

## BELIEFS OF THE SOULS AND WITCHCRAFTS OF VE PEOPLE IN VIETNAM \*

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Ve people has a minor population of about 2,000 people, residing in 6 villages of Dac Pree and Dac Pring communes, Giang district (Nam Giang), Quang Nam province. They live on mounts of Truong Son Range, along the border between Vietnam and Laos. Ve is one of 4 ethnic sub-groups comprising Gie - Trieng ethnic group namely are Gie, Trieng, Bnoong and Ve. According to some scholars, Ve people still preserve many characteristics of the bilateral system. They call themselves *Vel* or *Veh*, meaning 'village', Ve is name called by the Kinh people. They claim themselves to be of Laos origin and still remember their origin and their immigration. This paper endeavored to present Ve people's beliefs of the souls and witchcrafts, their roles and functions in daily life, and also analyze the direction of change in Ve people's religious beliefs.

### 1. BELIEFS OF THE SOUL, THE DEATH AND THE WORLD AFTER DEATH

Like many other ethnic groups in Truong Son - Tay Nguyen region (Vietnam's Central Highlands), Ve people believe that all creatures and supernatural forces like gods (*giang*), spirits (*cmot*) and inanimate objects have soul (*mhol*). As human thinking and spiritual life developed and get complicated, it is believed that a soul is invisible, colorless, shapeless, and only be seen by supernatural forces and worshippers. A soul is just like the body of human beings, gods, spirits, animals and plants. If the body is healthy, then the soul is strong; if the body is weak, then the soul is weak; a young body has a young soul, an old body has an old soul; there are also male and female souls. The soul of human beings, gods and spirit resides in their head and the soul of plants is at the tree-foot.

Beliefs of the souls have close related to beliefs of blood. Most religious rituals require the slaughtering of animals for worshipping but people mostly use blood and rarely take the animal heart and liver as offerings. Replying to the question why only blood is used in worships, the majority of Ve people say because blood is the most important part of an animal. This can be attributed to the age-old belief, not only by Ve people but many other ethnic groups, that a soul is visible; in animals, a soul is blood, while in plants, a soul is resin; gradually, a soul is imagined as invisible, existing inside or outside of the body. Thus, blood offerings are effective, which can satisfy supernatural forces. From such a belief, in religious rituals, they have the custom of painting the blood of the sacrificed animal on places believed to be the shelter of god or a spirit, to ask these supernatural forces to give support or forgive human beings. Blood can also be painted on the forehead in a hope that the soul will be healthy and enjoy tranquility. This belief is reflected in the customs of "hunting blood" which used to prevail in their society, especially for seasonal and tranquility rituals. For example, in the past, during seasonal rituals, they had to kill one person from another village and beheaded him/her to take blood for worshipping. Then each family scattered that blood on their rice field on the first seeding day in a hope that the earth god would make the soil fertile. They also scattered this blood on seeds before planting as offerings to the rice god, thus making the rice soul healthy and the rice field be productive. Ve people's customs to use human blood as offerings can be attributed to the legend of Madam Da Nhe (*Dong Da Nhe*), which is closely linked to the rice god and rice soul. This custom was also common in several Truong Son - Tay Nguyen's ethnic

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groups, like the Ka tu people (J. Le Pichon 1978). Since 1954, due to the State explanation of this customs' negative impact, local people have replaced human blood with buffalo blood. In recent years, buffalo blood has been replaced with chicken or pig blood and each family has held ritual. However, every three years or so, village people contribute to slaughtering a buffalo to worship gods the in seeding season and pray for a bumper crop or to pray for tranquility. On this occasion, families still scatter buffalo blood on the place where gods are believed to live, or on their rice field and seeds with the same purpose as in the past.

