

## **CAP SAC RITUAL AND THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE YAO (\*)**

LY HANH SON

The Yao has a rather large population, ranking 9<sup>th</sup> in the list of most populous ethnic groups in Vietnam and second in the world among countries with a Yao ethnic population. Within the Yao population, there exist many groups, which are scattered throughout different localities<sup>1</sup> (General Statistic Office, 2001). The Yao in Vietnam has long since preserved many of their traditional cultural values, including the *cap sac* ritual, which is one of the most typical characteristics of this group. So far, there have been many studies about the Yao in Vietnam and a great deal of the research conducted is about this ritual. They include the works by Bonifacy A. (1904), Abadie M. (1922), Nguyen Quoc Loc (1966), Be Viet Dang and other authors (1971), Le Sy Giao (1995), Le Hong Ly (1997), Nguyen Tuan Viet (1998), Pham Quang Hoan and other authors (1999). These works deal with many aspects relating to the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao in Vietnam such as the proceedings of the ritual, educational significance and folk arts. In this paper, we will discuss the traditional cultural identity of the Yao through the *cap sac* ritual.

<sup>1</sup> According to the results of the 1999 General Population Census, the Yao population in Vietnam is 620,538 persons, or 0.8% of the country's population.

### **1. The name and characteristics of the *cap sac* ritual**

The *cap sac* ritual is a ritual attached with great importance by the Yao. Yet, even today, its name remains controversial. The name *cap sac* has been used by Vietnamese scientists. This terminology comes from the fact that the one who has undergone the ritual is granted an identity certificate written in Yao-Nom characters. The certificate includes the background and identity of the ritual subject, the ceremonial reason and a number of other teachings. This identity paper is like a certificate granted to the ritual subject, who, after the ritual, is allowed to make ceremonial offerings, treat patients and will hold a certain position in Yao society. Aside from the name *cap sac*, other names also exist such as *cap tinh*, *lap tich*, *cap tinh*, etc. These names refer to the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao in the Northwestern region by researchers such as Xuan Mai, To Dong Hai and Le Hong Ly. The term *cap tinh* means to purify, because in the ritual, people light candles (or lamps) to enlighten the ritual subject in order to wipe out smut and sin in that man's body. Meanwhile the terms *cap tinh* or *lap tich* means to become a member of the family, due to the fact that the ritual subject is given a new first name and changes his middle name to suit the hierarchical order in the family clan.

(\*) This article was issued in the *Anthropology Review*, No. 3 in 2002 in Vietnamese.

Scientists in many other countries have given the ritual different names. For example, researchers in China often called the *cap sac* ritual is *qua tang* ritual, while those in France considered it the *joining Taoism* ritual.

Thus, for researchers, the name of this ritual is different. For the Yao, the name of this ritual is also diverse. In Vietnam there are dozens of names for this Yao ritual. For example, the Yao Tien often call it the *qua tang* ritual. *Qua* means undergoing or to be tested and *tang* means candles or any lighting devices. Thus the name *qua tang* means undergoing a lighting ritual and comes from the act of lighting lamps or candles to enlighten the ritual subject during the proceedings. Hence *qua tang* is synonymous to *cap tinh*, the name which is often used by Vietnamese scientists. In terms of linguistics, the Yao groups of the *Kem-Burmese* linguistic family also call the *cap sac* ritual *qua tang* or *quas tang*. The Yao groups belonging to the *Kim Mun* linguistic family pronounce it *chay xay* or *phun voong*, also meaning lighting or serving the light ritual. Some Red Yao and Yao Tien groups call the *cap sac* ritual *tat phat bua*, meaning religious naming ritual. In many cases, people refer to the *cap sac* ritual as *chau dang*, meaning making ceremonial offerings to the Yao ancestor – Ban Vuong. A higher level *cap sac* ritual is called by the Yao *tau sai*, i.e. granting certification to become a shaman. This name is synonymous with the term *cap sac* used by many Vietnamese scientists. In addition, the Yao Tien and Yao Do refer to this *cap sac* ritual by other names such as *chau lung*

*hin* (ceremony for family blessing), and *mai sai tia* (major ceremony for God blessing). In short, the *cap sac* ritual has been given many different names by both scientists and the Yao groups. This confirms that the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao is complicated, relating to many aspects of the Yao community's cultural and social life.

