

Traditional Beliefs of Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Region of Vietnam in Current Context

Le Van Loi*

Department of Scientific Management, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Hanoi, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: Levanloinpa@yahoo.com

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Abstract Traditional beliefs is one of the elements of Vietnamese spiritual culture in a very multifarious and diverse appearance. The traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam such as: Ancestor worship, the beliefs related to community and the beliefs related to nature, production and life cycle, etc. absorbing morality “when drinking water, think of its source”, “Let every man praise the bridge that carries him over” of the Vietnamese ethnic groups. Currently, the traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region are changing to adapt, more suitable to real life. Some traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region tend to recover, develop and emphasize the significance of human life for individuals and village communities. Many new and progressive cultural values have been transformed into the beliefs of the people here, which makes the cultural and religious values system more multifarious and more humanistic. However, the transformation of the beliefs of ethnic minorities according to the tendency to recover both cumbersome, costly rites, miscellaneous culture or a trend of commercialization also give many challenges for the preservation and promotion of traditional culture of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam in the current context.

Keywords: *traditional beliefs, the transformation of traditional beliefs, the northern mountainous region of Vietnam*

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1. Introduction

Vietnam is a nation with the multi-religion, beliefs. Like the religion, the traditional forms of beliefs have a close relationship with human social life. In specific historical conditions, the beliefs have significant impacts on people and society, contributing to creating special nuances for human life. In Vietnam, the majority of people, whether religious or non-religious, have a need and participate in the belief activities such as: activities of ancestor worship; commemoration and honors for those who have contributed to the country and the community; worship of deity and saint, traditional symbols and other typical folk belief activities of good values in history, culture and social morality [1].

The traditional beliefs in Vietnam are very diverse and each type of belief in each ethnic group, area, region often has different nuances. The northern mountainous region is residence of many ethnic minorities, so people's religious life here is very rich and imbued with their own identity. The abundance and the unique features of the traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern multifarious of Vietnam have attracted many scientists who are interested in research.

In the book of *Forms of religious beliefs in Vietnam*, Nguyen Dang Duy author on the basis of clarifying the definition of religion and belief, the relationship between religion and belief. The author also clearly analyzes the origin and characteristics of the ancestor worship, deity worship and Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam. The author introduces the types of beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous areas of Muong, Thai, Tay, Nung, Hmong, Dao, etc. and affirms that these beliefs often manifest their focus on two aspects are worship taboos and funeral. These beliefs are associated with the mountainous environment in the context which people have not explained the phenomenon of crops, health, etc. [2]. Ngo Duc Thinh in *Beliefs and religious culture in Vietnam* [3] and *Customary law, traditional customs and transformation* [4] have presented the beliefs of ethnic minorities such as the worships of ancestor, Mother Goddess, Duc Thanh Tran, etc. These beliefs are not only popular among Vietnamese but also preserved in a number of other ethnic groups such as Muong, Thai, Dao, Tay and Nung, etc. Le Trung Vu in *Life cycle rite of human* discusses rites in birth, maturity, marriage and funeral of Vietnamese people, including the funeral rites, ancestor worship [5]. Pham Minh Thao in *Funeral customs* has presented the funeral customs of some countries in the world and Vietnam such as animism and souls; the funeral

of some ethnic groups in the world; the funeral of Chinese people; the funeral of some ethnic groups in Vietnam. Thereby, the author reappears a part of the belief culture of some ethnic groups in Vietnam and in the world [6]. Nguyen Tho Khang in the article *Characteristics and cultural values of folk beliefs in Vietnam* has analyzed Vietnamese folk beliefs “formed and developed in the forms of major folk beliefs such as: ancestor worship (customs of ancestor worship), worship of deities (Idolatry), professional beliefs, personal beliefs and rites (life cycle), etc.” [7]. *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam* is studied by the Institute of Anthropology [8], *Vietnamese traditional customs and rites* by Thich Thanh Due, Nguyen Bich Hang, Le Thi Uyen [9], *Customary culture* by Hoang Quoc Hai [10], etc. The authors have mentioned customs in human life such as: the birth, wedding and funeral, rites in construction of houses and the worship in the family, prayer rites such as prayer for the lost souls, peace of mind, unjust and relieving people from bad luck. Besides, the authors also mention the belief activities of the Vietnamese people such as: worship of deities: Tudigong, Caishen, the forest deity, tiger, etc.; types of beliefs such as ancestor worship, Mother Goddess worship, life cycle rites, etc. of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam.

