

## RELIGION AND BELIEF OF THE THAI PEOPLE IN THE NORTHWEST OF VIETNAM - SOME PROBLEMS NEED TO SET UP

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*Abstract: Thai ethnic group is one of 54 peoples living on the territory of Vietnam for a long time. Like other ethnic groups, the Thai people has its own identity and habits, lifestyles, culture and religious beliefs, etc. However, this article does not go further presented the characteristics of an ethnic group that mainly analyzes some aspects of the environment, economic conditions, lifestyles, ways of thinking, etc. of the Thai people to explain why the Thai people in Vietnam do not have many changes in religious life in the current context.*

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Vietnam is a multi-ethnic nation. Every ethnic people has its own custom, life-style, psychology, culture, belief and religion. However, ethnic groups live in the same natural and social condition so their customs, life-styles, rites are similar. When we deal with culture and religion of Vietnamese ethnic groups we always attach special importance to the common, unity but we somewhat forget privateness, difference of culture, life-style, belief religion of 54 ethnic groups who live dispersedly in Vietnam. In this article, I want to raise my thought about religion of Thai people in the Northwest of Vietnam when religious situation has many changes in the Northwest, Tây Nguyên (West Plateau) and Southwest.

First, Thai people in the Northwest of Vietnam are more numerous. They have lived in region which adjoins two countries China and Laos; Why have not they received religions and belief of neighbor countries as Thai people in Thailand? Why has not the Northwestern zone received new religions?

Is it true that natural environment? Northwestern zone is hollow. It is surrounded by row on row of mountains so its inhabitants meet many difficulties in exchange with other communities. Their closed life-style has been gradually established.

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I do not content with the above answer. It is right that Northwestern region is not favorable region for exchange of cultures with the other communities, but many other ethnic groups do not live in difficult regions, they have not easily received Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism.

Because of geographical condition, Thai people think highly their national consciousness and their identity <sup>(1)</sup>. They defend their identity as they defend their ethnic group. If they lose their identity they will lose their nation and their ancestor.

Nowadays, Thai people have reject clanship in their social structure, but they maintain forms of the old religions. Thai people think that there are two existent worlds. That is the world of man and the world of ghost. Ghost can decide the life of human so Thai people must worship ghost to pray for good health, good harvest... Thai people think that ghost is soul. The belief of soul is preserved. The belief of soul has intermingled with belief of sacred objects and belief of magic to become the main belief of Thai people at present.

Nowadays, Thai people do not easily to leave prolix and costly procedures in the rites of ghost worship because they think that these procedures are their old customs. If they leave these customs they leave their ancestors <sup>(2)</sup>.

Thai people have persevered their identity, belief and religions. They also take part in persevering national identity of Vietnam. As they have confined themselves to their tradition (although their tradition is good) so they and other people of ethnic groups in the Northwest have rarely changed in social life including spiritual life and religion.

It is the reason why Thai people have not received belief and religions of the other ethnic groups.

Second, the Northwestern region is the important region in North-West of Vietnam so Vietnamese Government has many solutions on economy to raise material life of Thai people but we seem to achieve fewer results than the other regions. In North-Western region there are many rivers and streams in accordance

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<sup>1</sup> Thai people is one of few ethnic groups who has own language and writing system so we can know that they have consciousness on their nation and culture.

<sup>2</sup> In Thai people's conception, the world of "Phi" (it means the world of ghost is divided into many classes. Phi Khuôn is the soul of man and of animal; Phi Then is Heaven who creates all beings. In Phi Khuôn there are levels. In mountain hamlets Phi Khuôn is the head of hamlet who has the credit of founding hamlet. In family Phi Khuôn is head of household. When head of household died Phi Khuôn will dominate in family forever and Phi Khuôn turns into house ghost (Phi Hướn) so family has to worship Phi Hướn. Phi Hướn can make every body in family ill. Thai people believe that they can prevent disturbance of ghost by amulets and sorceries (following Cẩm Trọng: *Thai people in Northwestern region in Vietnam*, Social sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1978).

with agricultural production and animal husbandry. The residence of Thai people is adjacent to tropical forest so animals and plants are plentiful. In the shape of autarkic economy, Thai people have received natural preference. Thai people have tradition to weave brocade - a famous cloth in the world. Thai people are very diligent and dexterous. If you come to Thai house you can see their dress, blanket, curtain... are made by hand. Before getting married, a girl has to weave her dress, blanket, mattress... so we can find that Thai people are very diligent.

