

SPIRITUAL TEACHERS IN THAI COMMUNITY IN THAN UYEN DISTRICT, LAI CHAU PROVINCE*

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The Thai people in Than Uyen are part of the Northwest Thai people. They also share the same cultural traits, especially the spiritual culture of this land. In the spiritual life of the Thai people in Than Uyen, the spiritual teachers always hold an important position and role. On the one hand, they are “spiritual guides”, responsible for taking care of the cultural and spiritual life of the whole community. On the other hand, they are also members with a lot of contributions and closely attached to society. With the study of the difficulties and contributions of Thai spiritual teachers to the community, the article contributes more voices to the preservation of Thai folk knowledge.

Keywords: Spiritual teacher; Shaman; Thai people; Lai Chau province; Northwest.

1. Introduction

Than Uyen district is located in the southeast of Lai Chau province, and is part of the legendary Muong Than field. There is a long-standing coexistence of many ethnic groups, but the Thai are always the dominant ones.

In terms of socio-economic aspect, Thai people in Than Uyen in the past mainly focused on agricultural production, associated with the form of wetland and shifting cultivation. In addition, activities of raising cattle, poultry, weaving, and hunting, catching and gathering are still maintained here. In the past, the Thai community in Than Uyen lived in a Muong unit. The old Than Uyen basin (including Than Uyen district and Tan Uyen district today) is inhabited by 3 Muong units: Muong Than, Muong Khim (Kim) and Muong Cang (Trong, 1978, p.314). Through the process of French colonialism and changes in geographical, administrative, social terms, the way of dividing the area according to the village and muong unit no longer exists. Because of that, the boundaries of the old Muong villages were also disturbed.

In cultural and religious life, the Thai community in Than Uyen still preserves well the traditional cultural values of the ethnic groups, especially cultural and spiritual values. They always have the concept of an invisible world that exists in parallel with the tangible world of man. That world of nothingness is the dwelling place of the *phi*⁽¹⁾ who

¹. According to the Thai people's conception, the universe always has two parallel worlds, the real world and the nothingness world. In which, the world of nothingness is the world of the *phi*, or more specifically, it is the world of spirits, demons, gods

have the power to decide all aspects of the actual Thai life. It is because of this concept that in the ancient Thai villages, there are always the appearance of people with special abilities, a “bridge”, spirituality between the two real and virtual worlds, people with gods, mundane and divine... Those special ones are the Teachers Then⁽²⁾, Mo⁽³⁾, Mot⁽⁴⁾ - who in this article are collectively referred to as “spiritual teachers” or “shaman”. These spiritual teachers, from the past up to now, have always been members with an important role and close attachment to the community, especially in the indigenous cultural and religious life. Therefore, the study of shamans – as independent, specific subjects of the social sciences in general and the Culture – History – Ethnographic interdisciplinary in particular, is necessary.

2. Research overview

The number of works on Thai culture and beliefs is relatively large. There are some typical works such as: “The ancient Tay – Thai people

². *Teacher Then*: According to the Thai people's conception at Than Uyen, the teacher Then is the one who performs spiritual rituals such as praying for peace, praying for health through the form of performance, which is singing Then combined with the use of gourd lute and jingle.

³. *Teacher Mo*: At Than Uyen, Teacher Mo is like Teacher Then, who perform spiritual rituals for the community. However, in terms of modality, Teacher Mo often speaks in worship books, and uses magic qi (sword) instead of singing Then and plays gourd lute and jingle.

⁴. *Teacher Mot*: Teacher Mot in Than Uyen is also the person who performs spiritual rituals in the Thai community. The worship practicing of Teacher Mot is often associated with divination and medicinal treatment.

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in Vietnam” (Luong, 2015), “Kin Pang Then of the White Thai” (Tac, 2009), “The Thai people in Northwest Vietnam” (Trong, 1978), “Thai culture and history in Vietnam” (Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Science, 2015)... These are all works of high scientific value by scholars who have reputation. However, the problems presented in these books mainly focus on clarifying the “non-human” factors, such as the type of beliefs, ways of practicing beliefs, music – lyrics in activities, religious arts... without going into explanation for the human factor and the relationships between them and the community.

