies, religions were fair and individuals could carry out religious practices to meet their own demand. Therefore, in the societies of the Tay and Nung in particular, and of the Tay and Thai in general, there was no one to specialize in religious practices. Along with the development of primitive religions, the number of objects of worship also increased while worshipping knowledge and skills were improved. Therefore, it was necessary that there was someone to act as the bridge between human and gods. Clan development led to social assignment. Some old men or clan leaders were given the privilege of chairing religious practices. This might be one of the basic features which resulted in the appearance of sorcerers in general.

According to the analysis of archaeological scarvings on mountain cliffs in Hoa Son, Ninh Minh, Zhuang researchers believed witchcrafters appeared after the Spring

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and Autumn period and the Warring States period which dated back above 2,000 years<sup>(1)</sup>. Ninh Minh district in Guangxi is located near the Vietnamese-Chinese border, a large part of which can be seen from Mau Son peak in Lang Son. The legend of Co Loa walls and the leader Thuc Phan - An Duong Vuong, the King of Au Lac (208-179 BC), whose origin was the ancient Tay in Cao Bang also mentions (Vietnam) the witchcrafts related to Kim Quy god and the cunning white cock's removal of the spell<sup>(2)</sup>.

Some of the Chinese historical records of the Han dynasty also mention the appearance of witchcrafters known as 'Viet vu', one particular kind of which is to use a cock to tell fortunes. Zhuang scholars believed that 'Viet vu' mentioned in the historical records of the Han dynasty were sorcerers of the early Zhuang. It was time when the eastern Tay-Thai branch in Vietnam and Guangxi had not been separated. The word 'Viet' in 'Viet vu' may refer to ethnic groups of the Lac Viet residing in Guangxi, Guangdong, Yunnan, Guizhou and north Vietnam. From the above materials, it can be said that sorcerers of the present Tay and Nung also appeared since this time.

Nowadays, sorcerers of the Tay and Nung include both men and women. However, according to legend as well as records, it is likely that the early sorcerers were only women. This was popular not only among the Tay and Thai but also other ethnic minority groups in and outside Vietnam. Chinese scholars have also proved that in Chinese ethnic minority groups, shamen were initially women. It was only later that men became shamen as well. The Tay in Vietnam believe that at first, only women were involved in Then (a kind of the witchcrafts of the Tay). Later, when men could work as sorcerers, they had to be dressed in a long gown like women. The long string at the back of the hat worn by Then masters is a symbol of women's long hair.

That women were involved in rituals before men is consonant with social revolution as that was time of matriarchy. In such society, women took control of all production and daily life activities. Therefore, they would certainly play an important role in rituals. We think that the cult of 'Me Va' (Mother Hoa) of the Tay and Nung in Vietnam nowadays is related to the cult of the ancient mother as the Creator of the Tay-Thai in the old time. At present, in Shanglin and Tianyang districts in Guangxi

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<sup>1</sup> . Ngọc Thời Giới (2004), *Culture and Religious Beliefs of the Zhuang*, Ethnic Publishers, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> . *Contribution of the Tay-Thai Language Speaking Ethnic Groups to the Vietnamese History*, Conference summary records, National University Publishers, 2006, p. 85.

province, there are still temples and caves to worship Me Va (also called Molojia). The statue of Me Va worshipped in a cave in Tianyang owes its inspiration to an idea in legend. The statue is about 4 metres high featuring Me Va with naked breast and plump buttock. Around her waist is tuberoses. The base of the statue is also made of flowers. During the festival in March, people go there to make offerings and touch the flowers around her waist to wish for luck or children.

The cult of Mother Hoa as the Creator may have probably been transferred into the cult of Mother Hoa as a goddess of fecundity which is popular in the residential areas of the Tay, Nung and Zhuang. It can be said that the cult of fecundity is one of the primitive religious beliefs of the Tay-Thai. It is closely related to the primitive period when the job of sorcerers of the Tay, Nung and Zhuang was mainly done spontaneously by women with the belief that they were chosen by the gods. They are now called 'sien', which means fairy, implying that they are capable of incarnation. The craft was handed down in the family according to the choice of the maternal ancestors. To provide further explanation, we would like to introduce briefly some features of the White Thai's Then as a witchcraft typical of the Tay in the Northwest of Vietnam. Compared to the Tay and Nung, the Thai culture, including customs and religious beliefs, was less influenced by imported cultures. Therefore, a White Thai female sorcerer can be described as follow :

- 1) She is a woman chosen by her maternal relatives. She might be a sister or grandsister in law who continued the tradition of her husband's family. Before starting the job, she would have signs of sickness, daydreaming or sudden liking for Then.

