

# Culture of Pu Peo ethnic group from their consciousness of cosmology, spirits and health rituals

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**Abstract:** *Pu Peo ethnic group retains a rich and unique spiritual cultural life which is formed in its history and development process. Their cultural values, treasured and enriched in daily activities, and the practice of sacred customs and rituals, have been passed on to younger generations by reputable persons in the community. The article focuses on the Pu Peo's consciousness of cosmology and human to provide extra source to deepen narratives on this ethnic group in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Ethnic Culture, Pu Peo, Cosmology, Spirits, Invoke Spirits, Vietnam

## Introduction

In Viet Nam, the Pu Peo is one of the ethnic groups speaking the Thai-Kadai language and has unique cultural nuances. However, there has been not much research on this ethnic group, with few overall studies except those exploring some aspects of the group, such as history, origin, language, customs, and social relationships.

In the current context of deep integration, along with the State-run national goal programs on socio-economic development being fruitfully implemented in various places, especially remote and ethnic minority areas, the process of acculturation and cultural exchange has been boosted among ethnic groups. That process has impacted and created opposite effects (both positive and negative) on material and

spiritual life, leading to the trend of cultural change with a fairly rapid and increasingly strong intensity in ethnic minorities, especially those with a small population, including the Pu Peo. In other words, there have appeared signs of obscuration of cultural identities of this group in current conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to study traditional cultural values of ethnic groups, including the Pu Peo, and this should be encouraged to deepen the understanding of this group, preserving and enriching those values in the treasure of folk culture.

### 1. A sketch of the Pu Peo people

The Pu Peo is one of the ethnic groups speaking the Thai-Kadai language. The Pu Peo people have other ethnonyms like La Qua and Penti Lo Lo. The oldest

Vietnamese document mentioning the Pu Peo in the ethnonym of La Qua is Le Quy Don's *Kiến văn tiểu lục* (Miscellaneous Chronicles of What I See and Hear), in which it reads: "this group of people resided in the hinterland in the ancient time, then scattering to the mountains of Bao Lac's communes, living on farming, not moving to other places, and doing drudgery like the local people"... (quoted from Nguyen Van Huy, 1973: 72). This confirms the long-standing presence of the Pu Peo group in Viet Nam. In bibliographies before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was no record of changes in Pu Peo group. Regarding the ethnonym "Penti Lo Lo", in the Tay-Thai language, 'Penti' means 'indigenous'. Thus, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Pu Peo group surely resided in the northernmost areas of Viet Nam in a large number so that Le Quy Don could take specific notes of their life and cultural features. At the same time, Le Quy Don argued that they were long-standing residents in the territory of Viet Nam (Huy, 1973: 72-73). Though there was no data on the number of Pu Peo people in Le Quy Don's time, it can be seen that the Pu Peo at that time was such a quite large ethnic group with an important position in the region's population structure that Le Quy Don had to mention them. It can also be assumed that later on, a part of the Pu Peo group mingled with the Tay people; another part blended with ethnic groups migrating from across the border and lived alternately with them in the middle and high regions. They went through a long process of harmony and coherence, forming an ethnic group with a "hermaphroditic" name, for example when blending with the Lo Lo people, the name "Penti Lo Lo" (indigenous Lo Lo)

appeared, though, in their mind, there still existed a distinction between the native residents and the Lo Lo people (quoted from Le Duy Dai, Trieu Duc Thanh, 2004). Researchers from the Institute of Ethnology affirmed: "The Pu Peo people have lived in Ha Giang since before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Another part came later, around the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. People in Dong Van District (Ha Giang) all acknowledge ancestors of the Pu Peo and Lo Lo were the first inhabitants to explore this region. In many worshipping ceremonies, the Hoa, the Co Lao, and the Hmong also mention them as the first people to build villages in the northernmost land of the Fatherland" (Institute of Ethnology, 1978).

