

The Rites of Passage for the Dead to the Afterlife in the Funeral of the Tay People in Dak Lak Province

Lai Thi Van

MA., Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Highlands, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: laivan719@gmail.com

Received 1 December 2022; published 15 April 2023

Abstract: *In the context of cultural interference and integration among ethnic groups in the new land, the Tay people in Dak Lak province retain a deeply-rooted ethnic cultural tradition. Ancestor worship ranks high in their spiritual life; therefore, the passage of the dead from the physical world to the afterlife one of their ancestors is an essential part in the funeral rites. The long-standing ethnic cultural values in the funeral rites of Tay people are crucial norms of their spiritual culture which reflect their moral values and views of human and life. The article explores the rites of passage of Tay people in Dak Lak province, thereby clarifying their worldview and concept of afterlife¹.*

Keywords: The Rites of Passage, Funeral, Tay People, Dak Lak Province, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Cultural values are embedded in the Tay people's funeral rites, which form a sustainable environment for the preservation of traditional culture and reflect their spiritual life and diverse views towards human life and the world. The Tay, like other ethnic groups, expresses their ideas, beliefs, and perceptions of life and death through funeral ceremonies. Death for them is the beginning of a new life with

ancestors. They therefore view the practice of funeral rituals as a way to see off the souls of dead people to the ancestral world for their start of an eternal life.

The Tay conduct their rituals of funeral rites in an attentive and august manner, following a sequence of interwoven primary and supporting services under the lead of a ceremonial master (*thầy Tào*). A wide range of different rituals demonstrates the significance, complexity and cumbersomeness of the Tay's funerals. However, the practice of those helps the living people feel reassured and rest their minds.

According to Vietnam Encyclopedia (2003: 109), rituals are traditional activities performed on important occasions of

¹ The article relies mainly on its primary sources of information collected through field surveys in 2016-2021 and the secondary sources on ritual structures. Methodologies include qualitative research, field surveys, in-depth interviews, retrospective interviews, and participatory observations in the study area of Dak Lak province.

people's life and production. There are two distinguished types of rituals: family rituals - those associated with the human life cycle (from birth, marriage, to funeral); and public rituals - those scheduled on certain dates and related to agricultural production and other economic activities.

In this article, rituals are comprehended as the systematically gathered and performed rites in human-made sacred places and in accordance with the cultural traditions of an ethnic group, which are implicitly accepted, followed, and practiced by people. Rituals show all aspects of cultural life and relationships among humans, between humans and sacred worlds, and between humans and nature.

The article adopts the conception of psychological function by Charles F. Keyes (2022: 106-143)¹ to study the funeral rites

¹ Scholars who study funerals are keen on the psychological function of funerals to human life. Robert Hertz (1960), for example, with his study about the funeral process in Borneo, Indonesia has founded strong theoretical influences on the studies of funerals in Southeast Asia.

Continuing the functional approach in his study of funerals in northern Thailand, Keyes analyzed Buddhist scriptures as a foundation of Buddhism-associated conception and ritual practices performed by the northern Thai people. In particular, the anniversary worship after burial and donation for dead people, which he considered a form of ancestor worship, have been adapted to Buddhist thinking. Those practices, in his views, contrast with the normative Buddhist notion that what remains after death is not found in the continued existence of that same person, but in a transformation, or a reincarnation (Keyes, 2022: 130). He thereby argues that the northern Thais accept the Buddhist teachings but only after they undergo a duration of grief, by conducting presumptive rites of passage for the 'body' of the dead for a comparatively long period of time.

Keyes' analysis and interpretations thus show the living have created a new life for the dead and, at

performed by the Tay people in Dak Lak province. In specific, the research approach is grounded on cultural fundamentals (worldview, religious factors, beliefs, ritual practitioners, and so forth) about the afterlife, which are reflected through the Tay's funeral rites of transferring the dead to their ancestral world.

2. Ceremonies for transferring the souls of the dead to their ancestral world

The Tay people in Dak Lak province consider funerals as a process of preparing and sending the dead to their new eternal abode in the Heaven realm. Under the chairmanship of the ceremonial master², the process is conducted through highly spirited and specific activities, openly demonstrating the Tay's conception of the life after death. They believe that ancestors (*đăm/tổ đăm* in Tay language) endure in three places, namely the Heaven realm, cemetery, and ancestral altar³, which

the same time, help them to reestablish themselves through their practices of funeral and post-funeral rites. These processes, grounded on culture, religion, belief, and so forth, share similarities but also differ among ethnic groups in the world.