Information gathered shows that Ve people think that for every invisible or visible object there is one single soul (*mhol*), controlling all behaviors, thoughts, and secure this object's life. They belief of a soul closely relates to their explanation of and behaviors towards on-going and past incidents in their life. They believe that many causes of human illness or death closely relate to human soul (*mhol dich*). One person may face the following cases:

**First, soul leaves the body by itself in a certain moment:** For instance, during a dream, a soul leaves the body to hang out, what the soul see is reflected in dream; or when something suddenly happens (someone is scolded, beaten suddenly or facing a cruel animal), the soul is scared, startled and thus leave the body. Then, if a soul returns to the body, it is all right. If a soul loses its way, or is extremely scared and cannot return to the body, or be captured by supernatural forces, the body will get prolonged sickness. In this case, if worshippers are not invited timely to hold rituals "calling" or "force" the soul to come back, the victim will die. Ways of calling and forcing a soul to return vary according to specific cases. First, worshippers use the magic ginger root to foretell why the soul left, why it has not come back, then conducting rituals to call or force the soul to return. If the soul loses it way or is so scared that it does not want to come back, the worshipper will conduct one of the others rituals.

For example, the patient's family put three dry stream fish and a basket of some rice between the worshipper and the patient. The worshipper use magic words to help the soul know how to get back. When seeing that the soul has entered the door, the worshipper fastens some wax to the patient's hair, then puts it at the patient's forehead to help the soul know where to come in. In case supernatural forces capture the soul and do not set it free, the worshipper foretells which forces detain the soul, for what reason, and what do supernatural forces want to exchange for the soul's release. Patient's family must present exactly what the worshipper demands in offerings, which must include one four-legged animal. During the ritual, the house owner must slaughter this animal and roast its heart and liver as meal for both the worshipper and the patient, then prays to the supernatural forces to release the patient's soul. If all these rituals fail to help the patient recover, they believe that soul will never come back as the patient's time to live has run out, and s/he has to go and live in the kingdom of spirits and ancestors.

**Second, the soul is forced to leave the body:** They believe that this case happens as supernatural forces penetrate a human body, then sweep away and beat the soul, causing injuries or death to the soul, or even eating up the soul. This disastrous situation only occurs when people violate the community's rules and regulations, i.e. offending gods and supernatural forces, resulting in punishments. The offenders find it hard to avoid death. Rituals are necessary though rarely helpful.

**In the two cases of soul-related sickness leading to death mentioned earlier,** they believe that if facing the first case, victims have a "good death - *chit cmot*", if facing the second case, victims are said to have a "bad death - *chit preng*". They believe that normally, a soul is colorless and shapeless, but the souls of those who are about to die are round and blood-like red. This is because the soul is penetrated, injured or

beaten to death by supernatural forces. However, ordinary people cannot recognize the soul's color and shape; only supernatural forces and worshippers are able. Once a worshipper identifies that the soul is beaten, holding a ritual to beat off evil spirits (*man tich cmot preng*) is only one way to avoid bad death. In this ritual, the worshipper beats the patient with branch of leaves of *cho ner* tree (leaves with spiky blades), then reads these magic words: *evil spirits must leave the patient's body or die*. This ritual means that the worshipper uses weapons and magical power handed down by the god who makes friend with him or her, to sweep the supernatural forces harming the soul away from the body. After this ritual, the soul's red color will disappear and the patient will "enjoy a good death".



Pa Then Young woman at Tan Trinh commune, Bac Quang district, Ha Giang province

Photo: Khong Dien

after death as the soul leaves the body, it becomes a spirit right away or disappears, replaced by a spirit. Ve people view this differently. For an individual with a good death, the human soul (*mhol dich*) will become a dead person's spirit (*cmot dich*), then another soul called kitchen soul (*mhol plo*) appears. The dead person's spirit will