Lan Anh author in the article *The worship painting of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region* gave an overview of the beliefs of the worship painting of the northern mountainous people: “The painting worship of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region are mostly religious paintings associated with Buddhist beliefs or Taoism, but the worship paintings still show the artistic imprints of each ethnic group, formed from their own cultural roots and customs. Each ethnic group has a particular line of worship paintings with differences from brush strokes and colors to the number of paintings in each set. In the Northern mountainous region, ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, Dao, Cao Lan and San Diu use the worship painting in worship and funeral activities. In particular, ethnic groups of Tay and Dao own a large number of worship paintings, etc. Mountain worship paintings are present in the funerals, indicating the folk wishes of the family of the dead for the souls of the dead to escaping from the hell, reaching to Nirvana or Immortal realms” [11]. and affirmed: “The mountain worship paintings serve the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous provinces, so the colors are often bold, deep and typical colors like red, blue, white, gold. The mountain worship paintings are kept quite carefully. Nowadays, despite the development of life, the worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region still keep cultural values” [11]. Do Quang Hung author in the article *Religion and Belief in ethnic minorities along the northern border* have generalized the relation of the religion – ethnic group of ethnic minorities along the Vietnam - China border. In particular, the author emphasizes their cross-border ethnic relations as well as social and cultural relations in history and present. Thence, the author suggests possibilities to exploit the common "sacred space" in promoting ethnic cultural exchanges and tourism development in this area [12]. In the article *Beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam*, Hoang Thi Lan author has commented that the

spiritual life and beliefs of ethnic minorities in this area are quite multifarious and diverse. The author affirmed: “Most ethnic minorities in the region follow polytheistic beliefs. Each ethnic group has its own nuances in belief activities, but it is possible to identify the belief life of the people through a number of forms such as ancestor worship, beliefs related to the community, nature, production and beliefs related to the life cycle” [13]. In the article *The eight typical beliefs of the northern highlands*, the author introduced in detail 8 typical beliefs of the ethnic minority community in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam: the worship of stone, fruit and the worships of trees, animals, water, sacred things, ancestor worship, the worship of Tutelary God. The author affirmed: “For ethnic people in the northern mountainous provinces, the beliefs play a very important role in the spiritual life as well as the living and working” [14]. In the article *Vietnam religions*, the author mentioned the traditional beliefs in the lives of Vietnamese people. In particular, the ancestor worship holds an important position in the spiritual life of the people here: “One of the most notable and universal spiritual practices common to Vietnamese is ancestor veneration, a practice shared with Chinese and most other Asian cultures. Practically all Vietnamese, regardless of formal religious affiliation, have an altar in their home or business where prayers are offered to their ancestors. These offerings and practices are done frequently during important traditional or religious celebrations (e.g., death anniversaries), the starting of a new business, or even when a family member needs guidance or counsel. Belief in ghosts and spirits is common; it is commonly believed that failing to perform the proper rituals for one's ancestors will cause them to become hungry ghosts (Vietnamese: ma đói). A 2002 Pew Research Center report claimed that only 24% of the population of Vietnam view religion as "very important" [15]. Author of *The Vietnamese Value System* has confirmed: “Respect for parents and ancestors is a key virtue in Vietnam... When people die, their families honor their ancestors on the day of their death by performing special ceremonies at home or at temples and by burning incense and fake money for the one who died. The Vietnamese believed that by burning incense, their ancestors could protect them and their family from danger and harm. Days before the ceremony starts, the family has to get ready, because they won't have enough time to get ready when the guests arrive and the ceremony starts” [16].

Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet author in the article *Preservation and promotion of the national cultural values in the Northern midlands and mountainous region in the current context* has introduced the material and spiritual cultural values of people here. In particular, the author affirmed: “The ethnic groups in the region live closely with the natural environment, so they naturally believe in fate, supernatural forces, which is the basis of the beliefs and religion. Beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northeast region are primarily ancestor worship, followed by polytheistic beliefs and some aspects influenced by Buddhism and Taoism. In the family, people of the ethnic groups set up an altar to worship their ancestors. In addition, they worship the Buddha, follow Tao, sometimes they also worship the deity to be considered as the primitive ancestor of their ethnic group. For example, in

the conception of Tay and Nung, Shennong takes in charge of farm work, the deity creates season and keeps water for the crop. The deity has a very important significance for the productive life associated with agriculture of the people. Every year, ethnic groups organize formal ceremonies to worship Shennong in order to pray for good weather and less natural disasters. The ethnic people also believe that all things have souls, ghosts and deities. All are divided into two types: gentle (good) and evil (cruel). This is the reason for the formation of a series of temples to worship the Tudigong, village hall to worship the Tutelary God, as a cause for ethnic people to organize ceremonial festivals" [17]. Nguyen Thi Minh Thu in the article *Animals in the tale of folk and beliefs of worshipping animals of some ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region* has studied the two animal images as Tiger and Snake in ancient tales and the beliefs of worshipping these animals in the lives of the people here. By the survey of folk tales, the author believes that these animals have a close and intimate relationship in the lives of ethnic minority communities and prove their respect and worship for the animals in some ethnic groups "The typical ethnic groups such as Thai, Tay and Muong have maintained some worship customs of animals for a long time, including the Tiger and Snake with a sacred belief in good support for human life". Thereby, the author affirmed: "Actual natural conditions and spiritual beliefs with sacredness form the beliefs of animal worship in the cultural life of ethnic groups" [18].

