

## INITIAL RESEARCH ON PROTESTANTISM IN LA HỦ PEOPLE IN MƯỜNG TÈ DISTRICT, LAI CHÂU PROVINCE, VIETNAM

***Abstract:** Before the year 1987, the ethnic minorities in Lai Châu had practiced traditional religions. In the past twenty years, Protestantism penetrated into the communities of Hmong, Dao, Thai and other ethnic minorities then it expanded greatly in Lai Châu province. In this context, a part of La Hủ people in the border villages in Mường Tè district also converted to Protestantism (it is called Xè A in La Hủ language). Although the process of evangelization was intermittent and the number of believers was not crowded, but this religion has had a certain impact on the lives of La Hủ people. Basing on actual survey data, this article initially study the process of spreading Protestantism to La Hủ people in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province and it also suggested some solutions to this issue.*

***Keywords:** Protestantism, La Hủ people, Xè A, Mường Tè, Lai Châu, Vietnam.*

### 1. Introduction La Hủ people

La Hủ people in Vietnam have originated from Yunnan province, China. They immigrated into Vietnam approximately 4 or 5 generations<sup>1</sup>. According to the result of the Census of Population and Housing in Vietnam in 2009, the population of La Hủ people was 9,651 inhabitants and it ranked the 39<sup>th</sup> among 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam<sup>2</sup>. As reported by the Committee Propaganda Department of Lai Châu, La Hủ people have 2,004 households, 10,141 inhabitants, 2,62% of the overall population in this province<sup>3</sup>. La Hủ people in this area are divided into three groups such as La Hủ Trắng, La Hủ Vàng, La Hủ Đen. They live in 42 villages in the high mountains<sup>4</sup>.

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At present, La Hủ and Mảng, Cống, Cờ Lao people have the most difficult lives in Lai Châu province. Generally, the spiritual life of La Hủ is animism. “It is different from La Hủ in China, La Hủ in Vietnam is not affected by large religions. Before the liberation of the North, their religion and belief is primitive forms, but they are fairly complex”<sup>5</sup>. La Hủ people mostly worship traditional religion (except for the group converted to Protestantism).

The soul is “la” in La Hủ language; “la” exists only in creatures like plants, animals and human beings. A humankind has 12 souls in which there is one principal soul determines the life and the others are subsidiary souls. Thus, La Hủ people always protect the souls, especially children. They conceive that when someone is sick, it means his souls are going out, so his family has to worship to call these souls come back. “La Hủ people think that souls exist only in creatures like plants, animals and humanbeing but ghosts exist everywhere. The ghost is called “Xơ pẹ” or “Nê” in La Hủ language and they are divided into types as good ghost and bad ghost”<sup>6</sup>.

La Hủ people think that humankind’s disease relates to ghosts. Therefore, when someone is sick, he is treated by traditional medicine and he simultaneously is treated by rites. A mystery-man’s work includes divination, expelling ghost, calling the soul to heal, pray safety for family members and villagers, etc. In addition, La Hủ people conceive that there is a Buddha (kha xi củ mù), a Rsi-immortal (gừ gia mi) and bad or luck days. Along with this conception, there are rites such as the cult of ancestor (đế mà khừ), eating new rice (ồ xó cha) which are practiced in family and the cult of village’s divine (gạ ma te).

Generally, La Hủ’s religion is a primitive form with belief in a supernatural power that leads to fortune telling, treating by rite of Shamanism and many other rites. These are suitable conditions for external religions penetrate and expand.

## **2. The process of Protestantism’s evangelization in La Hủ residential area**

As reported by local officers, Protestantism (A Xè in La Hủ language) is religion that a part of La Hủ people believe in. Protestantism is also called Vâng Trứ in Hmong and Thín Hùng in Dzao language.