In terms of characteristics, if based on the number of lights or candles used to enlighten the ritual subject in each ceremony, there are three levels for the Yao groups belonging to the *Kem-Burmese* linguistic family. The first level is three candles, this means the ritual subject is enlightened by three candles; the second level is seven candles, meaning seven candles are used in the ritual and the highest level is 12 candles, this means the ritual holder carries on his head 12 lighting candles. Meanwhile, for the Yao groups of the *Kim Mun* linguistic family, there are two levels – *Tam Thanh* and *Tam Nguyen*. Another feature is that the *cap sac* ritual is always closely linked to religious, cultural and artistic factors of the Yao. Moreover, at present, only Yao men undergo the *cap sac* ritual while women are dependent on their husband's status.

## 2. Overview of *cap sac* proceedings

### 2.1 . Preparations for a *cap sac* ritual

Preparations for a three candle *cap sac* ceremony takes from six months to one year. For a higher level *cap sac* ritual, preparations may take one or two years at times, even longer. Preparations include raising two pigs for ceremonial offerings.

Production has to be boosted to get more food and food-stuff for the ceremony. Of course, compared to other rituals such as a wedding or funeral, the *cap sac* ritual is less costly in terms of food, as foods are only served to people to help with holding the ritual, family members and helpers. Other attendants at the ritual often have their food at home or eat with neighbors.

The next step of preparations is making embroidery ceremonial dress for the ritual holder. The way to make the dress and its patterns depends on each Yao group as the ceremonial dress of the Yao groups is different in some way. It is also necessary to make a chair for the ritual holder to use during the ceremony, repair and check all musical instruments and other things to be used in the ritual. Only some objects are brought by shamans such as ceremonial paintings and a monk's staff. Nearing the day of the ritual, the ritual holder's family has to pound rice, make wine, buy incense and punnah paper to make votive money and prepare oil or candles to be lit during the ceremony. The number of shamans invited to the ceremony must match the *cap sac* level, i.e. three shamans are invited for the three candle level *cap sac* ritual, seven shamans for the seven candle *cap sac* and 12 shamans for the 12 candle *cap sac* ritual. In addition, some unmarried young men and women are invited to sing during the ceremony.

Preparations for a *cap sac* ritual require a great deal of time and include many things, expressing the unity among the family of the ritual holder. Through the preparations, we can see the characteristics of the Yao customs in terms of the number

of offerings used for a *cap sac* ritual, conditions and number of shamans invited to hold the ceremony and helpers to assist with the proceedings.

## 2.2. Process of a *cap sac* ritual

A *cap sac* ritual often has complicated details, depending on the *cap sac* level and each Yao group, particularly the groups of the two linguistic families. For the three candle *cap sac* ritual of the Yao belonging to the *Kem-Burmese* linguistic family, the duration of the ceremony is two days and divided into two big steps: *thu den* (serving the candles) and making ceremonial offerings to Ban Vuong. Following is a brief description of the proceedings of a three candle *cap sac* ceremony of the Yao Tien group in Vietnam.

### - The "*thu den*" step

To begin the three candle *cap sac* ritual, tables of offerings are laid and ceremonial paintings are hung. Two tables of offerings are placed in the middle of the house in front of the middle main door. On each table there are: an incense stick burner, three small bowls containing wine to be offered to deities, a bowl full of rice grain, a bowl full of water and a bowl of fresh ginger. The table of the first shaman has an additional three small bowls, each containing a bit of oil and lamp wick to light the ritual holder. In front of the offering tables, i.e. towards the front door of the main house compartment, is where the proceedings of the *cap sac* ritual take place. On the wall at the back of the offering tables hang 10 ceremonial paintings brought by the shamans. After all preparations are made,

helpers take new brooms in their hands, pretending to sweep the floor while reciting an incantation in an attempt to disinfect and wipe out any “bad omen” from the house. This is so that the *cap sac* ritual can take place smoothly. From this moment until the end of the ceremony, all family members and attendees must strictly follow the customs. They are not allowed to wear mourning clothes, young men and women are not allowed to tease each other, use bad language or insult each other.