In addition, the researchers are also interested in in-depth study on the traditional beliefs of each ethnic minority community living in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam to recognize the general and private cultural identities of each ethnic minority community here. In Thai customary law in Vietnam, the authors Ngo Duc Thinh and Cam Trong have collected, translated, annotated and introduced the customary laws in the life of Thai ethnic minority communities in Vietnam [19]. Vuong Duy Quang author in *Spiritual culture of the Hmong in traditional and modern Vietnam* has clarified the economic, cultural and social features of the Hmong people. The author also partly mentioned the rites in the birth, marriage and funeral of the Hmong in Vietnam [20]. In *Thai people in Northwest region of Vietnam*, Cam Trong author has clarified the ethnic group, economic, social, religious, belief and cultural and artistic features of Thai people [21]. In the *Culture of ethnic groups in Northwest region of Vietnam*, the authors have mentioned the cultural features of ethnic groups in the Northwest region, shown the differences in the culture of some ethnic groups and in-depth analysis of the cultural features of ethnic minorities in the northwest region of Vietnam [22]. Nguyen Thi Thanh Nga author in the article *Some basic issues of ethnic groups in the Northwest region of Vietnam* has mentioned the material and spiritual cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region of Vietnam. In particular, the author emphasizes the spiritual cultural characteristics of some ethnic minority communities here: "Most ethnic minorities living in the Northwest region follow polytheistic beliefs and believe that universe around the people created by many world layers. Hmong and Dao people believe that the world is

made up of heaven, earth, water, underground. Thai people believe that the heaven is composed of 3 layers of the world" [23]. Nguyen Khac Duc in the study of *Protestantism in Hmong and Dao ethnic areas in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam* has introduced the general beliefs and traditional religions of the Hmong and the Dao in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam. In particular, the Hmong people have polytheistic beliefs and religions, with the forms such as: Ancestor worship, worship of Menshen, beliefs related to the lineage, Samanism and affirm: "The traditional beliefs and religious forms of the Hmong have a great role to meet the great spiritual needs of the people" [[24]; 11]. The author also generalized that the traditional beliefs and religions of the Dao as many other ethnic groups believe in the original beliefs and religions such as: worship of "Ban Vuong", ancestors and maturity recognition ceremony. The author affirmed: "The existence of traditional belief forms has met the spiritual needs of the people" [[24]; 16]. In the article *The northwest ethnic group's cultural region (Northwest Culture)*, the author has introduced the unique cultural values of ethnic minorities here. In particular, when introducing the religious culture and beliefs of the Northwest ethnic minorities, the author emphasized: "The ethnic groups in the Northwest region have beliefs "all things have souls" (animism), a kind of belief that every ethnic groups on the planet experiences. There are all kinds of "souls" and all kinds of deities of river, mountain, stream, stone, tree, animal, natural forces such as thunder, lightning, rain and wind. The parts of the human body also have the souls. The Kinh people believe that there are three souls and seven envelopes (male) and three souls and nine envelopes (female). Thai people have 80 souls, like souls of hairs, eyebrows, eyelashes, ears, nose, forehead, etc. The dead do not disappear, they return to live in the ancestral village. Because everything has souls, it is necessary to treat them as if they are like humans. So there is a good soul, a bad soul, an evil soul, a gentle soul depending on the treatment of the human with them, etc. In this way, the people establish the relationships with all things and with the ancestors, placing the human in the environment of space and time, creating a balance in the mind. The human focus on their existing lives of time domains: past, present, future; and dimensions of space, nature, environment, human, society. It is a multifaceted, multilateral relationship that ensures the rationality and the inevitable stability of human life" [25].

In addition, there are many articles published in magazines that mention different aspects of belief rites in the lives of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous of Vietnam such as: *Something about the beliefs of Thai people in the northwest region of Vietnam* by Hoang Tuan Cu [26], *Chu Dong tree in Muong mythology and totem trees in the beliefs of some ethnic groups in our country* by Phan Huu Dat author [27], *Beliefs and religions of Dao people in Cao Bang* by Dam Thi Uyen, Ngo Thi Lan Anh [28], *Knowledge, customs and rituals related to water of Muong people in Hoa Binh* by Le Thanh Hoa [29], etc.