Nguyễn Khắc Đức in his research on “Protestantism’s characteristics of ethnic minorities in the mountainous area in the North of Vietnam” confirmed that “During one fourth century, from 1986 or 1987 to present, there are 130,000 inhabitants of ethnic minorities converted to Protestantism, they are Hmong, Dzao, Thái, Pà Thèn, Cờ Lao, Tày, La Hủ people, etc.”<sup>7</sup>. Basing on the religious practice of La Hủ such as hanging crucifixes throughout their homes, gathering to pray, compliance with canon law so we agree with the point of view that A Xè is Protestantism.

A Xè was introduced in Vietnam from La Hủ in Gia Mễ commune, Kim Bình district, Yunnan province, China. In a research of the origin of this religious phenomenon, Đỗ Quang Hưng stated that “from 1998 to present, 27 inhabitants of Yunnan province have illegally immigrated to Vietnam then they have evangelized Protestantism in Hmong, Dzao, La Hủ, and Cao Lan community in Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang provinces. They have organized a reunion to propagate their faith in the border area in order to entice more than 20 people from the Hmong, La Hủ community come to China to study catechism and receive documents like the Bible, cassette tapes, then come back Vietnam to evangelize”<sup>8</sup>.

The process of introducing and expansion Protestantism in La Hủ in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province could be divided into two periods:

***From 1997 to 2006:***

In 1997, taking advantage of the kinship relation from a long time ago, some La Hủ from China crossed the frontier to propagate their religion to villagers of Tá Bạ commune, Vietnam. In addition, they also exploited the difficulty in economy and low level of education to entice the villagers convert to Protestantism. For instance, if they converted they would not need to work on their fields because they had the help of the supernatural being to have food to eat. Every day, believers had to pray and compliance with some bans such as no smoking opium, cigarette, no drinking wine, no eating raw food, blood soup, etc. The missionaries profit seasonal times as cultivate and harvest, they arrived La Hủ tents to entice people convert to Protestantism. Most of La Hủ people are illiterate, so forms of propagation are simple like verbal propaganda and study the Bible through cassette tapes, radio and memory card. According to statistics, in the end of 2004, the Ka Lãng commune had 18

households with 75 inhabitants converted to Protestantism/ Xè A at Nhóm Pố, Vạ Pù, Tá Bạ, and Là Si villages<sup>9</sup>. Then, this religion gradually expanded to other villages such as Ú Ma, Nhú Ma, Cờ Lò 1, Cờ Lò 2 of Pa Ủ commune.

In this context, at the beginning of the year 2004, local officers and border guards attempted to “propagandize the compliance with provisions of the law of inhabitants in religious activities”. As a result of this campaign, there were only 9 households with 25 inhabitants believe in Protestantism and they practice their religion in tents in the fields.

***From 2011 to present:***

At this period, missionaries have continuously evangelized and expanded Protestantism/ Xè A. At the beginning of 2011, propagation has recurred at Tá Bạ and Pa Ủ communes. Many La Hủ families hang the cross at their tents in the fields. Every Saturday, they prayed and studied the Bible. In 2012, there were 23 households with 45 inhabitants believe in this religion at Tá Bạ commune<sup>10</sup>. In 2013, there were 34 households with 193 inhabitants who believed in this religion at Pa Ủ commune<sup>11</sup>. The believers were middle-aged men and it was different from other ethnic minorities, believers were mostly women and elderly people. It is explained that La Hủ women are timid and they don't have a social life so their lives depend on their husbands. The old people can not work in the forests or cross over the border. As the result, only men work in the fields and forests, in particular, they cross over the border to visit relatives, goods exchange, learn about this religion and then they entice their families to convert.

Especially, beside religious activities, the religious propaganda in the La Hủ community on the frontier has related to politics. Missionaries did not only preach about Protestant dogma they also propagated the culture and history of La Hủ people as they have the same origin and a long history with La Hủ in Yunnan province. They had their own characters and cultural characteristics but they have been lost. This work has inspired the proud of their origin, established cognition of community with their living space that did not depend on the separation of the border between Vietnam and China.