- 2) A Then sorcerer does not have a teacher. She carries out her own installation ceremony at the presence of the village leader.

- 3) A Then sorcerer has a separate worship place called *hưón Then* (Then house) which is a two-room tilt house detached from the family's house. In the house, there is a Then altar (*hình*) divided into different parts with the main thuribles for *hưón Mô*, *hưón Sên* and the afterworld troops to serve Then. Above the altar hung swallows, wild geese and cicadas effigies made from paper or bamboo strings. The right part of the altar is to place the votive offerings of adoptive children who have been cured by the Then sorcerer. In terms of both its manifestation and meanings, this altar bears more primitive hallmarks than that of the Tay and Nung.

4) Then sorcerer's main object of worship is *me Báu*, the Creator of human beings, who is regarded as the Creator by the Thai.

5) A white Thai Then sorcerer's main job is to find the soul to cure sick people or to beg for children (to beg Mother Bau for children). A Then sorcerer's ritual includes calling the soul to find names, naming the sick people; comforting and persuading the souls to come home; fighting away devils from the sick people, etc. A Then sorcerer conducts her rituals by sitting and singing to lead the afterworld troops to find the lost soul for the sick people.

6) Then rituals is typical of indigenous features. Votive offerings must include rice, egg, silver rings (or silver coins), fangs of animals like tigers or wild boars. Moreover, there is also a bag of clothes to collect the lost souls of the sick. During the ritual, the Then sorcerer uses a witchcraft called *căm măn* to tempt or frighten devils to retrieve the lost souls for the sick.

It's probable that Then of the White Thai nowadays is different from that of the primitive time. However, it has undeniably preserved many of the indigenous features. This is reinforced by Henry Maspero's comparative research on the society and religious beliefs of the Thai and the ancient Chinese. Despite receiving many imported factors, Then and Put still maintain their primitive features and their cults of the mother of fecundity like the White Thai's Then. This can be realized in the following points :

1) Like White Thai sorcerers, before starting the job, Then, Put Tay and Nung sorcerers all have abnormal signs. Both male and female sorcerers follow their families' traditions.

2) In the worshipping house of Then, Put and Sien, although there might be imported factors such as the worship of a general or witchcraft founders, etc., with or without a separate thurible, worship of the owner's own fate is still maintained, especially among female sorcerers. We have discussed this by a comparative analysis of the patterns of Then' sanctuaries while studying the influences of south China's and north Vietnam's religious beliefs on the Tay's Then<sup>(3)</sup>.

3) Then and Put's main tasks include relieving people from bad lucks, curing the sick by finding their lost souls and conducting rituals related to children according to the worship of Me Va.

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<sup>3</sup>. Nguyễn Thị Yên. *Then Tây*, Social Sciences Publishers, 2007, p. 174.

4) Like Then masters of the White Thai, objects of worship of Then and Put are mẹ Bióc, mẹ Va who are in charge of child bearing and rearing. When conducting the rituals, Then and Put also let their souls to go to muong troi to deliver their clients' messages. Whether it is a female or male Then master, Mo, Put or Sien, their destination is always Me Hoa, who has been honored as Hoa Vuong Thanh Mau or Bodhisattva Kwan Yin. Among Then and Put, Sien (who can start the job without being taught) bear most indigenous features, which can be seen in the sanctuary as well as the ritual.

5) Indigenous features can be found in rituals conducted by Then and Put. For most rituals, there is always a "khẩu khoăn" (gạo vía) thurible in which place an egg, a dummy to find the lost souls and a "sửa khoăn" (áo vía) bag to collect the lost souls for the clients. Sien masters will use another egg which is believed to be the shelter of the soul "nàng Sáy" (Lady Egg) so that they can consult her to tell fortunes. While finding the lost souls for the sick, Sien will play music and sing with a knife in their hands to frighten devils, etc.