² The ceremonial master (*thây Tào*) is the person who presides over the ritual practice of transferring the dead into their ancestral world. He performs formal rituals during the whole process of funeral rites, from the time of the death until the end of the mourning period. This process expresses strongly the Tay's conceptions regarding the existence of life after death, souls, astral spirits, and an ancestral world.

³ Tay people believe cemetery (*thổ ti*) is home to the souls of the dead, which linger around their graves even after their bodies decay. An ancestor altar (*chỗ chông*) is the sacred place where ancestors reside and their descendants worship them and honor their merits through generations; and ancestors always exist in the Tay's belief as a 'focal point' to connect the deceased and the living. Whereas, souls inhabiting in the Heaven realm (*mường phạ*)

correspond with three types of rites for the transfer from the living world to the deceased world.

2.1. Ceremonies for joining the dead with ancestors in cemetery

Finding land to build a new home for the dead: Considering a cemetery as the village and graves as homes, the selection of burial location is very important to the Tay people. After establishing the altar, the ceremonial master and the funeral director go to the cemetery to identify the site. “We bring with us an egg and a cloth bag of rice for the ceremony of finding the burial spot. After sowing yin-yang hexagrams, the ceremonial master places the egg on a small stick like a chopstick, in a vertical position. If the egg stands upright and rests on the top of the stick, it means the soul of the dead person agrees to pick that location to build home,” said a ceremonial master (In-depth interview with Mr Hoang Van Thang, b. 1966, Krong Nang district, Dak Lak province).

Preparing offerings that go with the dead to the new village/cemetery: There is a wide range of offerings in the Tay funerals. They are sacred and important objects that carry a symbolic meaning for the transfer to the ancestral world. The process of preparation is to assist the ceremonial master in performing the “transformation of belief” from the living to the dead. “The distinguished features of these

are classified into specific groups. For example, those who die young or unmarried are assigned to the realm of young people of both sexes for opportunities to partner up with each other; ordinary souls (of those dying from old age) go with their ancestors (*đăm*); dead infants are reincarnated; dead ceremonial masters become mandarins in the realm of gods and buddhas.

sacred objects are often of their simple yet ceremonial significance” (See also: Turner, 1964). The steamed rice bowl, the egg, the whittled chopsticks, rice, pork, chicken, steamed sticky rice, round steamed sticky rice cake, Vietnamese traditional wine, tea, and so forth, are the common offerings.

Rituals of preserving and taking care of the dead body: The Tay’s conception and behaviors towards the dead body is often associated with their fear of evil spirits after the death. This governs their attention to and care of the dead body and their practice of funeral rituals.

Unlike the northern Thais¹ who relates the death to decomposition and filthiness, resulting in an annihilation of the dead body, the Tay in Dak Lak province take full care of the dead body through different rites performed by the ceremonial master. Escalating anxiety means even higher attention to the dead body, so as not to offend the deceased. Before the ceremonial master comes, family members are not allowed to touch the body or either mourn to avoid an unpeaceful rest for the dead. The Tay believe that recently dead bodies are unclean and therefore the deceased cannot meet their ancestors right away. The family has to buy holy water in Cam Lo (or Thien Lo) river to wash the body clean before practicing any rites, so that the dead is accepted by their ancestors.

The days before the burial are the time for family members to perform filial

¹ The northern Thais in the research by Keyes believe that as the dead body becomes bloated and useless, it needs to be “taken away” (*song*), or to be separated from the social groups to which the dead once belongs to, and must be “annihilated” (*sia*). (See further Keyes, 2022: 112).

ceremonies, or the ceremonies for thanksgiving to the deceased. Offerings often include a pig, a chicken, rice, Vietnamese traditional wine, round steamed sticky rice cake, steamed sticky rice, flowers, joss paper, and so on. The ceremonial master reads the names of family members and informs the dead of the offerings. The behaviors of the living during these days show their acknowledgement of the presence of the dead in the house. They also offer meals to the dead at lunch and dinner times, which is called offering of daily meals.