Next two shamans, masters of the ceremony, wear ceremonial dresses to make ceremonial offerings to ancestors, gods and Buddha and other deities that are present at the ritual. In this ceremony as well as the following ceremonies, the first master shaman and the second master shaman are allowed to make ceremonial offerings at their tables. The ancestral altar is only placed with offerings without a shaman to make ceremonial offerings. In addition to ceremonial offerings to Ban Vuong, the Livestock God, etc., each shaman has to pray to invite his deities such as the spirits of *cap sac* masters, ghost soldiers and gods drawn in the paintings, asking them for their support of the ritual. After this ceremony, family members, relatives and friends hold traditional dances about ancestors to the tunes of gongs, drums and other musical instruments, making the atmosphere jubilant and boisterous. Then, the two master shamans continue praying, asking deities to support and witness the ceremony of lighting the ritual holder. A chair is placed at the center of the house for the ritual holder to sit while the first master shaman reads his CV

and asks the deities to help untie his ignorance and replace it with intelligence. Next helpers light the three lamp wicks from three oil bowls placed on the table for the first master shaman. The second master shaman and the father of the ritual holder put the lighting bowls on the head and shoulders of the ritual holder. In case the father of the ritual holder is deceased, a prestigious man from the family line is chosen to do this. When this man dies, his soul is among the groups of spirits who are the masters of the *cap sac* ritual holder (*sai tia*). Later on if the ritual holder is able to be a shaman and whenever he holds ceremonies, he invites this group of spirits to join in support. When the lamps are placed on the head and shoulders of the ritual holder, some people help in keeping them from falling down, while the father of the ritual holder and two shamans are dancing around the ritual holders for 10 – 15 rounds, with the light aimed at the subject to illuminate so as to enlighten him. According to the Yao, the name *qua tang* or *qua tang* comes from this. For a higher level *cap sac* ritual, there will be more lamps or candles. The next ceremonies are to get off the lamps, give a religious name, ceremonial objects and ghost soldiers to the ritual holder. These ceremonies are very important and take place very solemnly as they are the fundamental goal of the *cap sac* ritual.

Another rather important ceremony not only expressing the religious belief but also bearing educational significance of the *cap sac* ritual is to grant *phap* (*pun phat*) to the ritual holder. The first shaman, the second shaman and the father of the ritual holder, by

turn, takes some rice from the bowls on the offering table and pray to ghost soldiers and the spirits of the master shamans who held the *cap sac* rituals for them in the past, and put the rice into their mouths, chewing and then spitting it at the ritual holder. They are chewing rice and spitting it while lightly throwing the rice grains at the ritual holder. The ritual holder pretends to raise his flaps to catch the rice. In Yao beliefs, this ceremony shows the dependence of the ritual holder on the shamans and his father. In terms of spirit, there is a harmony between the generation of the ritual holder and the generation of the ceremony organizers based on the dependency on ghost soldiers and religious names. In terms of customary law, from now on, the ritual subject must be fully loyal to his father and the shamans, masters of his *cap sac* ritual, and must not do anything opposing their advice and teachings.

Then, the second shaman guides the ritual subject in seven different traditional dances to make offerings of cakes and wine to deities. After two master shamans conduct the ceremony, the dancer shaman and helpers make the ceremonial offerings to bid farewell the deities. At this juncture, the *thu den* step is ended. Musical instruments and worshipping paintings are cleared to enter the second step - the ceremonial offering to Ban Vuong. After all those ceremonies are held, the ritual subject is considered an “adult” as he has served the *thu den* ceremony and given ghost soldiers and other worship objects, particularly a religious name and the shaman master spirit.