In this situation, beside the projects of social and economic development, local officers and border guards have explained the views

and religious policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State. They also have launched a campaign of self-management the border security and they have promoted the role of prestigious people in managing the population. As a result, many inhabitants more understood about religious policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State. They simultaneously realized the essence of religious propaganda, so they were not pious and some of them gave up Protestantism to return the traditional ancestor worship. At the beginning of 2014, the Protestant activities finished in Tá Bạ commune. However, the number of believers has gradually increased in Pa Ủ commune. At present, there are 74 households, 223 inhabitants who are believers and they mostly live in Ú Ma, Nhú Ma and Hà Xi-Hà Nê<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, the process of spreading Protestantism to La Hủ people in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province showed that this phenomenon has occurred for many years in the villages of Pa Ủ and Tá Bạ communes. The evangelization and religious conversion were silently carried out in the La Hủ community; it was not a movement like Hmong and Dzao communities. Firstly, the conversion was spontaneous. Then, it was caused by the relatives from the other side of the border, the number of believers gradually rose. Believers even did not know what religion they believe in. Their religious practice was not closely organized like in Hmong. However, from the year 2011, the evangelization has not been done by La Hủ from China, but La Hủ from Vietnam have come China study catechism and receive documents like the Bible, cassette tapes then they have returned their homes evangelize and entice people in their community. Consequently, believers more understood about their religion and their religious practice steadily expressed by worshiping just the God, hanging the Cross at their tents in the fields. They simultaneously throw away the ancestor altar, did not cult their parents. In addition, they studied the Bible by La Hủ language through cassette tapes, radio and memory card. At present, La Hủ people's Protestantism, overall, is at the initial period and it does not cause impacts or issues like Hmông and Dzao people.

### **3. Causes led La Hủ people converted to Protestantism**

In my opinion, there are four main reasons lead a part of La Hủ people in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province converted to Protestantism/ Xè A.

Firstly, La Hủ's residential area is isolated from the other ethnic minorities; their villages are far from each other and they also are far away the commune's center, approximately, from 20 to 50 km. Furthermore, the infrastructure is bad and transportation is difficult. The relations are only closed in their groups (they maintain the economic and cultural relationship with their kinship in the other side of the border) and their communication with the other ethnic groups is limited (they merely communicate with Hà Nhì people). In addition, La Hủ's material life is poor; they have a low educational level and their traditional religion is simple. In this context, some La Hủ from China take advantage of the kinship relation to entice La Hủ people in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province converted to Protestantism/ Xê A.

Secondly, the some contents of Protestantism are suitable to their cultural characteristics, so it can attract them. Protestantism has a modern and flexible mode of evangelization, especially, it is spread in La Hủ language. In addition, religious practice and liturgy are simple and they are appropriate for their poor condition of life. This religion simultaneously meets their desire to escape from poor and famine life. Thus, conversion to this religion, they find a mental support and it fills a hole in their spirituality. Besides, canon law has some positive points such as no drinking wine, no smoking opium, etc. It corresponds to many desires of women and addicts' family members. In particular, missionaries always propagate that following this religion in order to trace back to their ancestral history and culture.

Thirdly, the local political system could not meet the demand of its duty in the new context. The officers' educational level of Pa Ủ and Tá Bạ communes is low and their professional knowledge is limited. Most of the officers are not educated and they are almost Hà Nhì people; a few of them are La Hủ people. Although La Hủ officers are educated and they have a chance for communication with other ethnic groups they do not show their abilities. In addition, there are a few number of officers in charge of mobilizing the masses.

Fourthly, the local officers early discovered the penetration of a new religion and its development situation. They have organized a campaign to convince people come back their traditional religion. However, it was a temporary solution of stabilization. Moreover, in a large area, the

inhabitants live far from each other; they usually live in their tent in the field and they have a closed relation with their relatives over the border, so the re-evangelization may happen.

