

Some Features of the Ba Na Ethnic's Belief

TRUNG THỊ THU THỦY*

ABSTRACT: The paper presents a lively picture of the belief of the Ba Na, an ethnic minority in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It begins with the Bana's universe stratification which is interestingly divided into 3 different layers. Then it introduces and analyses the Ba Na's conceptions of deities and gods, and their idea of soul and immortality.

The Ba Na ethnic minority has the biggest population amongst those speaking Mon-Khmer language in the Central Highlands (Tây Nguyên). At the present, there are some 115,397 Ba Na people¹ who reside mainly in two provinces of Gia Lai and Kon Tum. Like other ethnic minorities, the Ba Na believe that deities or *yang* exist in all things surrounding them and guide their thoughts and acts. From their very deep consciousness, the Ba Na scare supernatural forces and they never overlook offering worship rituals to seek the peace in spirit for their community.

The Ba Na and many other ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands are recorded later in the history of human beings. It does not mean that the Ba Na own backward and out-of-date properties. So is the traditional belief of the Ba Na. It bears the humane values which play the significant role in people's lives. From the perspective of cultural subject, a universally vivid principle of existing deities in all things is believed. The Ba Na create the notion of deities and souls which is transferred from Ba Na's generation to generation.

1. Universe Stratification of the Ba Na

The existing folklore legacy of the Ba Na indicates that there are disconnections in their stream of traditions. What still remains in the memory of the Ba Na is that the universal arrangement is imagined in a longitudinal axis with several horizontal dimensions. It is this way of arrangement creating the stratification and dissimilar

*. MA., Department of Culture and Development, Institute of Politics the third region, Đà Nẵng.

worlds. In the first layer is the world of human beings, heroes, legendary animals and trees. Humans are central in this world. They can only own the space within their village. Beyond their village gate is a world where is home to numerous ghosts, deities, and powerful gods. Humans and animals in the first layer have the responsibility of participating in maintaining the existing harmony of the deity-arranged universe.

The second layer of the universe is home to the dead and souls. In order to come to the world of the dead, souls must go into *mang lung* gate kept by a long breast woman or *Ya Dung Dai Taih Toh*. The souls must buy fire from *Ya Dung Dai Taih Toh* in order to get pass the dangerous dank road into the village of the dead or *plei atau*. That's why the Ba Na often bury with the dead strings of bead and cotton so that the dead can exchange for fire.

The world of deities is in the third layer where the mightiest gods reside. The Ba Na believe the life of deities and gods is almost similar to that of secular life on earth but things in this world seem variant and changeable. For instance, the soul of the dead sees a deer in the form of a gourd and humans are seen as buffaloes in the eyes of deities. Therefore, things in the world of souls do not mirror those of the worlds of humans and the dead.

It appears difficult to trace back the origin of the universe and historical moments when all the word-of-mouth folklore legacy of the Ba Na allows people to think about a three-layer universe. This imagination is relatively similar to the concept of the universe of people in the Central Highlands mentioned in the book "Mystic land" by Dam Bo. If the universe in the notion of the Central Highlands people is observed having seven integral systems², the Ba Na describes it with three layers. This difference is still a big question and has yet to be answered.

2. The Conception of Deities and Gods

From the perspective of etiologists, the Ba Na believe that everything is sacred and mysterious that it is impossible for humans to discover. Lives of the Ba Na are governed by long-standing immutable customs which also governed the lives of their ancestors as well. *Yang* is the mighty creating all beings, the universe, humans and their functions. Humans, the small beings amongst all in deities' debt, must not do anything against their traditions. Humans are assigned to maintain the order arranged by the deities. Anything is born by the deities must be end by the deities. This is not

complicated at all. It is the reflection of a colorful and universal belief that *yang* exists everywhere and can see everything.

The whole life of the Ba Na is mirrored through the worship rituals, the prayers beseeching help from *yang* in their everyday life of families such as delivery, wedding, illness, funeral, trades, in their agricultural ceremonies such as the season commencement ceremony, harvest ceremony, New Year. Through such ceremonies and rituals, humans add spirit to their everyday activities. Prayers are often accompanied with acts and heightened with holy features.

In the spiritual world, humans often try to adapt to the predetermined order, act within such order, wallow into the holiness, and participate in its rhythm. In this world, there is no room for individual privacy thoughts and suddenly-inspired activities. This world is portrayed as a predetermined trail stepped by generation after generation.

Although the system of deities of the Ba Na is not grandiose enough to build a great patheon, the historical stories and legends which elucidate the formation of the universe and all beings can help people imagine the deities of the Ba Na according to the concept of the insiders.

In the Ba Na's beliefs, life exists in the form of a single substance which is organized by the hands of highest god couple of *Bok Kei Dei* and *Y Kuh Keh*. They also govern agricultural activities. The couple who hold all qualities of kind-heartedness, permanency, absolute mighty create all things and livings, and look after both humans and harvests. *Y Kuh Keh* is the wife who creates the earth and sky and *Bok Kei Dei* is the husband who makes the Sun, the Moon, the stars and sticks them to the sky.