However, if it is said that there is not a book, research or article to learn about the “human” factor in Thai culture and beliefs, it is not sufficient. In fact, in the book “Kin Pang Then of the White Thai” (Tac, 2009, p.37), although it is not the main content, the author has presented quite a few features such as the process to become teacher Then, teacher Then’s taboos... Or in the book “Mother goddess religion and Shamanic forms among ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia” (Thinh, 2019, p.478), Cam Trong mentioned a few content related to life activities, as well as the vocational training process of Thai shamans. In addition, there are two typical works that need to be mentioned are “Tay Nung folk beliefs” (Yen, 2009) and “Going into trance – the journey of spirit and identity” (Thinh, 2019). Here, the scholars have systematically and independently researched and presented the lives of Tay, Nung and Vietnamese spiritual teachers from the perspective of belief - religion, psychology, and social issues.

Despite the attention of scholars on issues related to Thai culture, beliefs and spirituality is great, the works focus on exploiting aspects of life, psychology and physiology, and beliefs (from a personal perspective) are still lacking. Therefore, we delved into “spiritual teachers in the Thai community in Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province” to present in this article.

3. Research methods

To study spiritual practitioners in the Thai community (Than Uyen, Lai Chau), the author used the ethnographic fieldwork method combined with in-depth interviews. Specifically, the direct survey in Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province (communes of Muong Kim, Muong Cang, Oen Khon...) and in-depth interview with 03 cases of spiritual teachers currently living here are: 1) Ms. Lo Thi Lang, teacher Then, was born in 1959, in Muong Kim commune, Than Uyen district; 2) Mr. Lo Van Soi, teacher Mo, born in 1950, in Muong Cang commune, Than Uyen district; 3) Mr. Deo Van Mung, teacher Mot, was born in 1926, in Khoen On commune, Than Uyen district.

In addition to the two main research methods above, the author also uses the comparison method.

Specifically, to have an objective and complete perspective, the author has relates, compares and compares on some aspects, the content between Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen district and Tay, Nung spiritual teachers in the Northeast (Lang Son, Cao Bang...) and the Vietnamese priest in the Red River delta.

4. Research results

4.1. Members who have a special identity in the community

4.1.1. The journey to change identity

Like the Vietnamese counterpart, the spiritual teacher in the Thai community in Than Uyen also encounters many difficulties on his journey to change his “identity” (Thinh, 2019). In the Thai community, only a small part of them can take on this special mission to become Then, Mo or Mot. This is not a choice due to personal preferences or circumstances, but mostly due to “fate” or “destiny”. Therefore, their “identity” becomes special, different from the rest of the family and community. They often have to go through a stage called “exile” (Thinh, 2004), “holy practice” (Thinh, 2004, p.478). As researcher Nguyen Thi Hien is called, these are manifestations of “yin illness”, “spiritual illness” (Thinh, 2004, p.295), which modern medicine cannot treat.

Teacher Then Lo Thi Lang (Muong Kim commune, Than Uyen district), also encountered the manifestations of “yin illness” in the early days of becoming Teacher Then. She confided that she used to have headaches, constant dizziness, eating, sleeping, and resting was erratic; went to see many doctors but did not find out the disease. Many nights, she dreamed that someone told her that her fate was to become Teacher Then to recover from her illness. Following the instructions, she invited Teacher Mo to initiate her, then as expected, after a short time she had recovered⁽⁵⁾.

In the case of Teacher Mo Lo Van Soi (Muong Cang commune, Than Uyen district), he did not have the same symptoms as Mrs Lan, but he was “insane” twice, his mind panicked, his behavior was out of control. According to his and his family, Mr. Soi has no history of mental illness, his illness also happened very suddenly and unexpectedly. The family invited people to worship, but only after a while, the disease recurred even worse. Because he thinks that this is a “yin disease”, Mr. Soi is being “exiled”, so his family decided to hold a ceremony for him to become Mo. After that ceremony, Mr. Soi’s mind gradually recovered⁽⁶⁾.