The studies have mentioned many different aspects of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region, such as: characteristics, existing forms and cultural beauty of each type of belief. Inheriting

the previous works, this article focuses on introducing the appearance of traditional belief forms and the transformation of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam before the effect of socio-economic development, globalization and international integration in the current context.

2. Content

2.1. Traditional Belief Forms of Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Region of Vietnam

People of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region have a rich and diverse spiritual life and belief. Most ethnic groups follow the polytheistic beliefs, worshipping many different deities. It is possible to generalize some types of beliefs of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region as follows:

** Beliefs of worshipping the ancestors*

Ancestor worship is a traditional belief and custom, with a very special position in the spiritual life of many ethnic communities in the world. The ancestor worship is a popular belief in the life of Vietnamese people. With the concept of "all things have their own souls" and people divided into two parts, including the body and soul closely related. When the body is lost, the soul will still exist in a separate world. Therefore, people believe that the ancestors and the dead always supervise, care, help and protect their descendant from the harm of evil, bad ghosts and support the health and fortunes for their descendant, etc. The ancestor worship is a belief maintained by many ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam such as Thai, Muong, Hmong, Tay, Nung, Dao, Giay, Si La, Lao, etc. [13].

Ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region have many different rites, but the ancestor worship always appears as a beauty in their spiritual life. The ancestor worship of the people here is not merely a form of common belief, but it also creates the cultural identity of ethnic minority communities in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam. According to the people here, the ancestors are deceased people of generations in the family and lineages, mainly previous generation, who made the career left for the next generation, supervising the descendant to do business in the life. Therefore, any family must remember their ancestors' merits and worship their ancestors. On holidays, Tet, the family performs a rite to invite the ancestors to come back home in order to receive the offering and their descendant will sit beside to pray for the health, business and expelling the bad things.

In the ancestor worship of the Hmong people, to remember the merits of the ancestors, every family has an altar. According to the custom, the altar of the Hmong has a piece of handmade paper, then stick on three pieces of chicken feathers. The ancestor worship is highly valued by the Hmong. The place of worship or the altar is the seated place of the ancestor in holidays, Tet, weddings, naming ceremonies, new house entrance ceremonies, which directly affects the prosperity of the whole family. The ancestor worshipping ceremony of the Hmong is quite simple but solemn on important occasions, the belief

activities of the Hmong appeared from the ancestors of the lineage and passed down from one generation to another [20].

Lao people worship their ancestors and mainly offers a rice to their deceased parents every ten days, they only worship their ancestors at the beginning of the year, marriage, funeral, entrance of a new home, etc. According to the Lao's concept, the ancestors are divided into home ghosts (including parents, grandparents and deceased relatives) and ghosts of the lineage. In particular, the home ghosts is the most important, the altar is placed in the middle of the main space in the house, the family often worship the ancestors at the beginning of the year.

Si La people have relatively close lineages. Each lineage of Si La people has an own legend. The relationship in the lineage is blood relation, it is headed by the head of the lineage who is the oldest. The ancestor worship place is located at the main space in the house of the head, with the nearest door for the relatives to worship in the holidays, Tet, weddings and death anniversaries. In the new rice ceremony and Lunar New Year every year, the Si La organize a common ancestor worship for both lineage at the house of their head. Whenever the families in the lineage have a big works such as marriage, funeral, new house construction, etc., they must bring the offerings to worship the ancestors, heaven and earth in the house of the head.

Dao people believe that the human only die physically, while the soul is forever immortal to "return to the ancestors", so the Dao pay special attention to rites related to the ancestor worship. The ancestor worship is the main work in the spiritual life of the Dao family and always maintained and expressed by unique and special rites. The Dao worship their ancestors for nine generations. However, in the daily worship, they pray only the three-generation ancestor and the worship is usually implemented at the beginning of the month, the middle of the month and the holidays in the year. The ancestral altar of the Dao is placed in the middle space and is the most sanctuary. In the worshipping rites, the Dao use many worship paintings, on the occasions of holidays, Tet, there are different types of worship paintings. The ancestor worship of the Dao is deeply humanistic, aiming to bring the people to memory of the source, as a deep link of the community, the desire for good things and the purpose of expelling evil things.

Giay people set up an ancestor altar in the middle space of the house. On the altar of each family, there are 3 bowls of incense and in the order from left to right, the first bowl of incense is to worship Kitchen God on 23 December lunar calendar, the worshipping army on December 23, the second bowl of incense is to worship the heaven and the earth in the early morning of the second day of New Year and the third bowl of incense is to worship the parents, grandparents, ancestors on the occasion of Tet, holidays in the year.