Rituals of moving the dead to the grave for burial: Before transporting the coffin, the ceremonial masters implement a ceremony of bridging the dead soul to the door right at the main entrance of the house. People place the incense bowl for the dead on a white cloth strip, which is about two-meter long and runs atop chicken and duck bamboo cages (components of the imagine bridge - translator). While the supporting ceremonial masters beat drums and gongs, the principal ceremonial master clamps two burned incense sticks behind his one ear, holding the phantom branch in one hand and turning pages of the ceremonial book with the other. He kneels on one knee, speaking out ceremonial words, and waving the phantom branch along the cloth strip at the same time. At the end of the bridging ceremony, the principal master throws the incense for the dead out into the front yard.

When it is time to move the coffin, the ceremonial master recites prayers, performs blessings, and puts out two lights on the coffin. He finishes the ritual by throwing a handful of rice out through the door, killing a rooster (the sacrifice) and splashing its

blood ahead of the way to clear the route for the soul of the dead, and signals to pallbearers to follow towards the funeral vehicle. Descendants of the deceased have to lie down on their stomach to form a bridge as the coffin is carried over them. The act resembles 'paving the way' for the dead and 'bridging' the soul of the dead to the ancestral world. It also means for the children of the dead as they carry their parents for the last part of the way while seeing them off to their new homes in the cemetery. Before the burial, children of the dead spread joss paper and throw rice into the grave, wishing their parents to rest with fortunes and prosperity in the afterlife¹.

2.2. Ceremonies for joining the dead with ancestors in the Heaven realm

Ritual procedures to prepare the dead to join their ancestors in the Heaven realm are carried out when the coffin is at home. Before they move the coffin to cemetery, the ceremonial master has to complete this process of separate rites, which show clearly the Tay's conception of ancestral residence in the Heaven realm.

Preparing belongings for the dead to go to the Heaven realm: The rites performed in this part of the funeral are associated with the Tay's imagination (or their views towards the afterlife) of a residential place for the dead in the Heaven realm. The ceremonial master leads the preparation and a lively process of sending the dead to the ancestral world in heaven. This is to build trust among the living about the existence of an eternal world after death. The living, with that belief, prepare all essentials for the daily life of the dead,

¹ Siblings often perform the practice for the childless dead people.

such as building a (burial) house, clothes, frequent personal belongings, and artifacts for wealth, land, and farming tools. They also arrange a lot of black and white cloth to serve the funeral, for example to put into the coffin and to bridge the soul of dead to the Haven realm. The Tay believe that the dead still needs personal possessions in their afterlife, so the dead must be fully prepared. They use colored paper to make clothes (also known as *hoa y*, flowery outfits), horses, human figures, hats, shoes, etc. for the deceased.

Rituals of opening the way and enlightening the soul: The ceremony to apply for a travel pass for the dead is carried out after the ceremonial master establishes the altar. It is the first and foremost ceremony and sets the foundation for others in bringing the soul of the dead to the ancestral world in the Heaven realm. The ceremonial master, on behalf of the family, informs the King of Heaven about the death and requests permission for the soul of the deceased to join and to travel to the ancestral world without being stopped by any forces.

The offering of lights (*tên đèn*) is performed for the purpose of illuminating and showing the way for the souls of the dead to their new homes in the Heaven realm. The Tay assume the dead have not yet arrived the Heaven realm right after passing away, so their families under the guidance of the ceremonial master should lighten up their homes in heaven in advance of all ceremonies. By doing so, the souls of the dead are then transferred smoothly to the Heaven realm. The ceremonial master places ten lights (candles) on the lid of the coffin in the directions of east, west, south, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, and up and down directions as

well. These ten lights represent ten kings (Ten Kings of Light) whose task is to bring the souls of the dead to heaven.