live forever in the tomb, thus they have customs of building tomb-house for *cmot dich*. It is believed that the cemetery is a village of the dead, where many *cmot dich* live. Sometimes, human beings meet the spirit in dreams. After the dead person is buried, kitchen soul (*mhol plo*) appear and still lives with the family and resides in the kitchen place where the dead person used to cook when alive. That's why it is called *mhol plo* - kitchen soul or ash soul. In the first meal of the family after the burial service, the male chief put some rice and meat thrown at the kitchen corner to invite *mhol plo* to have meal as well. Since then, the family will conduct this ritual in every meal within one year. They believe that if this ritual is not observed, the kitchen soul will get angry and cause crop failure and illness for the mourning family. *Mhol plo* also causes sickness to strangers who make sudden visit to the host family and behave badly or startle the *mhol plo* by stealing something, fighting, murdering, swearing or speaking and laughing loudly. *Mhol plo* will live with its home family for one year. When there is the first thunder marking a new rainy season, *mhol plo* becomes a gutless fly and go to Laos to live with the ancestors there and will never return. Ve people believe that whether living with the ancestors or in the spirit's village, each *mhol plo* and *cmot dich* has one soul, both are called *mhol* as human soul with roles and functions similar to a living person's soul.

Information gathered shows that Ve people's belief in a living human soul and dead spirit are different. Human soul is characterized by its weakness and inactiveness. It can usually be threatened, "bullied", even "beaten dead" or "eaten up". On the contrary, *mhol plo* and *cmot dich* are healthy, active, and tend to cause troubles in case of the bad death persons' soul. *Mhol plo* and *cmot dich* may cause illness and epidemic to the community if anyone does something against their will or just because they want to ask for food. Consequently, they are very frightened when they have to walk through or come in the community's cemetery, especially

near tombs of bad death persons'. Informants say a cemetery is the residential area of spirits and souls, who may "attack" living people's soul. This fear still prevails, particularly among the elderly. Due to such a view, my request for villagers to take me to the cemetery for a visit was rejected. Then a young man agreed to go with me, after coming home, he was criticized by his parents. Also due to this fear, when someone dies, Ve people do not dare to keep the dead body long in the house but bury it as soon as possible. At the same time, the mourners have to take care of all funeral procedures. Villagers are fearful that the dead person's soul could harm them, thus they do not attend the funeral. Even the mourners, after concluding funeral procedures, have to take a bath carefully and wash all tools they have brought with them to the cemetery before coming village. This is to cast off all following spirit and soul and to prevent them from entering the village and inflicting harms. In case of sudden death outside the village, the mourning family quickly buries the dead person right in the spot without holding a funeral or sharing assets of the dead person as in the case of ordinary death or bad death indoors.

In case of a bad death, the after-life soul is different from that of an ordinary death. In a bad death, whether the dead body is buried in a separate cemetery or right in the spot of the incident, a bad soul (*mhol preeng*), not kitchen soul (*mhol plo*) as in the case of a good death, appears. *Mhol preeng* cannot return to meet the mourning family and ancestors but turns into a wandering *clang clia* bird (a species of bird with gray feather and white wings). Ve people do not swear at, drive away, shoot or eat this bird as they consider it "sacred". Worshippers say that bad death men turn into male birds while bad dead women turn into female birds. These birds do not reproduce or drink water in a stream. It only drinks water stagnated on the ground or on leaves. Normally, these birds do not live in flocks or in pairs but remain single. However, an old man in ward 58 of Dac Pree commune recalled

that in 1978, there was a loving couple in this ward who could not get married due to obstruction from the family. They committed suicide. Also during this time, it was noticed a pair of *clang clia* birds flying together. Ve worshippers told us what they do to identify the *clang clia* bird, which represents the souls of bad death persons: when there is a bad death, before the burial service, a short string is attached to the dead person's big toe. After a while, there is a *clang clia* bird with its leg having a similar string. For the bad death person, his/her soul (*mhol dich*) does not become a dead person's spirit (*cmot dich*) but a bad spirit instead (*cmot preeng*). It does not live in the spirit's village (the cemetery) as normal dead persons either. Two types of souls of bad death persons, *mhol preeng* and *cmot preeng* do not have stable residence in the spirit's village (the cemetery). They have to wander here and there, and may do harms to human beings anytime. If they are not satisfied or just want to have a meal, they can cause drought and flood, sickness and death to both humans and animals. If harmed by a soul of bad death person, Ve people have to worship for tranquility.