It can be said that the cult of Mother of fecundity is an ancient religious belief of the Tay-Thai, which is similar to the cult of Lady Mu of the Kinh (Viet). However, in comparison to the Kinh's, the cult of Mother of fecundity roots more deeply in the Tay-Thai and bears in itself less philosophy. In general, the Tay Thai believe that Me Va or Me Bau (Mother Then) is the mother who makes the decision of the existence and fate of each person and 'Muong Troi' is their true homeland. Therefore, it is Me Va or Me Bau who is the natural mother of each person. The mother in the world is only someone assigned by Me Va to give birth to the baby. Thus, both the Thai and Nung pay great attention to giving a name to a baby. The Thai believe that each person has two names, one given by his parents and one by Me Bau. When a person feels sick, it means that Me Bau has called them to return to the sky. The Then master will then conduct a ritual to meet Me Bau and find the lost soul for the sick. The sick will borrow the Then master's body to speak out the name given by Me Bau and reasons for their sicknesses. The Then master will beg Me Bau to give the sick person another name and fasten a string round the sick's wrist to adopt him.

Like the Tay, a Nung baby's name is given by Then or Put assigned by Me Va when he's exactly one month's old. The Tay and Nung worship Me Va like a god who takes care of the baby's upbringing. They also consider Me Va as Mother Sinh - the mother who keeps each person's fate. In rituals to get away from bad luck and

birthday ceremonies they thank Mother Sinh and beg her for good luck and longevity. Most of those who have been cured by a sorcerer become the latter's adoptive children.

Therefore, while the Kinh's (Viet) worship of Lady Mu is only related to under-three year old children, the Tay and Thai worship the mother of fecundity as the mother of their fate, which is a life-long worship. Moreover, in many areas, the Tay even place the thurible for Me Va on equal terms with the thurible for the family's ancestors.

It can be said that the mother of fecundity is one of the important objects of worship of the indigenous Tay and Thai sorcerers, which might have rooted from the worship of the mother of human beings. The White Thai celebrates Then Kin Pang festival to honor the craft founder, which is actually a festival for Then master and her adoptive children (*lục liêng*) to bring votive offerings to Me Bau. To the Tay and Nung, although Me Va is no longer the unique object of worship, in most rituals conducted by Then and Put, they still bring votive offerings to the altar of Me Va. The worship of Me Va as the unique mother of the Tay and Nung can be seen in some folk festivals like the Lady Hai festival of the Tay. This is a kind of Shaman festivals conducted by the villagers to beg for bumper crops and safety. In this festival, Me Va and Mother Moon are seen as one single goddess who is considered as the mother in the sky who always takes care of her children<sup>(4)</sup>.

We thus believe that, like the White Thai, the Tay and Nung sorcerers consider mothers in general, and Me Va in particular as the ancient object of worship related to Shaman rites. Names given to these sorcerers are still kept among the Tay and Nung communities ; for examples, *mẻ siên*, *mẻ siêng* (female), *mo* (male), etc.

## **2. The appearance of sorcerers among the Zhuang and its spreading to the Tay and Nung in Vietnam**

On the whole, the popularization of imported religious factors among the Zhuang is typical of Chinese religious beliefs. Under the influence of Taoism and other imported religious beliefs, in the Zhuang community, sorcerers have features of secular monks of the Chinese Taoism such as, 'They lead an ordinary life with their

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<sup>4</sup>. Nguyễn Thị Yên. "Some Religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung and the existence of sorcerers at present is the inevitable effect of the exchange with imported factors such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism from the Zhuang in China and the Kinh moving from the delta to the residential areas of the Tay. *Patterns of Religious Beliefs of the Tay and Nung in Vietnam and the Zhuang in China*", *Ethnology Review*, (4), pp. 12-23.

wives. They are real hereditary sorcerers who know some prayings and can conduct several rites. Each sorcerer specializes in his own field such as acting as a medium, relieving one's bad luck, and curing the sick, etc.<sup>(5)</sup>

Therefore, the involvement of books and writing in religious beliefs is one of the factors marking the change of the Zhuang sorcerers from not having a teacher to having one. Disciples of the witchcraft are mainly men and are called monk master or hermit master. Besides, female sorcerers also tend to accept a teacher. The common feature of these two groups is that they worship not only witchcraft founders in their family clans but also their teachers and other imported deities. For example, apart from worshipping Me Va, indigenous sorcerers also worship the Jape Emperor and Buddhisattva Kwan Yin, etc.

Beside the legend of Mother Molojia (Me Va), the Zhuang also have a legend of an intellectual man who is considered the ancestor and the witchcraft founder of the Zhuang. Legend has it that the witchcraft book written by him was named Polotuo. We believe that the worship of the father-creator Polotuo related to the witchcraft book came into existence after the worship of the mother-creator Molojia, which is close to the period during which the Zhuang started to have books and sorcerers started to adopt teachers. It was also time of paternal authority in which men played an important role in social and family rituals. The combination of the role of the father-creator and that of a scholar in relation to books and writing might be a change in the belief of worshipping the leader of the people like to Mother Molojia.