According to statistics in 2019, the Pu Peo group has a population of 903 people, living in 20 among 63 provinces and cities throughout Viet Nam. Ha Giang Province is the biggest concentration of the Pu Peo people, mainly in the communes of Pho La and Sung Cheng (Dong Van District) and some communes of Yen Minh and Meo Vac Districts (General Statistics Office, 2020: 50).

## 2. Cosmology of the Pu Peo

Through the treasure of myths, legends, and fairy tales of the Pu Peo people, it is possible to see profound interpretations of their views of the natural world and human beings. In their mind, heaven is the father (*pé mân*) and the earth is the mother (*mái mân*). At the beginning of the time, the sky was round, the ground square, and the sky was smaller than the ground. Later, the Earth Mother narrowed herself so that the ground was equal to the sky, thus the ground became rough and uneven, high places turned into hills and mountains, low places were plains and valleys, and concave

became were rivers, springs, ponds, and lakes, hollows were seas and oceans. Heaven is the lord of all living things, there is nothing on earth he does not know, so when in trouble or suffering, people often call heaven for help. Those who commit cruel and inexcusable acts will be punished by the thunder god under Heaven's order. In the mind of the Pu Peo people, the sun (*k vắn*), the moon (*kàn*), and stars (*k luông*) are the eyes and ears of the Heaven, alerting mortals to natural and social fluctuations: rain, floods, storms, epidemics, chaos, and insecurity. Thick stars warn of rain, sparse stars for sunshine, comets for impending chaos or wars, so people should find measures to prevent and combat. The moon bears the image of a person holding a trumpet and sitting beneath an "xố lồ" tree. It is said that at the beginning of time, in the vast universe, there were two suns: one big (the mother) and one small (the sun). Initially, they were high above, far from the earth; feeling sad, they gradually went down. But the suns were too bright and too hot, people couldn't stand it so they went up to the mountains where they looked up at the sky and shouted to chase away the suns. The two suns moved up higher and higher until the earth was suddenly dark, no longer possible to distinguish day and night. At this time, the ground was covered by cold scary darkness, wild animals were free to hunt for food, not afraid of human beings. The cold season became more unbearable due to the lack of warm sunlight. People and animals got sick, then they died in horrible darkness. People prayed to heaven to bring the suns back to shine on the earth. However, the suns liked hearing roosters' welcome singing, so whenever the rooster

sang for the first time, the suns woke up and brings light back for people to work; when the rooster sang for the second time, the suns took their light away for people to rest (*Pu Peo Fairy Tales*, 1988: 9-10).

In the mind of each ethnic group, there is always a system of beliefs about the existence of one or many worlds apart from the world of human life. For the Pu Peo, the universe is conceived of as consisting of three layers, divided along a vertical axis: heaven, the ground, and underground. In each layer, the face of residents is different. The Pu Peo people believe that the souls of their ancestors are always above while human being live beneath them. Thus, the world of the living is always lower than the world of ancestors. In the celestial layer (*goọc mân*), heavenly beings, called *trau mân huộc* or *tê rắng rắng*, are red-faced men who bear a knife at their neck. In this layer, gods are holding different positions, such as "*piêng mân*" managing the entire heaven, "*mộc tuộc*" is the earth god in the heaven, and many other gods (rain, thunder, lightning...). The ground/earth (*củi ngoặc tuộc*) is the living place of not only human beings but also all living things. This is the real world that people can see and is different from heaven which is the nihility. This is also the concentration of many gods according to the animism of the Pu Peo (Institute of Ethnology, 1978: 255). Similarly, the ground has a father (*pê tuộc*) and a mother (*mái tuộc*) who give birth to all species on the earth; there is a couple of land gods (*pê pát* and *mái pát*) governing the land of villages, the land goddess also takes care of human being, especially taking care of souls of children from their birth to the age of 12. The most senior god