Besides differentiating soul and spirit of good and bad death persons, Ve people classify soul of ordinary people and of worshippers. They believe worshippers have a very strong soul, which can contact gods and minimize some punishments by supernatural forces. After death, worshippers' souls may affect the village's life. Therefore, when a worshipper dies, people from his home village, and even other villages, participate in the funeral and burial services. The funeral proceedings are also different from that of ordinary people as the grave is made deeper and wider, with stone and sand mixed to cover the grave, but not soil as in ordinary people's burial service, otherwise, it is believed that the village will be harmed. Obviously, their beliefs reflect a simple illustrative comparison: *people having strong souls when alive and have a major influence on a village's life will consequently have a strong and influential soul after death.*

However, in our view besides religious reasons, these differences in funeral and burial services are probably attributed to respect and gratitude towards the dead persons, as worshippers had saved many lives by providing treatment.

When a soldier is killed during war between two villages, his soul will become *giang troc ho bang* - a god guarding the village, which killed him. This god prevents outsiders, including those from his home village, to take revenge, rob or kill people from the village that killed him. On the other hand, the village having its soldiers killed considers this a bad death, posing a threat to the community, as the soldier's soul has become a guardian god protecting the enemy's village.

Ve people differentiate human beings with normal soul (*mhol dich*) and those with a spirit-like soul (*cmot cho lo*), similar to the concept of *ma lai* in some Tay Nguyen ethnic groups. The spirit-soul people's appearance is similar to the ordinary, but when they are asleep, their soul leaves the body and becomes an animal like a tiger, a snake, a wild boar and a squirrel. These animals go to cemetery, dig out and eat newly dead bodies; or go to the forest to eat dead animals. If the soul becomes a tiger, it eats both human beings and domestic animals. Besides, *cmot cho lo* usually snoops around in quiet paths to eat the passers-by's soul, then the victim will die. They think that when someone is asleep but cannot be waken up and his/her body is deadly cold, it is called *cmot cho lo*. To identify and protect oneself from *cmot cho lo* attacks, in wild places, people spit out some saliva on their own weapons. If seeing any animals running in the front, they chase and beat the animals. If the animal dies or injured, then someone in the home village or neighbor village dies or injured unexplainably, it can be labeled as *cmot cho lo*. In many Tay Nguyen ethnic groups, those who are considered *ma lai* are killed and his/her family is expelled from the village or sold off in far-away areas. On the contrary, Ve villagers practice good behavior towards those who are believed to be

*cmot cho lo*, as they do not want *cmot cho lo* to harm family members, especially children. If there is a family that have a *cmot cho lo* member and do not want him/her to live with them, when *cmot cho lo* individual is asleep, they just put a big rock on its stomach and believed that this will prevent the soul of *cmot cho lo* from "returning" to its host body, then the *cmot cho lo* individual will die. Its soul will reside in a forest and become a tiger, which usually eats human beings and animals, they believe that these tigers have five toes and are very smart.

**Views on souls are closely linked to views on death and the world after death.** As mentioned early, Ve people classify death into 2 categories, good death and bad death. Good death is when someone dies of old age, illness and the death must be at home. They believe that bad death is caused by gods or spirits, e.g. sudden death outside the house, death at home after being injured outside the house, or death in childbirth. It is believed that death due to lightning is caused by lightning god, death due to drowning is caused by water god, death due to landslide, rock avalanche and animal attacks is caused by the god of earth, death in childbirth is caused by rice god, death due to fighting is caused by the souls of bad death persons, so on. They also believe that if a husband and wife die within a short period of time, the person who died first "returns and captures" his/her spouse to the world of ancestors and spirits.