- *The Yao ancestral worship ceremony*

First, tables of offerings are laid and ceremonial offerings are made to invite Ban Vuong and ancestors to attend the ceremony. Preparations start with the slaughtering of two pigs, which are placed on the table along with votive objects in the form of currency. The table of offerings to Ban Vuong is placed inside the house opposite the main door near the wall separating the living room and the bedrooms. The table of offerings to the family ancestors is placed in front of the ancestral altar. Offerings on each table include an uncooked pig, which is placed faced down, three small bowls of wine to be offered to spirits, two bowls of fresh ginger, a bowl of water, a bowl of rice, an incense burner and a great deal of votive money. When all preparations are made, the first shaman, wearing ceremonial dress, offers sacrifices to ancestors and deities. Simultaneously, three boys and three girls stand in two rows behind the shaman, kowtowing to welcome ancestors who are attending the ceremony.

Then comes the singing and reciting poems to ancestors. Another table is placed in the middle of the house near the table of offerings to Ban Vuong. On the table there are three bowls of cooked pork, three bowls of cooked mustard greens, a bottle of wine, six bowls, six pairs of chopsticks and a prayers’ book. Two master shamans, a dancing shaman and another three men, who are invited to recite poems, sit by the side of this table together to read poems from the prayers’ book. Meanwhile, the boys and girls continue their dancing and

singing. Singing and poem reciting last about three hours.

After praying to ancestors and deities to support the family, votive papers and money are burned to bid farewell them. The ceremonial offerings to Ban Vuong and the *cap sac* ritual are then closed to an end.

In short, the proceedings of the *cap sac* ritual are very complicated, comprised of many small rituals and different details relating to all aspects of the spiritual life of the Yao people. As for the seven and 12 candle *cap sac* ritual, there are a few different rituals included in than those than in this 3 candle *cap sac* ritual. They include a ceremony of presenting oneself to the Heaven Spirit, a ceremony of granting a religious honor certificate to the ritual subject, a ceremony of marriage ties, a ceremony of visiting paradise, etc. Each ceremony expresses certain aspects of Yao beliefs in the relationship between the *cap sac* ritual and deities. For this reason, the duration of the seven candle *cap sac* ritual lasts about four days while the 12-candle *cap sac* ritual is five to seven days.

### **3. *Cap sac* ritual and the cultural identity of the Yao**

#### **3.1. *Cap sac* ritual and the Yao conception of the spiritual world**

The *cap sac* ritual of the Yao, as preserved in a sustainable way, is thanks to its connections with spiritual factors, traditional customs and the ethnic psychology whose foundation is the conceptions formed and maintained by one generation after another.

For the world the Yao ethnic minority live in, they believe there are three layers: the upper layer is where deities and giants exist, the middle layer is the land of the living and the lower layer is the land of the dwarfs. Men in heaven hang knives around their necks, the living hang knives on their waist and the dwarfs hang knives on their calves. Also according to the Yao, the lives of the three world layers are all created by the *Cap Po* God. When a world and its living creatures are created, *Cap Po* also creates deities to administer the life in different aspects in that world. For example, in Heaven are the Jade Emperor, Lao Quan's father, God of Thunder, God of Lightning, etc. In the water, there lives the Sea-God and the Dragon King and in in the layer the living are the God of the Soil, the Kitchen God, the Rice God and the Livestock God, etc. Besides deities, there are other spirits including ancestors. According to the belief of the Yao, most of these spirits have returned from the dead to be with the living.

Although there are many types of deities and spirits, the Yao think there are only two main types, those that are evil and those that are good (Be Viet Dang et al, 1971). The good includes blessing spirits and deities who protect the lives of men, cattle and domestic animals such as ancestors including the Yao forefathers, the God of Farming, the Kitchen God, the God of the Soil, the Jade Emperor, Allah, Three Refuges, the first winner of three competitive examinations and ghost soldiers. The evil includes ghosts which often do harm to humans, domestic animals and crops such as river ghosts, stream ghosts, mountain ghosts