⁵. The interview was conducted at 15:00 on March 21, 2020 at La village, Muong Kim commune, Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province.

⁶. The interview was conducted at 17:00 on March 22, 2020 in Ma village, Muong Cang commune, Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province.

In one of his work, Professor Ngo Duc Thinh wrote: “The life story of priest and priestesses got hair stuck, sick, and mentally-tortured is very common. According to them, they considered being possessed, suffering from a kind of “spiritual” disease, sometimes called yin illness ... They can go crazy, roam, and talk nonsense” (Thinh, 2019, p105). In another work, researcher Nguyen Thi Yen wrote about Tay Nung shamans as follows: “Whether a woman or a man, the entry characteristics are spontaneous with similar expressions such as: being frenzy, unusual movements, speech...” (Yen, 2008, p.104). Thus, it can be said that, for individuals with special status in the Thai community in Than Uyen in particular and ethnic groups in the northern mountainous areas in general, there is a “denominator”. Through this denominator, that individual changed his identity into a human capable of communicating with gods.

In fact, the journey to find the identity of Thai spiritual masters at Than Uyen not only stops at overcoming the “exile” period, but also continues in the days of “reintegration” with normal life. According to the story of Thai spiritual teachers such as Mrs Then Lung, Mr Mo Soi and Mr Mot Deo Van Mung⁷, after recovering, these people entered a period of extremely strange dreams. They dream of the deceased in the family, taught by these people to do ceremonies, teach ancient Thai language, teach how to read books... This is strange because just through those dreams, people who work spiritually know how to practice the ritual, how to worship, how to “do magic”. This is a relatively different point from the Tay, Nung shamans. Researcher Nguyen Thi Yen once wrote: “Compared to Then, Put of the Tay and Nung people, the Then of the White Thai still has more indigenous imprints and has not been mixed with imported elements... The practitioner know how to work without having a teacher...” (Yen, 2008, p.54). Specifically, for the teachers of Then, Put of the Tay and Nung, after going through the period of “exile”, they will be taught ceremony by their father-teachers and mother-teachers⁸, while the spiritual teacher of the Thai attain “apprenticeship” through dreams.

According to Mr. Mo Soi and Mrs. Then Lan, after passing the “exile” period, they began to fall into a state of confusion. This emotion stems from many reasons. The first reason, the author said that, the “apprenticeship” through dreams made

Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen feel confused and lost. They are an ordinary person, suddenly becoming a person with a special mission, having to do special jobs without the teacher helping them. Therefore, their “overwhelmed” mood is completely understandable. Another reason for this state of affairs probably stems from concerns about how to face society in a new identity. The case of Mr. Mo Lo Van Soi is typical. Before being Mo, he was a local official, at that time (around 1995), the whole country was implementing the movement to build a new cultural lifestyle, so the spiritual work was considered superstitious by community and society. Mr. Soi shared, at that time he felt very worried, somewhat scared. Anxious because of not knowing how to deal with friends and colleagues, afraid of not knowing whether to be fired, or being subjected to any other form of discipline. It can be seen that, in many previous studies and surveys, the phenomenon of spiritual teachers having to let go of the path of fame and career in mortality to pursue “yin works”, “holy works” are not rare, especially is for the Vietnamese community. This, in addition to clarifying the source of the anxiety and confusion in the early days of becoming a spiritual teacher, also gives us a more realistic view of the concept of “destiny”. Indeed, this is not a job that one can choose, it is a mission that these people must pay a lot to pursue and serve the gods.