According to the custom of the La Hu, in the traditional New Year, the people in the lineage who have the same ancestors in one generation will come to the house having the ancestor altar to worship the ancestor and to wish the new year. When members of the family, lineage are present fully, the host will genuflect in front of the offering tray and pray the ancestor to support the descendant with abundant health, good crops, and good harvests; animals growing fast, not sick, disease, etc.

Cong people have many lineages and each of them has a way to set up an altar, to worship their ancestors. The Cong worship the ancestors for up to three generations. If the siblings in the family have lived separately, each of them will set up the own altar in their house and worship their ancestors themselves. The Cong when making a ceremony, often pray to be protected by their ancestors for the health, smooth business, fortunes, expelling bad things, welcome good things, etc. The new rice ceremony of the Cong is to give thanks to their ancestors for a productive crop, expelling evil and cruel things destroying the crop.

The ancestor worship is the main belief of the Nung, and the Nung families only worship from their grandparents down. At the beginning of spring and the occasion of new house construction, opening the sowing crop, the families prepare the offerings for the worship on the ancestor altar.

The Kho Mu people believe that the ancestors are home ghosts and from grandparents generation and older, they are not worshiped but must wander to be reincarnated into grandchildren families. They explained that therefore, the grandparents and deceased people are like the grandchildren in the faces and temperament. The ancestor altar of the Khomu is made of woven bamboo tray hung on the wall near the kitchen; According to the concept of Lo Lo people, each person has 3, 8 or 9 souls and the Lo Lo worship the ancestors and parents who are dead relatives in the family. On their altars, there are wooden dummies, the surfaces painted by black coal and the offerings to worship the ancestors on important holidays.

** Beliefs related to the community*

In addition to worshipping the ancestors in families and lineages, ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous provinces also have some common beliefs of the community such as worship of ghosts of village-muang, god of earth, god of mountain, Tudigong and Saints in the region, etc.

In addition to worshipping the home ghosts, ancestral ghost, ghosts (phi) of village-muang. According to the concept of the Thai, phi of the village is an unity consisting of the soul of all members of the same resident unit: village or muang, in particular, the soul of the first person having the merit for «founding» the village or muang is the master. In addition, phi of villages, muang also include many other supernatural forces, such as *master ghost of earth*, *master ghost of water* and many other ghosts that coexist in the muang – village. Therefore, referring to *phi of village*, *phi of muang* is actually referring to the soul of the whole village - muang. Therefore, it is also possible to understand that the phi of village -muang is the gods looking after and protecting the lives of people and at the same time protecting the mountains, forests and fields in the region, as well as all kinds of animals and plants there. [[30]; 386-402] From the above concepts, every village or muang of the Thai always has a temple. The temple of ghost of village - muang are always built next to a forest at the beginning of village or muang.

Beliefs related to the community of the Muong are quite rich [31], the Muong worship the National Mother of Lady King, Tan Vien mountain god, god of the earth, the Tutelary god, etc. National Mother of Lady King is a deity worshiped and placed in the most solemn position in the

public temples in many localities of the Muong. National Mother of Lady King is actually a Princess of the Forest (mother of the forest). Tan Vien mountain god is revered and called Bua Tho, Pua Ba Vi (king at Ba Vi mountain) by the Muong people. Every year, the Muong make festivals to worship Tan Vien god with many special rites. In addition to Tan Vien mountain god - a famous person worshipped as the Tutelary gods in all areas of the Muong, in different localities, there are different gods honored to become tutelary gods of the villages.

Within the village, the Tay worship the Tudigong (the god of earth), the god of earth and the saints in the area called the deity (god). In the conception of the Tay, the Tudigong is the common deity of the village, muang (there are many ways to call the names of the gods of different village and muang such as: Muong Pha Han, Man Phia Tien, Ngoc Can Fairy Princess, etc.); This god protects the village, the crops, etc.

The Nung also worship the earth god, the Tudigong, the Tutelary god of the village who are the public gods of the whole village. For the earth god, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, the families often bring the offerings to worship at common worship places of the whole community. The Tutelary god almost is worshipped in every locality with a large number of Nung people, but not all villages have a temple. Sometimes, a few neighboring villages have a communal temple, every year, in the spring, the families in the villages gather to perform the rites for worshipping the Tutelary god.

The Dao worship Ban Ho as a legendary character, considered the primitive ancestor of the Dao, mentioned in the tales of folk, divine and poetic stories. Like the Tan Vien mountain god of the Muong, in addition to being worshiped in families, the lineages, Ban Ho or Ban Vuong of the Dao is also worshipped in public temples, etc.