Although the Northwestern region has natural potentiality, it is one of the poorest regions in Vietnam. Vietnam has 5 poor provinces, and then Northwestern region has two provinces: Lai Châu and Sơn La.

After surveying the reason why economy of North Western region is less development, we find that following reasons: Thai people are in the habit of shifting cultivation of wandering hill tribes; Thai people are not habit of hoarding food for future; Because of depending on natural preference, Thai people do not think of expansion of productive investment. The producers of Thai people's festival, funeral, and wedding are prolix and costly...

According to us these above reasons can be overcome by propagation, guidance, education. In fact, this problem is not settled easily...

Thai people have preserved their tradition, way of living and habits for many generations so they meet many difficulties in change of their thought, their way of living.

The development of economy, culture and society in the Northwestern region meet many difficulties because of the miss of emotional state. This miss is influenced by religious view of Thai people. In other words, the religious view of Thai people influences Thai people's thought, action, behavior towards all problems in life including economic problem.

Thai people do not think that their products which are made by hand have material value so they rarely buy their products. So they do not invest in expansion of production.

Formerly, we used to think that culture had not concern with economic development, the economic elements themselves were the basic of economic development, and these elements had not concern with culture. It is an erroneous

concept. Now, we think that culture can inhibit or impulse the economic development and religion is an important component of culture.

I have recently read *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, written by Max Weber, a German philosopher and sociologist. In his work, Max Weber thought highly of ascetic ethics of Protestantism and he thought that ethics had an important role to take shape rationalist thought of capitalism. It means Protestant ethics had an equivalent and selective relation with the spirit of capitalism. This relation created a necessary and favorable motive for development of European capitalism. According to Max Weber, Oriental nations, first and foremost China had not the development of capitalism because China had not favorable conditions for development of capitalism. Because of the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese culture had been a rule of behavior and rigidity. In other words, conservative etiquettes, customs and habits... could not represent and create capitalist spirit.

We have not a lot of sympathy for Max Weber when he pressed subjective factor and spiritual factor in the creation of economic model. After reading Max Weber's work, my worries are interpreted. We should examine behavior of human in economic activities, in their relation with world outlook and outlook on life and religion is also outlook on life and world outlook. It means that outlook on life and world outlook of religion govern and influence economic treatment of human.

As Thai people, Khmer people in South who are influenced by the Theravada Buddhism meet many difficulties in economic life. Many economic solutions of government can not go down in the masses. Government provides field rice for them, and then they sell their field. The government lends money to them then they spend all money but do not use money to invest in production because they do not desire to enrich themselves. They do not think to expand the economic relations and enlarge production. In short, they content with their present life.

Is it true that Buddhism has influenced their philosophy of life? Buddhism thinks that life is ocean of misery. The spirit of empty makes them feel that life is fictitious. This outline of life influences their style life. They live indifferently. They do not desire the opulence. If Khmer people want to escape from misery they must destroy obscureness.

The Buddhist ideology has left stamp in the life of Khmer people. They do not easily change their way of life soon.

For Thai people in Northwestern region, tradition has penetrated into their subconsciousness so they can not change their style life soon.

When carrying out economic solutions, we should consider spiritual life and religion of ethnic people. How can we change their customs, their way of life without losing their traditional identities? If we compel Thai people to leave the worship of ghost, we will violate religious liberty of Thai people.

If we encourage Thai people to weave brocade by machine, they will weave more brocade and they have more money but their brocades are not sophisticated. So the value of material culture may lose the value of spiritual culture.

We should combine religious solutions with economic one. We not only propagate and mobilize our people but also raise material life of our people. We make our people have good health so they do not believe that ghost makes them ill or dead. They understand that ghost can not decide their life, then they are not afraid of ghost and they do not worship ghost any more.

If we want economic solutions to achieve the result, we should pay attention to cultural and spiritual elements. Thai people originally venerate ancestor and the head of village. We should help the head of village to become opulent. He will be “alive ghost, alive deity” to persuade his people following him. When material life is improved, people will broaden their scope of knowledge. They gradually reject backward customs.

In order to overcome conservative and backward culture we should invest in lines of communication so mountain hamlets are in touch with each other, compatriots of various ethnic groups can exchange and learn each other so their spiritual life becomes healthy. We help Thai compatriots bring into touring potentiality of the Northwestern region. We help them develop economy of the Northwestern region so the Northwestern region escapes from miserableness and integrates with fellow ethnic groups on the path to modernization.

These my above thoughts are only solutions of methodology. In order to have concrete solutions, all branches and organizations should study deeply Thai people and resolve remaining difficulties so we shall achieve expectant results. /.