on the earth is *Piêng mung* who governs the whole ground. Below *Piêng mung*, there are smaller *Piêng mung* managing regions and areas. Below these are other gods, such as forest god (*sau nguôi*), soil (*tuộc mung*), dry field (*tuộc lữ*), ricefield (*tuộc rong*), water (*tuộc ong, tuộc năm*), house (*tuộc ty liêng*)... Particularly, *Tu tuộc* is a land god who must work with a magician to form a pair in working, different from *tuộc mung* who can deal with the work alone. It can be said that the system of gods in the Pu Peo people's animism reflects the power of supernatural forces and dependence on nature in the agricultural residents' life. The underground (*mông đờ min*) is the lowest layer, lying deep in the earth and being inhabited by a kind of people called *trau mân băng* or *tơ nín*. *Tơ nín* (one who wears a knife at the ham) people are as small as fingers. It takes six *tơ nín* people to carry a cogongrass leaf. They use *hộ cogongrass (muốc)* to roof their house. In the mind of people, this is a natural world, because residents here also have a normal life like humans on the earth, growing rice, marrying at the age of maturity, and forming social and family relationships. However, in this world, everything is small in comparison with the earthen world. Time in heaven and underground is the opposite of earthly time. In addition, the Pu Peo believe this is the layer of ancestral spirits (souls leaving bodies to become ghosts), or the underworld ruled by the King of Hell - the place of detention and trial of souls of the dead for good and bad acts so that they can be free or imprisoned forever in the hell. In the past, the three worlds were connected by a ladder with which residents from the two other worlds could go to

the earth at noon and night. On the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month (called the day of omittance - *vân đặng*), residents from the heave and the underground rushed to the human world (Institute of Ethnology, 1978: 255). Therefore, people, these days must wear cogongrass on their heads to distinguish them from otherworldly beings. The Pu Peo people's concept of the three-layer world is similar to that of many other ethnic groups in the region.

### 3. Consciousness of spirit, life, and death

The Pu Peo believe that soul exists in the body of living things. It is the energy that creates figures and vitality. The human soul is more complicated than that of all species. It is not only the factor that creates figure and vitality but also forms the personality, behavior, emotions, and spirit of a person. For example, a soul can make a person brave or timid, calm or hasty, quick or slow, gentle or cruel, etc.

Ethnic minorities in Viet Nam also believe that there are souls in each person, for the Tay - Nung there are ten souls, the Dao, La Chi, Ha Nhi, La Hu twelves, the Hmông three, while in the Thai's concept, there are 80 souls (50 in the front and 30 in the rear). According to the Pu Peo, a person has 8 souls (*n'nguôn*) and 9 spirits (*mrrư vân ngóa*). Among those souls, in the concept of ethnic groups, there is the main soul that is believed by most people to lie atop the head, so people avoid rubbing and beating the head for fear of hurting their souls. The remaining souls, depending on the concept of each group, lie on the human body, such as in the nose, ear, mouth, chin, armpits, chest, arms, and legs.

The Pu Peo people think that, when the soul is in the body, a person is healthy and happy

because the soul manipulates all functions (laughing, crying, thinking, working). If for some reason, a person is frightened or startled, the soul temporarily leaves the body, making the body lose its balance and causing fatigue or sickness. Once the soul leaves the body, a person dies, turning into a ghost (*kblook*) forever. The soul's attributes depend on age and gender. The healthiest souls belong to men and young people. Children's souls are often weak, therefore when Pu Peo children under the age of 13 go out far, at night or noon, they are often painted with a *quá đấng* sign (a soot cross on the forehead to keep demons away) or attached with a *pliu* (five-pointed stars made of different colored fabric) on their hat so that their souls will not wander. At the beginning of a new year, the Pu Peo hang bamboo *pliu* at the door as a charm to prevent evil ghosts and demons from entering the house.