** Beliefs is related to nature*

Ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region still worship many natural phenomena. According to the Thai's concept, everywhere in nature is considered to have *phi (ghost)*. It can be mentioned that some types of popular *phi* are worshiped by the Thai as follows: *Phi châu đin* (ghost of the earth); *Phi hay* (ghost of terraced-field); *Phi na* (ghost of field); *Phi đông héo* (ghost of cemetery); *Phi đôn*; *Phi co bà* (ghost of banyan tree); *Phi ngược* (ghost of serpent); *Phi huôi* (ghost of stream), etc. [8].

Similar to the Thai, the Muong people also worship many natural phenomena such as worshipping god of the earth, stones, fruits and trees. The Muong think that the land also has the god of governance. The trees considered as sacred objects and worshiped by the Muong people such as ficus microcarpa, Chu dong tree, banyan trees, bombax ceiba, etc. During the festival of new rice, the Muong have a custom to worship upland rice. They believe that the rice also has a soul, if it is hard to pray, the rice mother will call the envelopes of the rice children to proliferate, making the life of the Muong more full.

** Beliefs is related to agricultural production*

Most of the ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam live by farming and breeding. So the types of beliefs related to agricultural production are present in the religious life and beliefs of most ethnic groups.

The Muong with main economic activities are wet rice agriculture economy, therefore, the Muong have a system of religious rites related to the crops according to the growth cycle of rice such as: worship Dol king agricultural god, beliefs on rice envelopes, etc. The Thai, Tay, Nung, Dao, San Chi, Giay, etc. all believe that all things have the souls and the gods support the crops, production, therefore, every year, in the spring (before the production season), the ethnic people mentioned above all have rites to go to the fields (also known as the Long Tong festival, bumper-crop praying festival) in order to pray a convenient, bumper crop, all good and prosperity things.

The Ha Nhi in some localities in the northern mountainous area have a bumper-crop praying in June at the end of the summer in order to pray for heaven, earth, gods of mountain and forest to support good and bumper crops, etc.

Some other ethnic minorities such as the Thai and Lo Lo also have rites to pray for rain in the drought years in order to pray for the gods to support the favorable weather, good crops and full lives of the people [19].

** Beliefs is related to the life cycle*

The life cycle rite expresses the beliefs related to the individual from birth to death. The life cycle rite is implemented by the family, lineage and community for each person through stages such as the stage of birth with taboos before and during pregnancy period, the rites before, during and after birth and various ceremonies until adulthood; The adult stage also has ceremonies marking the age of adulthood and marriage rites; The stage of death has ceremonies for the dead, rites during and after the funeral [5]. Ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous provinces have a diverse and rich life cycle ritual system. Each ethnic group has certain taboos and rituals around important milestones in the period of a human life from the birth to the death. Typical ethnic groups are Ha Nhi, Hmong, Mang, Si La and Nung, etc.

1) According to the concept of the Ha Nhi, the people still depend on the supernatural forces. The conceptions of souls, ghosts, supernatural forces have dominated the human life and have a great influence on the spiritual life of the Ha Nhi. The Ha Nhi think that heaven is a private world in which Jade Emperor can decide everything that happens in the life on the earth. And Jade Emperor with Thò Po Mother will assign the work to each person, prosperous or poor lives, etc. Therefore, from the birth to the death, every human is made rites related to the important stages of the life by the relatives. Every year, on New Year holidays, especially on the first day of the New Year, the families make a ceremony to worship Jade Emperor with the offering including a chicken or a bowl of water [8].

2) The Hmong have a concept of the human life divided into 8 cycles and the people living only three mornings are also considered a human life cycle. The lifecycle beliefs of the Hmong include: Children who are one month old will be implemented the naming ceremony. When the son of the family at the age of getting married, if liking any girl, they should report it to their parents so that the family can go to the fortune telling in order to know whether they suit each other or not, and if they suit each other, the son often goes to catch the wife. When taking the bride to the house, implementing the rites to enter the husband family, to the ancestors about the name and age of new daughter-in-law, then choosing the wedding day and wedding ceremony. In

everyday life, if the Hmong feel uneasy or worried about something, they believe that the soul is lost or missed, so they will make an worship of ancestor and god to call the soul coming back. With the concept that the soul will return to the ancestors when the people die, during the rites of worshipping, the Hmong often have the rites to clearly indicate the way the ghost must go through, what the ghost must do, what the ghost should say to convince the ghosts and gods to return to the ancestors. This rite of the Hmong shows the piety of the descendant to the parents and ancestors [20].