Besides this couple, the Ba Na have other couple of *yang Mat Nar* - *yang Mat Khei* or the god of Sun and the god of Moon, respectively. The Ba Na have a lot of legends to explain the heat of the Sun and the softness and sweetness of the Moon. The goddess of Sun takes care for reproduction and prosperity. The sun spreads out warmness, makes rice plants produce grains, and enlightens humans to go to work in forests and fields. The god of Moon is always close to labourers. The steps of the god become the pace of life of humans. The god helps humans recognize the flow of time to arrange their cultivation or hold rituals. The life of the sun and the moon is also the life of all beings on earth. The sun and the moon often appears in parallel in almost all decorations, communal houses, designs of handicrafts or weaving products of the Ba Na people.

In the Ba Na's belief, the god of rice or *yang Sri* and the worship of rice plant play an important role. The belief of worshipping the god of rice is present in many places in the world. The god of rice is also known as the Mother of rice or described in the image of a woman. The Ba Na believe rice plant has its soul and spirit or *po ngol* and humans must treat rice plants carefully and respectfully on the fields and in the storage places. They think that by doing so they can produce abundant food and bump harvests. For this reason, the Ba Na have a variety of taboos in order not to displease the god of rice. They also have a lot of prayers to keep rice with humans. The mysterious closeness between the fertility of land and the creativity of women is one of basic agricultural perceptions. The Ba Na fear the god of lightning or *Bok Glaih* the most. The god is portrayed as a giant with the tall and ferocious appearance. The god always brings a lightning-discharge stone hatchet. In dry season, the god sleeps like a log and he wakes in rainy season to go everywhere. *Bok Glaih* is easy to be moved and to get angry. Not only looking after human's traditions, the god is also responsible for maintaining a necessary order of the universe. Any ritual which is carried out carelessly or out of the traditional line will be punished by the god's hatchet. With the god of lightning, all the origin orders must be maintained and respected.

The god of water or *yang Đăk* is loved by the Ba Na for her friendliness. Like the Ba Na, *yang Đăk* is gentle, fond of singing and loves going to festivals of the human world. In the consciousness of the Ba Na, *yang Đăk* is a beautiful goddess who owns sweet voice to sing. The purified appearance and enchanting singing voice of *yang Đăk* attract a lot of young men in the village. Humans always try to keep purified lives for villagers themselves or otherwise the sources of water in the village will be impure. Thus, in their everyday lives, the Ba Na have a number of taboos to protect the purity of the water sources.

The Ba Na consider fire as a powerful god for his destruction potential. Because houses are often made from bamboos, the punishment of fire is very strict in deed. Being burnt to death is considered fierce by the Ba Na who sometimes would sooner move to another place for residence than stay in the burnt village. Before burning fields to grow maize, the Ba Na never forget praying the god of fire or *yang Unh* for bestowing humans with precious fire for burning fields and having much ash. These prayers are to wish for bump harvests and people can live peaceful and happy lives.

Bok Hôch, a god looking after birds and animals, is often told by the Ba Na. The god drives birds and animals to fields whenever harvest comes. *Bok Hôch* is described as a huge bird with wide wings and terrific cries. Ahead of the harvest

time, the Ba Na prepare a lot of traps, bamboo spikes, fences to prevent the destruction by animals and birds.

The god of banyan tree or *yang Long jori* appears in a lot of tales of the Ba Na. In comparison with other trees, banyan tree is known as an ultimate sacred tree and the symbol of strength and life. The god of banyan tree is amongst goddesses but described with a bushy and rough figure. Inside this rough appearance is full of humanity. The Ba Na deem that any woman who has no milk after delivery can buy the milk of banyan tree and rub to her breasts, then milk will come. Amid the high mountains, thick holy forests, rice fields, banyan trees are seen outstandingly as a deep green figure with wide branches stretching far and interlacing roots. In the eyes of the Ba Na who always look things in a new perspective, sensitively, imaginarily, surprisingly and fearfully, banyan tree is in deed the home of deities.

Besides the abovementioned deities, the Ba Na have numerous gods and goddesses such as the god of forests (*yang Bri*), the god of land (*yang Teh*), the god of stone (*yang T'mo*), the god of mountains (*yang Kông*), the god of rivers (*yang Krong*), the god of pot (*yang Go*), the god of iron (*yang Mam*), the god of gong (*yang Ching*), and so on. Each god has a specific function assigned by the Creator *Bok Kei Dei-Yă Kuh Keh*.

3. The the Ba Na's Conception of Soul

Similar to the explanation on deities, the Ba Na often understand the souls by their folklore stories. Unlike normal fables, these stories are pregnant with poetical principles on the life on earth. It is this fanciful mentality creating the vivid and unique belief of the Ba Na. This belief has permeated through all sides of people's life and developed into a holy and miraculous credence. This type of thinking is not only found amongst the Ba Na but also with other aboriginal groups in the Central Highlands. Accordingly, every thing from rice grain to jar and insect has its soul. So do humans whose their soul is considered a holy substance creating the marvelous but invisible life which is unable to touch by normal senses in normal moments. Given the visual experiences, traditional perceptibility and individual experiences gained from colorful dreams, soul is neither unreal nor abstract. According to the Ba Na, human's dreams occur when the human soul or *pơ ngol* departs the body or *a kâu* for its miraculous world where the soul can meet its past relatives. This world is also called the world of deities. Thus, dream is the gifted moment when people through their soul can contact with the deities from their real world. In the dreams,

people can go into an eery and mysterious world. The dream is the venue of humans and deities, visible and invisible worlds, the natural and the illusionary.