Prison breaking ceremony (pả ngục): This is an atonement for the dead (removing all sins committed by the person in life such as killing, fighting, arguing, cursing, etc.). The Tay believe all living people are guilty and they are thus imprisoned after death in the hell jail governed by Shogi (Dragon King). Souls immediately after leaving their bodies are detained by nine guarding gods in the hell jail. The prison breaking ceremony is to free and redeem the souls for them to join their ancestors in heaven. Offerings include one pig head, two pig legs, one chicken egg, one papaya, and two one-meter pieces of white and black cloth to circle around the jail. “The papaya is opened in halves with one to cover the egg, representing the full term of pregnancy. The completion of the prison breaking ceremony marks the nine months and ten days of the fetus, which means it is time for (re)birth”¹ (In-depth interview with Mr Hoang Van Dong, b. 1958, Krong Nang district, Dak Lak province).

The jail is built by the ceremonial master in the house yard, comprising of nine finger-sized bamboo sticks placed into a circle of about one meter in diameter (corresponding to nine directions of east, south, west, north, northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest, and the prison’s center). People then cover the jail with two one-meter pieces of white and black cloth. The ceremonial master places a

¹ The egg represents the soul of the dead. After the ceremonial master breaks the prison and save the soul from hell, it is reborn. The Tay conceive the soul now is a newly born child.

half of the papaya, a chicken egg, and a worship tablet inside the circle. To break the prison, the ceremonial master and the family go around the jail three times while chanting sutras for the dead. They place the pardon paper and the report on the rice bowl in front of the jail entrance, begging the King of Heaven and Shogi to forgive the dead and to allow the soul to join the ancestral world.

When the soul is gathered, people take a little caged chick and let it pass through an entry, which means the egg is now hatched into a chick. The chick and the worship tablet are moved through the curtain (*phong tu*), signifying the soul is reborn and now follows the ceremonial master and family home for the ceremonies to transferring into the ancestral world.

Rituals for seeing off the soul of the dead to the Heaven realm: The bridging ceremony for the dead to go to the Heaven realm requires offerings such as steamed rice, pork, Vietnamese traditional wine, joss paper, a piece of white cloth of 40 centimeters wide and 4 meters long, and a chicken and a duck kept in the same bamboo cage. Family members kneel before the dead coffin while the ceremonial master recites prayers to gods and requests ancestors to open door for the dead soul. He then beats the gong and drum and together with family members go around the coffin. They all look down into the coffin to show gratitude to the dead. The ceremonial master also creates a bridge with a white cloth strip, one end running atop the duck and chicken cage, the other draped over his shoulder. He advances towards the altar for the dead and reads out words to request the souls of the deceased and ancestors to bring offerings to heaven.

After the bridging ceremony, mourners start to weep and follow the ceremonial master around the coffin, singing the light-off song while putting out candles (*phân đăng*). This means time to say goodbye and the soul of the dead is sent to a new home in the Heaven realm.

The salvation ceremony (*sính tồ*) is to plead gods to assign the soul a suitable residence in heaven. The ceremonial master performs different rites depending on the profile of the dead -child souls to be reincarnated, old souls to live with ancestors, and unmarried souls to go to couple-matching realm, etc.

The ceremonial masters and the bereaved family then proceed a farewell ceremony to gods and thank them for bringing the soul of the dead home in the Heaven realm. The final ceremony is sharing land and assets. The ceremonial master builds a property list (conceived as a declaration) with fingerprints of all family members on it, acknowledging their agreement in handing all listed properties to the dead person. The ceremonial master reads the list out loud and then burn it. Thus, the ritual procedures to see off the soul of the dead to the Heaven realm are completed under the chairmanship of the ceremonial master before the coffin is transported to the cemetery.

2.3. Ceremonies for joining the dead with ancestors on the altar

The transitional period for the dead to join ancestors on the family altar starts after the burial and lasts until the end of the mourning period. This process is complete with a ceremony to officially worship the dead on the ancestral altar instead of a temporary one that is set up after buried.

Rituals for the transitional period: After the burial, the ceremonial master performs

a rite to put up a tablet for the dead on a separate altar, which is erected either in the corner of the house or under the ancestral altar. He then summons the soul to rest on the tablet for daily family care and worship. The Tay people today often offer meals to the dead at the grave for the first three days after burial and, after that, for 40 days¹ or 100 days on the temporary altar at home. They believe the soul of the dead, despite residing in a new home, is not yet a member of the ancestral community in heaven, so unable to be worshiped on the family altar. For that reason, family members offer daily meals for the dead on the temporary altar. The soul, even after being reborn in the afterlife, still lingers around the temporary altar and only joins the ancestral world when the mourning period finishes.