and the souls of those who did not die peacefully. Thus, to ensure a peaceful life for humans and domestic animals and develop crops, men have to worship and know how to conduct ceremonial offerings to deities and spirits. Or rather, humans must know how to trick the evil spirits. Yet, whoever wants to worship and offer sacrifices to deities and good spirits to ask them for support or play tricks against evil spirits, has to undergo a *cap sac* ritual. Only those who have passed the *cap sac* ritual are acknowledged by ancestors and deities as their children and are allowed to worship and make ceremonial offerings. This is because as discussed earlier, Yao mentality stipulates that in the *cap sac* ritual, paintings of different deities and spirits are hung and other deities are invited to attend, witness and acknowledge details of the ceremonies. At the same time, in the *cap sac* ritual, after ending the ceremony of giving a religious name to the ritual subject, the shamans provide him with ceremonial objects as well as necessary skills to ask deities and good spirits for support, as well as the necessary number of ghost soldiers to protect himself when he makes ceremonial offerings. The ritual subject also has the knowledge to trick evil spirits.

### ***3.2. Cap sac ritual and characteristics of religious belief of the Yao***

Through the *cap sac* ritual, it can be confirmed that the Yao people are very influenced by religious belief, firstly being Taoism. Taoism factors are present in ceremonial paintings, and the calling for the Jade Emperor and the father of the emperor to use the buffalo horn. In particular, shamans use Taoism magic and witchcraft to cleanse

and give religious name to the ritual subject. The ceremonial paintings hung during the *cap sac* ritual illustrate the Taoism belief of cosmology. Together with Taoism, there are also Buddhist factors. They include eating vegetarian meals, prohibiting one from breaking a religious vow, prohibiting the slaughtering by the ritual holders and ritual subject, as well as prohibiting teasing by young men and women. In addition, the ritual subject and the shamans are also influenced by the metempsychosis of Buddhism. Ancestral worship is deeply shown in the proceedings of the *cap sac* ritual. During the *cap sac* ritual, most of the stages, starting from welcoming the shamans to the end of the ritual, ceremonial offerings are made solemnly to the ancestors of the ritual subject, particularly the Ban Vuong. Some religious spiritual elements are also experienced, such as the ceremonial offerings made to the Livestock God, the Rice God, the Kitchen God and the God of the Soil, etc. In addition, there are also factors of Confucianism seen in the relationship between the father and the son, the master and the disciple, etc. Therefore, through the *cap sac* ritual, the characteristics of the traditional religious belief of the Yao are seen to be influenced by different religions.

### ***3.3. Cap sac ritual and cultural and artistic activities***

In the *Cap Sac* Ritual, many artistically valuable paintings are hung. For the 3-candle ritual, 6 paintings are hung, and the 7-candle ritual requires 24 paintings. For the 12-candle ritual, as many paintings as possible are hung reflecting different areas,

from deities – both big and small – to daily activities of the Yao.

Another artistic aspect is the traditional costumes which are carefully embroidered and decorated. The method of making of these costumes has been handed down by the Yao from one generation to the next. Each costume must be made while the original one is still in good condition, serving as a model for cutting, embroidering and decorating the new one. It is thought that if the costume is not made according to the design of their parents and grandparents, the Yao will be punished by their ancestors and deities and their children and grandchildren will face disaster. For this reason, we can see that the costumes of shamans of Yao groups in different localities are similar.

Another common cultural factor in the *cap sac* ritual is performing arts. First, mention should be made of traditional dance. During the process of the ritual, traditional dances were held under many different and interesting forms. Dances can be divided into two categories: dance accompanied by singing and dance to the tune of music. Dance accompanied by singing is a form of dance that is performed to the tune of prayer songs or poems. All those who take part in the dance have to sing. In addition to tools used by the performers, such as a music bell held in the right hand and a short stick held in the left hand, the dance is also accompanied by gongs and drums. Meanwhile the dance that is performed to the tune of instrumental music is a form of dance which is accompanied by musical instruments such as

drums, gongs, music bells, and other instruments (Ly Hanh Son, 1994). Besides dance, performing arts are also used during the *Ban Vuong* Ceremony in which songs are exchanged between three pairs of young men and women. They have to sing about 36 songs with diverse content reflecting beautiful scenery, love, dreams in labour and also advice for leading an ethical lifestyle.