With the Ba Na, night plays an important role because it turns them into others with much more interests. When the Ba Na are in deep sleeps, they are in a dual state which means there are a sleeping body is warmed by cooking fire and have regular breaths and a soul in the form of a spider, a grasshopper, or a cricket is on a trip. The soul is free in the figure of insects getting out of navel and wandering here and there. The dreams tell us about the soul's wander in the night. Therefore, the Ba Na do not touch such insects because they are afraid of killing someone in the figure of such insects. Sometimes the Ba Na wake up and feel tired, they deem that their soul has wandered too far. In dreams, the soul meets a lot of things and only *pojâu* has capability to explain the images it has met. The whole spirit of a human is in their soul. Therefore, whenever going out or walking in the night, it is the Ba Na's custom to put a dry leaf over their head to protect their soul from being captured by wick *yang*. The soul comes back when people wake up. If a person is in sickness, it is thought that the soul gets lost or is captured by gods or seduced by the dead. In this case, nobody else but *pojâu* who holds secrets and holy power is invited to cure the sick. *Pojâu* works on the mission of saving humans. The Ba Na's belief in shaman is the strongest and most durable.

The death is extreme contrast to the life. So, the nature of soul after death has certain changes. If it exists in parallel with the body, the soul is a weak and vulnerable entity for several reasons. When the death separates the soul from the body, it immediately turns out a holy powerful entity. It exists independently and usefully and sometimes its existence is harmless. According to the Ba Na, the death means the soul never returns to the body and the soul wanders all the time in its world. It is believed that there are good ghosts or *kiăk lăng* and bad ghosts or *kiăk me*. Becoming a good ghost or bad ghost does not depend on the personality or the physical body of the person while living. It depends on the good or bad status of a person when they die. The Ba Na think a person has a good death when they die of old age or illness in their house. When the dead goes to the village of the dead or *plei atâu*, the soul of this person becomes a good ghost and always helps and support their relatives. The Ba Na fear the bad death or *lôch koni* which is abnormal such as suicide or *lôch đipo*, women die while delivery and the child has yet to be born or *lôch xonom*. The soul of those people often comes back to harass and harm villagers. Those have bad death are often buried in a particular graveyard which is different from the village's graveyard. It is located far from the village where nobody would

dare go to for cutting trees and doing farming. Those have bad death are prevented from going into *mãng lung*. They are caught by evil genius to work as servants. That's why the Ba Na never divide properties to the bad dead persons.

The Ba Na trust that all beings have soul and only soul can go to the afterworld, therefore, the destruction of an object or killing of an animal to sacrifice is to force to destroy the body in order to move their soul to the world of the dead. Is the soul everlasting? It is an interesting question. The Ba Na have a poem telling the incarnations of ghost. The poem reads as follows:

Humans metamorphose into tigers

Tigers are stabbed to death and turn into wildcats

Wildcats die and transform into weasels

Weasels turn into deer when they die

Deer dies and turns into mouse

Mouse is eaten by humans and turn into mole

Mole dies and turns into fog

Fog dissolves in the endless world when the sun spreads sunbeams.

It is hard to believe that the Ba Na have the conception of immortality. Until a certain moment, the soul ends its limited human life and turns into another factor which continues its participation in the indefinite universe. In the end animals or dewdrop disappears in the boundless universe. The Ba Na think the soul is simply the longer existence of the body. Perhaps this is the reason why the life of the world after dead is not a strong power controlling the acts of humans on earth. For the Ba Na, the thought that the soul exists longer than the body is not the end for the humans to escape from the fantastic hope of the death which is considered the destruction or compensation for the life on earth.

The traditional faith of the Ba Na exists along with all their vivid consciousness. Even the Ba Na of the Catholic villages believe in the god of lightning, the god of water, the god of rice, the existence of soul and that the soul is not the end. They pray Jesus and their traditional deities. The tradition belief of the Ba Na has an enduring life and cannot cast off overnight. It does not mean that belief has not been sunk into

oblivion. Time flies and the death of the respectful elderly in the village in succession who maintains the invaluable legacy of the ethnic group, the collision of cultures, and the everyday changes have made breaks in the Ba Na's traditions. There are unanswered questions regarding this issue. It is hoped that time and the information search will provide a satisfactory answer.

Reference:

¹. Lê Duy Đại. "Population of Central Highlands in the modernisation and industrialisation period", *Ethnological Studies Review*, No. 4, 2006.

². Dam Bo. *Miền đất huyền ảo* (Mystic Land), Hội Nhà văn Publishing House, Hà Nội, 2003, p . 409.