The soul is the decisive factor in life and all activities of a person. A person gets sick or dies because his soul leaves his body for a while or forever. The soul leaves the body when being frightened or startled; or kept by ghosts, demons, gods, or stronger soul of someone; or maybe it is so absorbed in the landscape or pleasures in the world or the heaven that it does not want to come back. Therefore, to help sick people recover, apart from traditional remedies of their folk medicine, the Pu Peo also perform worshipping rituals to bring the soul back to the body - it is the soul-summoning ceremony (Ai, Toan and Phuong, 2006).

#### 4. Evocation for health

When a person is sick and cannot be treated for a long time, or often suffers from anxiety and panic attacks, the Pu Peo go to fortune-tellers to know the cause (demons,

gods, or some reason) and then hold the soul-summoning ceremony for good health. In addition, on the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> day of the Lunar New Year, the Pu Peo performs the soul-summoning ceremony for every family member. They believe that, during a year, people travel a lot, and so do the souls. Thus, it is necessary to summon souls back to welcome the New Year, wishing for a year of good health and good lucks (Institute of Ethnology, 2014: 351).

The Pu Peo practice fortune-telling with weights (or stones) and corn kernels.

- *Fortune telling with weights*: When the sorcerer arrives, the householder burns incense sticks on the ancestral altar to explain the reason for the ceremony and ask for ancestors' blessing. The sorcerer sets up an altar with a bowl of rice, three incense sticks, and the sick person's shirt. When ready, the sorcerer squats, arms resting on his knees, two thumbs pressing against each other, lifting a weight (previously a stone) hanging from a thread above the shirt, reciting prayers and names of ghosts in turn. If the weight moves, the ghosts answer. The sorcerer asks the ghosts why they make the person ill and what they want, implores them for the sick person to be cured, and promises offerings at the request of the ghosts. Only the sorcerer understands the ghosts' answer.

- *Fortune telling with corn kernels*: This way of fortune-telling is also seen in the La Hu and the Cong groups. Standing before the householder's ancestral altar, the sorcerer prays for blessing and assistance. Then, the sorcerer applies nine red corn kernels on the sick person's head, reciting names of ghosts. Through the vibration of hands, the sorcerer can guess which kind of ghosts

are in action and what they need, promising that if the sick person recovers, he will give offerings required by the ghosts.

Through the fortune-telling to find out which kind of ghosts causing illness, the family offers a banquet and asks the sorcerer to host the ceremony, pray to the ghosts, promising to pay with chickens or pigs if the sick person is cured. After the sick person recovers, the family must invite the sorcerer to make the thanksgiving ritual for the ghosts, with all offerings as promised (Ai, Toan, and Phuong, 2006).

The soul-summoning ceremonies (*kang ngun*) of the Pu Peo are abundant, such as those for children and sick people.

- *The soul-summoning ceremony for children*: When a child is one year old, his family holds a ceremony to summon his soul. If no one in the family knows how to pray, they must ask a sorcerer to host the ritual. In this ceremony, the sorcerer must ask the god of door (*t'dũng*) to show the way. The main offering is a young rooster that has not crowed.

When performing the ceremony, the householder burns three incense sticks in the main bowl on the ancestral altar to pay respect and ask for ancestors' permission to carry out the ritual, then lights two incense sticks on both sides of the door-sill (each one side) and one more at the sacred fireplace. Next, the sorcerer recites prayers in front of the ancestral altar, then stands next to the inner door-sill, facing outwards, holding the child's shirt in one hand, the chicken in the other hand, and reading the soul-summoning prayers (*Xuống cây khảm tiên*) to call the child's soul back. To see if the ceremony is fruitful or not, the sorcerer throws a pair of scissors behind his back;