#### **4. Some suggestions to solve the issue of conversion to Protestantism of La Hủ people at present**

The conversion from traditional religion to Protestantism has occurred in ethnic minorities in the Northern West area. However, this is a sensitive issue that relates to security and social economic development in the border region. It needs to have flexible solutions which base on empirical fact. The Directive No.01/2005/ CT-TTg *on some tasks toward Protestantism* is the guidelines for local political system and officers in religious affairs toward Protestantism. In applying these guidelines to the practical situation in the area of La Hủ people in Mường Tè district, Lai Châu province, the local officers in charge of the religious affairs should have a common awareness of Protestantism in order to have an appropriate solution. Thus, it needs to distinguish what is the difference between the spiritual demands and the taking advantage of religion. It is important to have the effective implementation of social and economic development, raising the peoples intellectual in order to solve the causes lead to Protestant expansion in La Hủ people. In addition, the local officers should respect and facilitate for religious freedom rights according to the law. It needs to have a campaign of preservation and promotion the traditional culture.

In my opinion, there are some solutions to solve the problem of converting to Protestantism of La Hủ people as follow:

Firstly, improving the efficiency of dissemination the guidelines and policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State; it is an important work in religious affairs towards La Hủ people. Besides, it needs to disseminate the nature of the Protestantism's evangelization, raising vigilance of taking advantage of religion in political aim, preservation and promotion the traditional culture. These are the bases of cognition and spiritual activities of people, facilitate for religious freedom rights.

Secondly, improving the capacity of the local political system and promoting the role of the border guards, training local officers, in

particular, the officers are La Hủ people. It needs to have a financial aid to La Hủ's children who are healthy and clever to study in high schools, colleges or vocational schools.

Thirdly, should develop the infrastructure such as transportation, the telephone network coverage, the effective implementation of the economic and social development programs in order to improve the standard of living. Strengthening cultural exchanges between La Hủ and other ethnic groups; improving the quality of education in the La Hủ area in order to build the confidence of people in local government and organizations.

Lastly, should have a better border management in strictly managing the phenomenon of religious propagation and conversion. Border guards and local officers attempt to prevent people from illegal border crossing and keep the surveillance religious propagation of La Hủ people, especially the taking advantage of religion in political aim in order to have measures to solve these issues./.

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**NOTES:**

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- 2 General Department of Statistics (2010), *The result of the Census of Population and Housing in Vietnam in 2009*, Statistics Publishing House, Hanoi.
- 3 *Conference of the Preliminary Review 3 years Implementation of the Project of Preservation and Sustainable Development of La Hủ people.*
- 4 *Statistics of 4 borderguard stations in Lai Châu province in 2013.*
- 5 Không Diễn (Chief author, 2000), *La Hủ people in Vietnam*, the Ethnic Culture Publishing House, Hanoi: 127.
- 6 Không Diễn (Chief author, 2000), *La Hủ people in Vietnam*, *ibid*: 131.
- 7 Nguyễn Khắc Đức (2013), "Research on Characteristics of Protestantism in Ethnic Minorities in the Northern Mountainous Area in Vietnam", *Religious Studies Reiview*, N<sup>o</sup>. 8: 53.
- 8 Đỗ Quang Hưng, *Religions and Beliefs of Ethnic Minorities along the Northern Border*, <http://bpvn.bienphong.com.vn>
- 9 Ka Lăng Borderguard Station (2004), *Report of Situation and Result of the Borderguard Affairs in 2004*, Mường Tè.
- 10 Ka Lăng Borderguard Station (2012), *Report of Situation and Result of the Borderguard Affairs in 2012*, Mường Tè.
- 11 Pa Ủ Borderguard Station (2013), *Report of Situation and Result of the Borderguard Affairs in 2013*, Mường Tè.
- 12 *Data collected in Borderguard Station of Pa Ủ in March, 2014.*

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