As many other local ethnic groups in Vietnam, Ve people do not think death is the absolute disappearance but an end of life in the human world and a move to one of two kingdoms. *Mhol plo* will live with its ancestors in Laos, *cmot dich* will live in spirit's village (cemetery) forever. This is totally different from the beliefs of many ethnic groups in Vietnam's Central Highlands, Ede and Mnong ethnic groups for instance, they considers death as the beginning of the birth and re-birth cycle, i.e. after death, the soul is incarnated to become a human being again. But

Ve people believe death is a permanent move to the world of spirit and ancestors without incarnation. Human beings in these two kingdoms do not get old or change their appearance compared to pre-death period, as in dreams the dead still look similar. Ve people's "kingdom of ancestors" is not symbolized as the heaven or the hell but exists as a true and specific region. For instance, informants in Dac Pree say their ancestors' kingdom is in Co Nenh mountainous region, Dac Chung district of Xe Coong province, Laos. However, they do not have a specific, clear and detailed concept of the life of *mhol plo* in the ancestors' kingdom, as in the case of life in the spirit's village.

They believe that a spirit's living condition and ways of earning a living in the spirit's village resembles the living world. Each spirit has habits and requirements as if it were alive. Spirits also work, get married and deliver children as human beings. But people cannot see spirits (though spirits can see human beings), thus they cannot know activities taking place in the spirit's village. Sometimes, in twilight, human beings can hear some unclear and vague sounds from life in the spirit's village. Due to the beliefs that dead persons still live and work, in burial service, Ve mourners place daily utensils, production tools, plant seeds, bones of domestic animals around and on the tomb. This means some assets are shared with the dead person, thus s/he can work and live. Without this sharing, it is feared that the soul and spirit will punish the mourning family, causing illness and crop failure. These assets are things frequently used by the dead person once s/he was alive. It is noteworthy that all these tools are ruined. According to Ngo Van Doanh 1995, this is because in the spirits' village, everything is in contrary to the living world, thus tools should be made broken to become fine afterwards in the spirit's village. Nevertheless, this asset sharing is conducted only in case of a good death and a bad death at home. If someone dies suddenly out of his/her house, the mourning family just places

smoking tools but not "production means". Consequently, the soul and spirit of bad death persons in this case always suffer hunger, then raising troubles to demand meals from human beings.

Ve people believe that in spirit's village, everything is in contrary to the living world, including time. Spirit can see human beings, but not the other way around. Therefore, in all spirit-related rituals or when offering sacrifices or sharing assets to spirits and ancestors, Ve people must use their left hand and turn their hand to the back, believing that by this way, spirits and ancestors are able to receive offerings. In this regard, they still preserve a story entitled Brothers Caring for Each other (*Oai nho ka no*).

Based on this information, we have drawn the following remarks: According to Ve people's belief, every existing thing has a soul (*mhol*). However, souls of most objects are stronger than human beings, thus the former can punish, beat to death or eat up the latter. Human beings have one soul, but after death, people have both soul and spirit: kitchen soul - ancestors and spirit - dead person's spirit, though there is a difference between good and bad death. Ve people believe that both kitchen soul (*mhol plo*) and spirit of good death persons (*cmot dich*) have a soul and the roles and functions similar to a human one. For bad death persons, their soul will become "bad soul" and "bad spirit". This is different from the views of many ethnic groups in Vietnam that human beings have one or more souls, after death, only spirit exists while souls disappears.

Ve people do not delineate clearly residential areas of gods, human beings and the dead into different levels (like heaven, living world and hell) as with other ethnic groups. They believe that gods, ancestors, spirits and human begin all live on earth - sharing the same space (except for lighting god live above) and in villages as of human beings. They also classify after-death world into two categories: ancestors' kingdom - the residence of kitchen's soul, and spirit's village

- the residence of spirit in cemetery. Of course, this place is not reserved for bad death persons.