### 3.4. *Cap sac* ritual and Yao customs

Reality shows that in the *cap sac* ritual, different aspects of the daily life of the Yao are indispensable. According to the Yao, three professions including teachers, shamans and medical practitioners, are particularly respected by the community. All three professions are directly related through the *cap sac* ritual. This means only those who are given religious names are allowed to practice such professions. This is because the Yao believes those who have religious names are supported and protected by ghost soldiers, deities and ancestors. Moreover, they also think that those who have religious names, meaning those that have already experienced the *cap sac* ritual, are considered by the Yao community as adults, thus they are allowed to do work relating to Yao traditional customs. Research shows that only when Yao men undergo the *cap sac* ritual they have a certain position in the family and community. They are allowed to burn incense on the ancestral altar, help the family prepare offerings for ceremonies, read books to choose the proper days and months to conduct important work, represent the family to welcome shamans and attend funerals, etc. For the family clan, those who have undergone the *cap sac* ritual bring

pride to the whole family line and are selected to start the season of sowing upland rice and represent villagers to hold ceremonies related to farming and husbandry. They are able to be masters of the *cap sac* ritual for others and shamans for the burial of the dead body. The Yao people believe that only those who undergo the *cap sac* ritual have a good heart and ethics to differentiate between right and wrong and deeply understand the traditional customs of the Yao community.

In the opinion of the Yao, men who are given the *cap sac* ritual are acknowledged by ancestors, face no risks and avoid dangers for family when they hold ceremonies relating to traditional customs. They are always supported by ancestors and deities and protected by the ghost soldiers, the masters of their *cap sac* ritual and even the ghost soldiers of their masters' ancestors. Also, mistakes made during ceremonies are forgiven and ignored. So, the *cap sac* ritual holds an important position in the spiritual life of the Yao, contributing to preserving the customs and traditions of this ethnic group.

### ***3.5. Cap sac ritual and educational practice of the Yao community***

The educational characteristic in the *cap sac* ritual is shown in the teachings written down in the certificate granted to the ritual subject which direct him toward the good and prevent him from doing evil. For example, there are 10 to do and 10 not to do.

- *10 prohibited actions:*

1. It is forbidden to kill cattle and animals

2. It is forbidden to insult heaven and earth, the sun and the moon
3. It is forbidden to insult parents, and the six closest relatives in the family
4. It is forbidden to commit fraud and be greedy for beautiful girls and for gain
5. It is forbidden to cling to life and fear death
6. It is forbidden to be adulterous and trafficking
7. It is forbidden to respect the rich and despise the poor
8. It is forbidden to despise brothers, sisters, friends and relatives
9. It is forbidden to fear tigers and in heavy rains and strong wind to be ready to save others.
10. It is forbidden to insult gods and promise to ensure security.

- *10 dos:*

1. I pledge to respect supernatural power
2. I pledge to be clean and pure to my six closest relatives
3. I pledge not to be suspicious
4. I pledge to have seven stars in the dipper support
5. I pledge to have the first winners of three competitive examinations support
6. I pledge to make the Eight Trigrams appear
7. I pledge to have four deities dispatching troops
8. I pledge to have nine determinations
9. I pledge to have five monks support
10. I pledge to have a perfect decimal number (Trieu Huu Ly)