if the scissors are parallel to the door-sill, the child's soul does not return and the ceremony must be conducted again. If the scissors are perpendicular to the sill, the soul comes back. The host or the sorcerer holds a dried gourd facing the altar and wavers it back and forth above the offering tray. When the ceremony is finished, the chicken is slaughtered, boiled, and arranged on the altar, together with the chicken's intestines and some chicken broth, for the worship again. After the ancestral worship, the sorcerer burns three incense sticks in the bowl on the altar, turns the tray towards the sacred fireplace, and reverses the gourd (holding the gourd's body, pointing its curved stalk to the offering tray) for the worship of the god of fireplace. The purpose of this ritual is to inform ancestors and the god of fireplace that the soul-summoning work is complete. After all worshipping rituals, the family prepares a banquet; the chicken thighs are not chopped and are left for the sorcerer to check the femurs again as a way to ensure the ceremony's result<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Old Pu Peo people further explain that, the chicken thighs in all worshipping ceremonies must be kept for the sorcerer to check the femurs inside. According to the Pu Peo people's concept, the result of the worship is reflected through holes in the chicken femurs. There are 1-3 holes, aligned or symmetrical, it is a good omen; it's not good to have 3 or 4 holes. Depending the number and position of holes, the sorcerer can predict many things: the worshipping ceremony is complete or not; whether the ghosts accept or not; the soul returns yet; or how many children the couple has, they are compatible or not (in marriage); or the soul of the dead has gone yet, it is satisfied and blesses the descendants or not (in funeral). Also based on that, people can predict that in the year, village members have any problem (disease, safety) in the worshipping ceremony dedicated to the god of forest and the *Pạt óng* (going to the field) ritual (Ai, Toan, and Phuong, 2006).

- *The soul-summoning ceremony for sick people*: The Pu Peo people believe that a person gets sick when he is captured by evil ghosts or his soul is so engrossed by pleasures in some beautiful scenes on the earth or the heaven that not wanting to come back. There are two ways of worshipping to summon the soul of a sick person: One is to ask for the assistance of the god of door (*t'dũng*) - called the *Chũa khang ngũn* ceremony, and the other is to ask for the help from the god of forest (*sau nguôn*) - called the *Cùi mân tuang* ceremony. The soul-summoning ceremony with the assistance of the god of door is similar to that for children described above. The soul-summoning ceremony to ask the help from the god of forest is more complicated: A worshipping platform is erected in front of the forbidden forest, where the sorcerer brings chickens to summon the soul and ask for the forest god's assistance. To set up the platform, the Pu Peo use eight bamboo plants, with branches and leaves intact: four plants for pillars (12x45 cm), the remaining four ones are tied to the pillars to form the truss, the base pointing to the east and the top towards the west. The platform is about 80 cm high, covered with some canna leaves on which is a row of ten pieces of rice with a piece of meat each. Under the platform, there is a flat basket for votive offerings. Standing in front of the platform and holding a bamboo branch, the sorcerer first invites the ancestors in the forest (*tê muông*), heavenly ghosts (*M'gười*), earth ghosts (*M'ừộc*) to take the offerings and help to summon the soul. Then, the sorcerer, with a live chicken in one hand and in the other hand pants, shirt, and headdress of the people whose souls are summoned, starts

to call their souls. Each person must have a chicken as an offering, men using hens, women roosters. When the souls come back, they are brought home, to the front of the ancestral altar for the worshipping ritual to be protected by the ancestors. Then each person takes back their clothes and a piece of rice wrapped in their headdress/shirt (Huy, 1973: 72-73).

### Conclusion

In the mind of the Pu Peo people, the universe is imaged to consist of many layers, each layer has features of life and is the residence of gods, human beings, and the dead. The Pu Peo always keep in mind that, in the supernatural world, gods play an important role in dominating their spiritual and material life. Thus to be blessed and protected by gods, it is necessary to carry out worshipping ceremonies to bring about wellbeing and happiness. Their concept of soul and spirit is also unique, associated with the system of interesting concepts and behaviors about the protection of human souls and spirits so that people are always happy and healthy to continue activities in the unfavorable natural environment in the mountainous area. At present, the Pu Peo habit with the Hmông and some other ethnic groups, so their culture has been more or less influenced by these groups. However, they still preserve their own identities and language □

### References

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