In their view, the spirit's world does not have the rich, the poor, or status either. Probably, this view reflects the living world. This is different from Gie and Trieng ethnic sub-group as Tran Manh Cat remarked, they believe that the other world consists of 2 parts, the rich and the poor and this view is attributed to the classification of the rich and the poor classes in the human society (Dang Nghiem Van 1981). Due to the beliefs that death is just like moving to live in another world, i.e. the ancestors' kingdom and spirit's village, and that a soul will live forever in a different place and different form though dead persons have life as human beings, Ve people do not have the customs of preserving and abandoning tombs as in several Central Highlands ethnic groups, or the customs of worshipping ancestors like ethnic groups in the north of Vietnam.

## 2. FORMS OF WITCHCRAFT

Remnants of witchcraft forms have existed significantly in Truong Son - Tay Nguyen region in general, and residential areas of Ve people in particular. These mostly consist of witchcrafts in treatment, production and inflicting harms. Our surveys in Ve village show that local people have to use certain "sacred objects", believed to be granted by gods or died people, to perform such witchcraft. They have different sacred objects, each of them has separate impact on human life. There are sacred objects used for the whole community, within a lineage or a family, or just by one individual. Some sacred objects inflict harms, others bring good luck, and some do both. They believe that sacred objects could be anything but they should have beautiful or abnormal shapes and colors (stones), or represent wild animal strengths (tusk, wild boar's teeth and tiger claws), which people pick up by chance. An object becomes a sacred one if a god appears in a dream, telling the recipient that this object is granted by the god and then given instruction on how to use it. Sacred objects of the community

and lineages are passed from generation to generation but worshipping rituals are not held regularly but only before the object is used. Family and individual's sacred objects do not require worshipping rituals and cannot be passed to other people; when the owner dies, sacred object is lost or damaged by other persons, the sacred object loses its power

### 2.1. Witchcraft in treatment

In Truong Son ranges, jungles and mountains, the life of Ve people was previously separated from the outside world. Diseases and mortality, especially among children, were constant threats for ethnic people living in the jungle, in general and Ve people in particular. To cope with these threats and minimize risks, they have established an abundant folklore knowledge of treatment. Depending on diseases, family of the sick person select treatment based on traditional plants and herbs available in the forest, or invite worshippers to cure the disease by fortune telling and spell castings.

**Fortune telling worshippers:** Each Ve village has one or several persons who can perform worships and fortune telling to cure diseases. Local people believe that these persons are able to contact and receive support from the lightning god or water god - who make friends with the worshippers; if the worshipper is male, the god is female and vice versa. During treatment, with magic "support" from the god, the fortune telling worshippers come to know the cause of the disease and how to cure it effectively.

According to some Ve worshippers, this career requires a long-term process of "passing the professions" and "posing challenges" by gods. This process lasts from several years to 20 years. First, a person gets sick, then dreams about a green snake - incarnation of water god, or red snake - incarnation of lightning god, sweep in the house, turn into a human being of the opposite sex, lie beside and suggest "making friends" with the sick person. If the sick person agrees, the god

will cure his/her disease, then both talk heart-to-heart to each other until early morning, then the god turns back into a snake and leaves. Since then, the god pays nightly visits to the human beings. Until both understand each other well, the god instructs the human being how to practice the career. Initially, the god checks whether the human being is capable of curing disease in this way: placing 3 covered bowls in front of the person, the first contains alcohol, the second contains water and the last contains animal blood. Then the god asks the person to pick up one bowl and drink it up. If taking the alcohol bowl, s/he is able to foretell and cure the disease; if taking the water bowl, s/he is also able to foretell and cure the disease, but treatment rituals may require more offerings compared to the first case; and if taking the bowl of blood, s/he cannot become a worshipper. Following this procedure, the god will teach those who drink the bowl of alcohol or water how to foretell diseases, to conduct treatment worships and give relevant prescriptions. They believe that each god is able to cure certain diseases, as a result, a worshiper can only cure diseases known and taught by the god.