The educational significance reflected here is the respect for shamans who are

masters of the *cap sac* ritual, gratitude shown to parents, loyalty to friends and respect for uprightness and despise of talent, altruism, courage, sincerity, to resist deception and lust. Moreover, these teachings are implemented with the ten vows under the supervision of gods and ancestors, thus the educational characteristic is even more valuable. In addition, the *cap sac* ritual also teaches men to respect and observe regulations, customary laws and traditional customs of the ethnic group. This is clearly shown in the book *Qua son bang van* – legend about the creator of the Yao, which is read in the ceremonial offerings made to Ban Vuong. The book writes: “the King offers Ban Vuong’s children and grandchildren living in thick jungles, knives to protect themselves and fires to distinguish. Ban Vuong’s children and grandchildren are not allowed to do harm, must respect laws and regulations. Whoever fails to observe laws or regulations is duly punished” (Trieu Huu Ly). The educational characteristic of the *cap sac* ritual is also reflected through the paintings hung during the ritual such as the four upright figures and the ten great halls of the ruler of the underworld. These paintings show scenes of gods who are always present by the side of the *cap sac* ritual subject in all his lifetime to witness his good or evil actions in order to bless him or punish him when he departs from the world of the living to be with his ancestors. For this reason, the ritual subject often volunteers to self-improve his virtues to do good, and avoid committing crimes. It can be said that the *cap sac* ritual plays a very important role in educating men to lead a good life, to have community harmony and respect and observe customary laws and traditional customs of ethnic groups.

### 3.6. *Cap sac* ritual and scientific research

Conceptions of the *cap sac* ritual, sets of ceremonial paintings and the system of deities and related customs and legends are very valuable for research on the identities of and the religious belief of the Yao. Thanks to the collection and extensive studies of those paintings as well as the system of deities of the Yao, Jacques Lemoine, a French scientist, for the first time, declared that the Yao’s religion is Taoism (Lemoine, 1982). Furthermore, through legends and poems recited during the *cap sac* ritual, researchers can study the origin and the process Yao migration from one location to another. For example, Prof. Tran Quoc Vuong, when carefully analyzing events written in the book *Qua son bang van* came to the conclusion that the modern ancestors of the Yao now are the Dong Viet of the Ton – Han Dynasty and their residential areas were Fujian, southern Zhejiang and eastern Jianxi (China) (Tran Quoc Vuong, 1963). If studying two poetry stories *Dang Hanh* and *Ban Dai Ho*, one can learn clearly the process of migration of some Yao groups from China to Vietnam.

Factors such as ceremonial dresses, dances, music, ceremonial paintings, and offerings in the *cap sac* ritual are also very valuable for research on the characteristics of material culture, culinary culture, arts and fine arts of the Yao. The *cap sac* ritual somehow influences the psychological life of each Yao, thus having a certain role in the studies of the psychology of this ethnic group.

In addition, the *cap sac* ritual shows other factors of the Yao culture such as customs relating to hierarchal relations in the community, belief in the good or bad affecting the holding of the ritual and the custom of mutual help, etc.

In short, generally speaking, the *cap sac* ritual is a communication ceremony of the cultural heritage of the Yao handed down by the present generation to the next generation. Therefore, the *cap sac* ritual contains many important compositions of the Yao cultural identity and plays the role of linking different generations of the Yao ethnic group. Thus, the preservation of the *cap sac* ritual will contribute to maintaining and developing the traditional cultural characteristics of this particular ethnic group.

#### 4. Constraints of the *cap sac* ritual

In current living conditions of the Yao in Vietnam, the *cap sac* ritual has certain constraints. First, it reflects clearly the stratification of the Yao society in terms of religious dignitaries as well as the social status in the Yao community. He who is granted a *cap sac* certificate, though not seeking power to rule or exploit others, seeks a peaceful life for his family and relatives and those who need his spiritual support. Those who are able to become experienced shamans are elected as heads of family lines, represent villagers to make ceremonial offerings to the Village Tutelary Spirit and hold farming ceremonies. They also have the prestige in resolving disputes in the village. Therefore, they have certain status compared to other villagers who have not or have yet to experience the *cap sac* ritual. For non-*cap sac* ritual people, they, and even their wives, are considered children by the community, thus having no status in Yao society. According to the Yao traditional customs, these people are not allowed to touch incense burners on the altar, to sit with the village elderly to discuss important village affairs, to light the fire when inaugurating a new house, to be match-makers or representatives of the bride-groom in the

wedding. In case the family is unable to hold *cap sac* ritual for their sons, depending on circumstances, that family is sneered at by members of other family lines as being poor and not caring for children. Obviously, the *cap sac* ritual has created a split in Yao society.