It must also be added, besides the appearance of confusion, Thai spiritual teachers also received many positive changes from their new status. Mr. Mo Lo Van Soi and Mr. Mot Deo Van Mung cannot use the old Thai word before becoming spiritual teachers. But after experiencing strange dreams, they all know how to speak and write ancient Thai language fluently. This phenomenon is also relatively common among shamans in other ethnic communities. From a spiritual perspective, these special abilities are said to be the “fortune” enjoyed by shamans. However, for modern sciences, this is still an unsolved phenomenon.

4.1.2. The “spiritual guide” of the community

From the religious-cultural perspective, the spiritual teachers at Than Uyen make a great contribution to the community in order to stabilize life on both the function of psychological consolation and cohesion of the village community.

Thai people are the ethnic group with a deep belief in the spiritual world, so connecting with the spirit is always an important and necessary need of all members of the community. The traditional society of the Thai is an agricultural society closely structured by the blood relationship and the place of residence, so agricultural beliefs and worship rituals for community deity of destiny is very important. In the past, every year when the flowers bloom, preparing to sow seeds for new crops, the Northwest Thai in general and the Thai people in Than Uyen

⁷. The interview was conducted at 10:00 on March 21, 2020 in La village, in Ban On, Khoen On commune, Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province.

⁸. For the Tay and Nung people, *father-teachers* and *mother-teachers* who are considered teachers of Then and Put teachers have the responsibility to help and teach new spiritual teachers. In fact, in the Tay and Nung communities, there are also a number of Then teachers who attain “apprenticeship” through dreams. However, this phenomenon is not common.

in particular organize *Xen ban*, *Xen muong* (village worshipping ceremony, Muong worship in order to pray for healthy people, lush rice fields, abundant cattle, and happy Muong village) In this ritual, there are always two important people, one is *Chau xua*, the other is the shaman. *Chau xua* is the owner of the ceremony, usually descendants of the Tao family⁹) at the head of the village. As for shamans such as Then, Mo, Mot, they preside over and perform rituals and ceremonies. Thus, in the community belief activities of Thai people, spiritual teachers always play a key role. They are those who directly customs with the spirit, on the one hand helping people to carry out sacrificial activities, on the other hand, is a bridge for the spirit to “descend to the mortal realm” to give the community health and fortune.

Thai people’s need for divine connection not only takes place in the community scale, but each individual and family always wants to receive protection from the spiritual world. Thai people in Than Uyen believe that “all living beings”, human life in the real world is always determined by supernatural forces. Therefore, in the past, when a Thai was sick, they often thought about whether the soul was lost or being held somewhere. That is why, first of all, they will go looking for Mrs. Then, Mr. Mo, if the illness is getting worse, go to find Teacher Mot, invite them to worship and heal. Despite the validity of the above concept, it can be seen that the role of the Thai spiritual teacher not only exists in community activities, but also appears in the daily life of each Thai members.

Entering modern life, when there have been many changes in the socio-economic life, the spiritual role of Thai shamans in the community has also changed. First of all, community activities such as *Xen ban*, *Xen muong* in Than Uyen now no longer take place as before, meaning that the “spiritual guiding” position of the spiritual teacher to the community has been much reduced. Similarly, the role of Thai shamans to take care of the spiritual life and beliefs for each individual in the community is also decreasing. In the past, when scientific and technical conditions were not developed, regardless of their illnesses, Thai people also turned to shamans. But now, Thai people have gradually changed their cure from spiritual worship to treatment according to the modern medical protocol.

However, the role of the spiritual teachers in the religious-cultural life of the Thai people in Than Uyen has not ended. The evidence is that in recent years, although she did not go to worship as much as before, Mrs. Then Lan was still invited by local people to pray for security, prayers, sometimes to

treat “yin illness” for people in Muong village. Or Mr. Mo Soi does not go to worship as much as before, but is still regularly invited to worship spirits in funerals in the district. Thus, although the “spiritual leader” role of spiritual teachers at Than Uyen is no longer the same as before, they still have their own place in the spiritual life of the community.