3) The Mang argues that the life exists in four different worlds: Heaven is the world of creative gods, the real world is living place of the human, the world where the dead and the demons master deep in the earth is the world of monstrous people and the underwater is the world of serpent. The human consists of two parts including the soul and body. When the people die, the soul will go to the heaven to live with the ancestors or to the cemeteries to become a ghost, and the ghosts are also quite common notions with many different types of ghosts: home ghost, ghost of the lineage, ghost of forest, ghost of river wharf, etc. These types of ghosts will be good ghosts for the human if the people please them, they will make the people sick and worse if the people treat them uncomfortably. Therefore, in the life cycle of each person, the Mang have different life cycle rites such as naming ceremony, maturity ceremony, funeral rites [31].

4) The Si La have life cycle rites since the child was born. The life cycle ceremony of the Nung is calculated starting from the time the woman gives birth to the child for three days. When the child is born for three days, the family will invite the priest to do the full days old ceremony and drive away the evil for the child. Also on this day, the child's customary name is set, and the official name will be set by the parent when the child is 14 or 15 years old in the maturity ceremony.

One of the most important rites in the life cycle rites of each ethnic group is the funeral rite. The funeral is a rite in family and social life, at the same time, it is also a special cultural phenomenon including many different rites, reflecting the conceptions of social history and the community of the ethnic group. People of ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region believe that every human has a body and soul, when the people die, the soul still exists. Therefore, the funeral rites of the people in the northern mountainous ethnic groups are carried out very carefully and attentively with the rites of entering the coffin, the ceremony of worshipping the dead and the burial ceremony. Although each ethnic community has its own funeral rites, it shows the concept and respect for the dead. Typical ethnic groups are Giay, Hmong, Muong, Khang, Ha Nhi, Thai, Si La, Nung, Kho Mu, Mang, etc. [6].

2.2. Some Changes of Traditional Beliefs of Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Region in the Current Context

Development of market economy, globalization and international integration promote communication between cultures, nations and ethnics together. This is an inevitable,

objective process as well as internal needs of nations. Industrialization, modernization, market economy and international integration bring an inevitable consequence which is transformation in many aspects of social life, therein, transformation of traditional belief of people is included. Traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region is diverse, plentiful, full of humanity and deeply imbued with ethnic identities. In the current period, traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities here are under strong impact of economic – social development and international integration.

Nowadays, economic – social life of ethnic minorities in Northern mountainous region of Vietnam has changed basically and positively. In regions of ethnic minorities, natural economy, self-supply is gradually removed and replaced by commodity economy. Industrialization, modernization and new-countryside construction has given impact and innovated the image of regions of ethnic minorities. Material and spiritual life of the people get significant improvement. Construction and development of progressive culture, imbued with national identity has brought clear effectiveness in preservation, promotion of traditional culture; therein, traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities are included. At the same time, lots of new, advanced cultural value continue into belief life of the people, enriching system of cultural and belief value, bringing more humanistic meaning [4].

Strong economic – social transformation comes from comprehensive national renewal. Traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in Northern mountainous region tend to rehabilitate and develop, facilitating religious culture to spread in society. During transformation from traditional society into modern society, traditional belief of the people here has changed to adapt, be more suitable with real life. Many belief rituals which used to last for many days are shortened now; many modern facilities are used in religious life; some cultural symbols are interpreted in new meanings; cultural types, beside transmitting faith in supernatural being, are emphasized in human meaning for individuals, society of village. For example:

In funeral of the Hmong, cumbersome procedures in condolences which last for many days (8 to 9 days) such as placing the dead inside the house for 2, even 3 – 4 days and reciprocating are omitted; instead of kneeling 3 times, reciprocating with drinking alcohol 3 times, now, the people only officiate and drink little alcohol figuratively.

In funeral of the Thai, all descendants in the family line of the dead and neighbors, connexion stay home for the funeral; each family of siblings, relatives of the dead must prepare a feast to give to the dead; if the family is wealthy, the feast must contain pig head and chicken; if the family is not wealthy, the feast must contain chicken. After the funeral, family of the dead must send a thanks to the comer by treating a meal. Therefore, expenses of funeral of the Thai are very expensive. Nowadays, funeral of the Thai is organized consistently with less procedures, which help to reduce expenses for the family.

In many regions of the Yao, the biggest worship ceremony of the people which is Ban Vuong worship ceremony is organized less regularly. If the ceremony is organized, the offering is simpler. “Holy pig” is not as big as before, two bigs are enough. The procedures of the ceremony are shortened as well.

In many regions of the Tay, the Nung, economic life of the people is improved quite a lot. Therefore, some festivals with traditional belief rituals have been restored after years of omission such as: ceremony praying for rain of the Nung, Long Tong festival in many villages of the Tay...