Reality shows that, the *cap sac* ritual somehow costs needy families. As discussed earlier, to organize a *cap sac* ritual, material and spiritual preparations must be made ready. In terms of material, they are mainly ceremonial offerings and food to serve the days the ritual is held. For example, in the Yao Tien community in Hoa Binh province, the two sacrificed pigs weigh at least 100 kg, excluding food and food-stuff and other things such as fabrics to make ceremonial dress for the ritual subject, incense, votive objects, sticky rice to make cakes as offerings, etc. This is just the cost of a *cap sac* ritual, i.e. for only son. If the family has many sons, the cost will be much more. Of course, with increasingly economic improvements, this constraint can be easily overcome.

In addition, the *cap sac* ritual has certain impacts on the status of Yao women. There is a notion that if the husband is granted the *cap sac* certificate, his wife is as well. In case the husband has not yet undergone the *cap sac* ritual, his wife is considered the one having no religious name, thus she is not allowed to take part in important affairs of the family line as well as activities in the community. When she dies she is not allowed to be buried like other women whose husbands have undergone the *cap sac* ritual. So, it is held that in the Yao society, the *cap sac* ritual has created conditions for bias judgment of the status of women compared to men.

Although there remain those small constraints in the current life, the *cap sac* ritual has for a long time now become an indispensable event in the spiritual life of the Yao with close links to the cultural characteristics of this ethnic group. So, the issue of preserving the Yao cultural identity is often linked with the maintenance of the *cap sac* ritual. If the *cap sac* ritual fades, sooner or later, the traditional characteristic of the Yao culture will be lost, thus affecting, to some extent, the process of cultural connections of this ethnic group.

### 5. Comments

Of all the rituals of the Yao community, the *cap sac* ritual is most typical. Most Yao men, regardless of what local groups they belong to and where they live, have to undertake this ritual. This is the basic difference between the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao and that of other ethnic groups.

Like the *cap sac* ritual of other ethnic groups, the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao is complicated, has many levels and different names and relates to most of the aspects of social life of the Yao people. This is possibly the issue that gives administrators in many localities difficulty in clearly seeing unique cultural factors in the *cap sac* ritual, so as to develop its positive aspects.

From research findings, it is shown that the *cap sac* ritual of the Yao is not merely a religious ritual, but contains unique cultural elements of this ethnic group. Most of the aspects of the Yao traditional culture such as its concept of the spiritual world, aspects of religious beliefs, folk arts, community educational customs, etc., are shown very clearly in the *cap sac* ritual. All these factors, together with other formal factors such as offerings, ceremonial proceedings, sets of

ceremonial paintings, musical instruments, prayers' book, and ceremonial dresses have created the cultural value of the *cap sac* ritual, making it not only an integral part of preserving the Yao cultural identity, but also an important significance to scientific research on the historical stages, culinary culture, arts and fine arts of the Yao people.

Therefore, creating favorable conditions for the Yao to maintain and develop the positive aspects of the *cap sac* ritual will contribute to preserving the traditional cultural identity of the Yao ethnic group, in line with the Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Central Committee.

### References:

1. Be Viet Dang, Nguyen Khac Tung, Nong Trung, Nguyen Nam Tien (1971), *The Yao in Vietnam*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
2. General Statistic Office (2001), *The results of the 1999 General Population Census*, The Statistic Publishing House, Hanoi.
3. Lemoine, J. (1982), *Yao ceremonial paintings*, White Lotus Co. Ltd., Bangkok.
4. Trieu Huu Ly, Material is kept at the Library of the Committee of Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas, codenamed VC/4.
5. Trieu Huu Ly, *Qua Son Bang Van or Binh Hoang Khoan Diep*, It is kept at the Library of the Committee of Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas, codenamed B89.
6. Ly Hanh Son (1994), Notes on dances of the Yao Tien and Red Yao, *Folklore Culture Review*, No. 4.
7. Tran Quoc Vuong (1963), Through studying *Binh Hoang Khoan Diep*, discussing the origin of the Yao (*Man*), *Nationality Review*, No. 40. p. 46-51.