Rituals for ending the mourning period or joining the dead with ancestors on the altar: The ceremony which marks the end of the mourning period (*dô slam pi* or *pét khan* in the Tay language) is also known as the funeral headband untangling ceremony or cut-off ceremony. This is the final ritual of the Tay funeral procession. After the ceremony for mourning cessation, the soul of the dead join ancestors on the family altar and is worshiped by generations of the family. The Tay traditional mourning period lasts three years, but reduces to one year now among the Tay community in Dak Lak province. The ceremonial master first helps choose a date and then presides over the one-day cut-off ceremony. Important rites performed at the ceremony include

welcoming the ceremonial master, setting up a ceremonial altar, clearing the grave, offering food and wine, funeral headband removing ceremony, unifying the soul on ancestral altar, purifying, offering meal, and seeing off the ceremonial master.

The ceremonial master then comes in front of the dead tablet and read out the names of family members that are listed in the proclamation for the funeral headband untangling ceremony. The family members are prostrate before the tablet, mourning for the last time and the ceremonial master casts a spell to discontinue mourning period and to banish inauspiciousness before burning the proclamation. After that, all family members take off their mourning attires, fold them and carry them on the top of their heads, sitting down in front of the tablet. The ceremonial master reads out prayers taking a hooked stick to pull the mourning attire of each person to the ground. He then uses scissors to cut out the bandages from the people's mourning clothes and tie them all to one end of a 20-centimeter-long stick, burn them, saying prayers and walking out of the door (of the mourners' house). He waves the burning stick in the air and casts a spell before throwing it. The mourning family forms a bridge with two cloth bands of black and white between the ancestral altar and the dead tablet. They then move the incense bow and tablet for the dead across the bridge towards the ancestral altar, removing three burning incense sticks from the bow and placing them together with the tablet into the ancestral incense bow. The ceremonial master prays for the dead soul to release from the tablet and join the ancestral altar. The Tay people believe the dead souls,

¹ The Tay carry out a 40-day worship, which is distinguished from the Viet people's 49-day period.

after the cut-off ceremony, will join the Heaven realm and their ancestral world and enjoy an eternal afterlife. Today, the Tay in Dak Lak province have adapted their cut-off ceremonies to allow more ceremonial flexibility and funeral families do not have to follow three years of mourning under strict taboos. Families with children going to get married or working far off or unable to appoint worshippers may perform the cut-off ceremony earlier. The Tay's cut-off ceremony now might be shaped in different forms in order to adapt with the changing circumstances, but their conception of the ceremony - a rite of passage for the dead to join the Heaven realm and the ancestral world - remains.

3. Conclusion

Among the funeral rites performed by the Tay people in Dak Lak province, the rite of passage to transfer the souls of the dead to their ancestral world is strongly embedded with their views towards the living and afterlife worlds and their practices of ancestral worship. The Tay believe death is the beginning of a new life in the ancestral world. Through a system of ritual practices and procedures, the souls of the dead are transferred into the ancestral world to continue a new life in eternity. The tradition reflects the Tay's aspirations and humane thoughts about good things and a better life on the afterlife world □

References

1. Bloch, Maurice, and Jonathan Parry (1982), "Introduction: Death and the Regeneration of Life", in: Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. XX-XX.
2. Keyes, Charles F. (2022), "From death to birth: Rituals and Buddhist significance in northern Thailand", in Keyes, Charles F. (2022), *Ethnic cultures and religions in Southeast Asia*, National University Publishing House, Hanoi.
3. National Council for the Development of Vietnamese Encyclopedia (2003), *Vietnam Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, Tu Dien Bach Khoa Publishing House, Hanoi.
4. Huntington, Richard and Peter Metcalf (1979), *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
5. Robert Hertz (1960), *Death and the Right Hand*, Translated by Rodney and Claudia Needham, London.
6. Victor Turner (1964), "Half state: A stage of lower excitability threshold in rites of passage", in Ngo Duc Thinh and Frank Proschan (eds., 2005), *The world folklores: Some fundamental research works*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.