Especially, with expansion of communication, integration, effective support of modern media, lots of belief cultural value do not only exist within scope of each village or each ethnic any more but also spread widely domestically and internationally. Thus, development of modern society, especially industrialization, modernization, expansion of international communication, integration, has brought belief cultures of the ethnic minorities a chance to affirm the social role as well as convenient conditions to continue new, modern value of the time.

However, besides positive aspects, impact of technology, information transfer, transformation of cultural, living value... has also brought corollary and challenge to traditional belief life of ethnic minorities in mountainous region of Northern Vietnam. Market economy is not clearly shaped in regions of ethnic minorities but its negative effect on belief life and belief culture is quite clear. Many belief cultural activities which used to be spiritual living with folk features are now “theatricized”, ostentatious, formalistic and lacking of creation of the people. Besides, together with immigration, population and labor, job shifting have made many types of belief and culture which are tied with society of the village gradually lost or deformed.

With rehabilitation of traditional cultural value, belief life of ethnic minority lately has increased and arisen with backward customary, not suitable with new social condition. Many worship rituals in belief have changed significantly, more civilized but some prolix, expensive procedures tend to be restored. Besides, with cultural communication, integration, some belief life featured with traditional culture tend to be lost, replaced by strange value different from traditional culture of the people. Some belief life, festival of the people in the regions has been making meaning of belief types distorted, biased, distant from their true nature.

The biggest challenge for traditional beliefs of the ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region is invasion of new religions, “strange religions”, which includes many evil religions non-humanity, anti-humanity, contrary to the customs of Vietnamese people. Evangelism of these evil religions in regions of ethnic minorities erodes good value of traditional religions, it also increases superstition backward customary, even causes damages to health and property of the people. Effect of new age on traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities is strong and complicated. Beside positive impact, some beliefs are eroded and lost gradually or completely.

To conserve and promote value of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities of Northern mountainous region nowadays, impact of the times cannot be ignored, therein, it is important to notice following issues:

Aware more deeply properties, role of traditional beliefs as well as its inevitable changes due to impact of the times. Facing strong impact of industrialization, modernization of market mechanism and international communication and integration, inevitably, traditional

beliefs must change to adapt and exist. All impacts aiming to conserve traditional beliefs must notice to facilitate types of cultural belief to continue new value, suitable with social progression.

Define clearly that subjects of preservation and promotion of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities are people of the ethnic minorities. In practice of traditional belief rituals, selection and “improvement” of belief activities must be determined by the people here. At the same time, it is needed to make the people here aware of the good and the beauty of traditional beliefs, thence, they shall be more confident and proud of tradition, ethnic identity.

Pay more attention to “dynamic conservation” of traditional beliefs, making traditional beliefs more alive in community living of ethnic minority in the Northern mountainous area. It means that belief cultural living must be shown lively in community of villages, created and enjoyed by the people.

In economic – social development in regions of ethnic minorities, it is required to pay attention to help the people organized their live in civilized orientation, facilitating traditional beliefs to transform naturally in order to adapt with the times. In construction of new countryside of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous area, it is needed to focus on helping people here organize their lives, aiming to connect to tradition and target to civilized value of the times. When the life is organized reasonably, material life is enough, spiritual life is plentiful, the people shall promote the role as subjects creating culture, which makes traditional beliefs conserved and promoted in community and social life. Thence, traditional beliefs shall have conditions to transform naturally with orientation on maintenance of identity but more civilized and advanced. They satisfy spiritual needs of ethnic minorities and contribute to diversity of Vietnam ethnic culture at the same time.

3. Conclusion

Tradition beliefs of the Vietnamese in general and of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous regions in particular reflect desire of the people about a stable society, a prosperous life. Traditional beliefs also help to adjust awareness and behavior of human in relationship with personal – family, community, village and nation; between human – natural environment and human – self. Through those relationships, traditional beliefs help people live right, live honestly. Traditional beliefs target people to maintain traditional moral and cultural value of the people, aiming people to true, good and beautiful lifestyle. Besides, traditional beliefs help to create cultural value for national culture. However, some traditional beliefs make people dependent to divine beliefs, forget the capacity, creative confidence of human themselves. The cynical thoughts, waiting for the support of the divine forces have been dominating the awareness and action of a large part of people here. During globalization and international integration, traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in Northern mountainous region of Vietnam have been transforming strongly, therein, the advanced transformation, increasing human value and strengthening ethnic cultural value, is mainstream. Besides, there are

some transformations reducing true inherent cultural value of traditional beliefs. Thus, it is needed to facilitate the people to promote the subject role of belief activities, and, at the same time, help them conserve, promote good cultural value and limit backward aspects in traditional belief activities, thence contributing to enrich social spiritual life as well as increase resources for economic – social development of the Northern mountainous area in particular and of Vietnam in general.

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