Up to now, the appearance of “yin illness”, “spiritual disease” in the Thai community in particular and the ethnic community in Vietnam in general is not uncommon and in a way these diseases are cured by worshipping. Or in the traditional belief of the Thai people, after death, a man must be sent off by a Mr. Mo to his ancestors. Modern machines cannot replace this, so the role of Mo in the community still exists and has a certain position. It must be emphasized that this comment is not meant to support superstitious activities. However, over thousands of years, people are still putting a big question mark before spiritual stories, proving that the need to make up for the spirit of modern people always exists. Therefore, the “leading” position of Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen, although there has been many changes, cannot be replaced or lost in the coming time.

4.2. The members who stick closely to the community

Considering that the Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen are those with a special mission to the community, only half of the picture of the shaman’s life is depicted here. In the religious and spiritual life, they are the “leaders” who have a great role to perform the function of socio-psychological comfort for the community, but they are still “mortal people”, their lives must still lie in relation to socio-economic factors.

4.2.1. In economic life

Economy is always an important and essential aspect, but sometimes it is considered a delicate matter, so the mention of the economic life of spiritual teachers in ethnic communities is often avoided, or generally mentioned. In the book “Going into trance – the journey of spirit and identity” (Thinh, 2019), although Professor Ngo Duc Thinh has approached many angles in the life of priests, but did not mention it. the economic life of these shamans. Or in the work “Tay Nung folk beliefs” (Yen, 2008), researcher Nguyen Thi Yen also presented relatively fully, both spiritual life and mundane life, but only for about a half of the page to reminds us of economic production activities as well as income from worship practicing of Tay and Nung Then, Mo, Pu, Tao teachers.

In general, in economic life, the Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen have some similarities with the Tay and Nung spiritual teachers mentioned by Nguyen Thi Yen. “Most of those who work as Then and Put occupations live in rural areas. In addition

⁹. For the Thai people in Than Uyen, the Tao lineage is the descendant of the people who have contributed to the construction of the village.

to working time, they still participate in agricultural work, farming is their main income...” (Yen, 2008, p.149). So is the spiritual masters in Than Uyen, their production activity is mainly agriculture. Mrs. Then Lan still works with her husband and children on the fields. Because Mr. Mo Soi is not entitled to the state pension, he has to participate in farming and breeding to ensure family life.

Up to now, Lai Chau province in general and Than Uyen district in particular has always been a locality with low economic life, people's life still has many difficulties. Therefore, in terms of average income, the Thai community in Than Uyen in general and the local spiritual teachers in particular, all have moderate or even low economic circumstances. Like Mrs. Then Lan, because her family was so poor, she could not build a *huon then*⁽¹⁰⁾ for herself, but had to worship in her main house. Mr. Mo Soi, although he is a descendant of the Tao family, and also a well-known teacher Mo in the region, but his family's economic condition is not very good. Although he turned 70, he still had to participate in economic production to ensure family life.

Thus, the economic situation of the family of Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen is not outstanding and more abundant than other families in the community. Perhaps, this statement will face many conflicting arguments. According to Nguyen Thi Yen, “nowadays, due to an improved life, the income of the priests also increases, especially the proficient teachers who are trusted by many people and practice in urban areas” (Yen, 2008, p.149). This assessment probably stems from the view that going to worship is also a livelihood. In fact, this viewpoint is completely grounded if comparing with the economic life of Then and Put teachers in the Tay, Nung and priests in the Vietnamese community. It is easy to see that when the spiritual needs of people, especially the Vietnamese community, tend to increase, the economic life of spiritual teachers is also getting better and better. Money “remuneration” after each ceremony, is usually sent by the owner in the spirit of “arbitrary”, so there is no fixed amount. With the above sums of money, the idea that going to worship is a job of making a living is completely reasonable. However, this statement is not correct for the Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen.