The Zhuang migrated to the residential areas of the Vietnamese Tay and brought with them their religious beliefs as well as religious practices conducted by sorcerers of both these groups. According to the time and rules of folk culture spreading, the appearance of sorcerers in the Tay community must be much later than that of the Zhuang. Some records show that Cao Bang is one of the places that the Tay originated from the Zhuang in Guangxi first migrated to in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, as the Zhuang and the Vietnamese Tay lived in a near neighbourhood, transportation was convenient and language was the same, the exchange between the Tay and the Zhuang took place earlier. Moreover, there must have been scattered migrating groups of the Nung to the Tay's area, most of whom had been influenced by the Tay. This leads us to assume that the Nung sorcerers originated from the

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<sup>5</sup>. Henri Maspero. *Taoism and Other Chinese Religions*, translated version, Social Sciences Publishers, 1999, p. 152.

Zhuang who came to the Tay's residential areas to hand down their witchcraft might appear before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Both the two system of witchcraft with a teacher both came into existence and adopted in the Tay's residential areas. Under the influence of religious beliefs imported from the Kinh, this system experienced certain changes to form a group of the Tay and Nung sorcerers with typical characters of their residential areas as can be seen at present.

The Kinh's sorcerers appeared in the Tay's residential area later than the Zhuang, namely at the beginning of the 17th century as the result of the retreat of the Mac's troops from the capital city to Cao Bang (1594-1677). The Mac dynasty's troops then settled there. Earlier, the Kinh had scattered in the Tay's residential areas, but their number and influence was not as big as the Nung's.

According to the handing down of the witchcraft of the Tay and Nung sorcerers in the new residential areas in Tay Nguyen (south Vietnam), it might be assumed that the penetration and influence of the Nung sorcerers (originated from the Zhuang) from China on the Tay took place as follows: Among the Nung who migrated to the Tay's areas, there were always those who were sorcerers or whose families were involved in the job. After their settlement in the new areas, they continued and handed down the witchcraft to their students to meet the community's demand for religious beliefs. While living together with the Tay, due to similarities in language and customs, they gradually adopted Nung students and spread their influence to the Tay. The witchcraft was then transferred to the Tay's, evidence of which was the change of Put Nung into Put Tay; Tao Nung into Tao Tay, etc.

On one hand, the Kinh migrated into the Tay's residential areas and adopted religious and cultural customs of the Tay to form new religious beliefs. The process of exchange and influence accompanied by the handing down of the witchcraft took place for a long time.

Today the worship of witchcraft founders can be found in many religious beliefs of the Nung in Vietnam. According to the tales passed down in some Then Nung groups in Lang Son, the witchcraft might have been formed by their ancestral master in Guangxi (China). As time goes by, his name was not known but only his hometown was remembered by his followers. Ms Mong Thi Sam's Then Nung group in Lang Son has come into existence for about 270 years. When conducting rituals, they always mention "Pò Vìn, An Mạ" which is explained as the name of the village

in China where the witchcraft started. In other places in Cao Bang and Bac Can, the settlement of family clans was so scattered that Put masters can no longer remember the place where their witchcraft started. They therefore call *ham Hác* (the founder in the Kingdom Hác–China today) as the place where the Put's witchcraft started.

From such analysis, according to demographic features and hands-on records, we recommend the determinants that might have led to the exchange and continuity of imported factors in the Tay's indigenous religious beliefs :

1) There is an acceptance and influence of the Nung (originated from the Zhuang) on the Tay to form the Tay's new religious beliefs such as Put Tay, Tao Tay.

2) There is an acceptance and continuity of religious beliefs of the Kinh on the Tay's religious beliefs such as Then (female) and Dang (male); sorcerers.

3) After that, due to the co-living and exchanges among Tay and Nung sorcerers, new religious beliefs appeared which combine that of the Tay and the Nung such as the Then Nung.

In short, the formation and changes of religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung is closely related the exchanges with imported religious beliefs from many outsiders such as the Zhuang (Guangxi, China) and the Kinh from North Vietnam. Exchange, integration and continuity are the main way in which religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung have been formed and changed. This contributes greatly to the formation of a unique but various of religious beliefs of the Tay and Nung in Vietnam. /.

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