When asked about going to the ceremony, Mrs. Then Lo Thi Lan confided that the income from it was not worth much. Mr. Soi also confided that, despite his family's difficult circumstances, he went to worship services mainly to help them. The person who went to worship more often, Mr. Deo Van Mung, also shared that he did this mainly to help people, money is not important. Thus, the worship

practicing of teachers Then, Mo, Mot in Than Uyen is not considered a profession to make a living. In other words, the shamans here make a living by working, producing like other members of the community, and performing the role of taking care of the spiritual life of the community is considered a duty. So, it is possible to partly answer the above question, which is that in the Thai community in Than Uyen, the spiritual workers also have similar views with Thai teachers in Nghe An. They do not consider going to worship as a profession to make a living, but as a way to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations towards the community and their destiny towards the gods.

4.2.2. In social life

Teachers Then, Mo, Mot in the community's life, in terms of culture and beliefs have an important role, a special position, are the “guide” responsible for ensuring the spiritual life of the community. However, out of the spiritual world, Thai shamans in Than Uyen also have a certain role in social life.

Besides the spiritual role, they also make great contributions to the community in preserving, preserving and promoting the ethnic culture. As mentioned, spiritual practitioner of Thai people often know and understand indigenous knowledge (folk knowledge), so they still hold an important position in the cultural and social life. Mrs. Then Lan made a lot of contributions to preserving the Then belief and Then music of the Thai people in Lai Chau province; Mr. Mot Mung spent a lot of effort recording and teaching traditional Thai medicine. In particular, Mr. Mo Soi, in recent years, has collected, recorded, translated hundreds of poems and published dozens of books in ancient Thai language. His contributions are of great significance in the study of languages as well as traditional culture of the ethnic group, of the locality. Therefore, in 2019, Mr. Sat was conferred by the State with the title of Excellent Artist of folk performing arts and folk literature.

5. Discussion

In the religious life, Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen are members with a special mission in the community. In addition to the spiritual life, Shamans are closely attached to economic production and daily life of the community. They do not get rid of production activities, do not consider going to worship as a profession. In particular, for the community, spiritual practitioners in Than Uyen also make great contributions to the preservation and promotion of the fine cultural values of the ethnic group.

Learning about the identity of Thai spiritual teachers in Than Uyen in the “spiritual life” and “mortal life” partly helps us to better understand their difficulties and their contributions to the community. Because, preserving traditional ethnic

¹⁰. According to the custom of the Thai in Than Uyen, when a person becomes the Then, they have to build a *huon* next to the house they live in to worship the Then and Mistress Han.

culture is very important, but more important is protecting and understanding people who directly hold this precious source of folk knowledge.

6. Conclusion

With the study of the difficulties and contributions of Thai spiritual teachers to the community, the article aims to contribute more voices to preserving

and promoting the traditional knowledge stock of the Thai ethnic group. It can be seen that the human factor always plays the subject role in the activities of preserving and promoting traditional cultural values, in which it is indispensable for people who directly hold a precious source of folk knowledge like Thai spiritual teachers.

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THẦY TÂM LINH TRONG CỘNG ĐỒNG NGƯỜI THÁI TẠI HUYỆN THAN UYÊN, TỈNH LAI CHÂU

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Tóm tắt

Người Thái ở Than Uyên là một bộ phận của người Thái Tây Bắc, cũng có chung những màu sắc văn hóa, đặc biệt là văn hóa tinh thần của vùng đất này. Trong đời sống tinh thần của người Thái tại Than Uyên, các thầy tâm linh luôn giữ một vị thế, vai trò quan trọng. Một mặt, họ là những người “dẫn dắt tinh thần”, có trách nhiệm chăm lo cho đời sống văn hóa, tâm linh của cả cộng đồng. Mặt khác, họ là cũng những thành viên có nhiều đóng góp và gắn bó chặt chẽ với xã hội. Với việc tìm hiểu những khó khăn và đóng góp của các thầy tâm linh người Thái cho cộng đồng, bài viết góp thêm tiếng nói cho việc bảo tồn kho tri thức dân gian tộc người Thái.

Từ khóa

Thầy tâm linh; Thầy shaman; Người Thái; tỉnh Lai Châu; Tây Bắc.