During the process of teaching, the god frequently checks and poses challenges to see whether the student remembers what is taught in this way: *the god pretends to be sick or makes anyone else to be sick, then telling the student to cure; the god may give instructions on many prescriptions, then puts many similar medicines in one place in the forest, then the god tells the student to go and take one medicine back; the god "shoots" or "places" certain objects at the sick person, or sometimes changes the shapes of objects "shot" or "placed", then tell the student to find the cause of the disease, and so on.* If the student foretells wrongly, s/he must study again until being able to make right foretells. In case the student fails many challenges, the god discontinues teaching his/her. The process of teaching takes place at night at the student's

house, but ordinary people cannot see it and learners have to keep secret. After learning all teachings, the student must promise the god to worship and foretell to help people. If s/he breaks the promise, the god will make him/her sick, or even be mad.

According to worshippers, after the teaching process, the god grants a "sacred medicinal plant" to cure diseases and a "sacred ginger root" to foretell diseases. However, the god does not offer these directly but places them in the forest, the student must find them out and grow them in another secret place, then go to take them in case of necessity. This is to prevent the sacred ginger and sacred medicinal plants from being found, damaged or contaminated by others, causing them to lose power. The ginger root is the worshippers "sacred object", which helps them identify causes of diseases and how to cure effectively; the medicinal plant is used for treatment purposes. The ginger root and medicinal plant handed over by the god take effect only when they are used by the owner; thus, we did not notice the passing of foretelling worships for treatment from one to another, or from generation to generation in family and the community.

After "passing the professional" the worshiper and the god rarely meet each other. Only if the worshiper fails to cure the disease, then s/he calls for help from the god. Ve people believe that sometimes the god surrenders and has to ask for help from other gods, thus another prescription or invocation is offered. These gods may have discussions to arrive at a suitable prescription. During this process, the worshiper and gods exchanges views with each other, but ordinary people cannot see or hear. After the ritual, the patient's family asks the worshiper to have a meal. Before having any food or drink, the worshiper has to pour or place some alcohol and food on the floor, intending to invite the gods offering help to share the meal as well.

In addition, they believe that those worshipers, who "make friends" with lightning god, were taught how to cast a spell on food or to "shoot" a spiky object at other people. In the former case, anyone eating this food will absolutely die, in the latter case, the victim may ask another worshiper to hold a ritual and deactivate the witchcraft. Therefore, among Ve people, worshippers serve as magician, though some could cast a spell to harm others, like witches.

**Illness and treatment:** Ve people believe that there are many causes of illness and diseases. Diseases are classified into two groups. The first consists of diseases caused by supernatural forces or witchcraft. The second covers diseases stemming from within the body. To identify causes for each disease, the patient and his/her family have to recall if they have done anything in violation of the community's rules and regulations, resulting in punishment by the god; or places they have been to that caused them to be harmed by spirits or worshipers. If one of such cases happens, they believe that some supernatural forces have affected the body, causing the disease. This belief is strengthened once facing serious disease, or in case it is impossible to identify the pain and how serious the pain is. If common illnesses such as headache, flu, coughing, stomachache, pimples, etc., last for long and worsen, they also believe that this is due to supernatural forces.

Supernatural forces can cause diseases and illnesses to human beings in numerous ways such as: to injure or beat the soul to death; eat the soul; sweep the soul away from the body; shoot a spiky object at the body and the victim may die if not receiving timely rituals and treatment; put an evil egg under the armpit and the victim dies when the egg hatches, and also cause obstructed labor and death once the victim gives birth. Once punished by such supernatural forces, victims have to find and invite a worshiper who is able to cure the disease.

The worshiper first has to foretell the disease and there is one single way to do that. The worshiper takes one "sacred ginger root" and asks the patient to eat half of it. S/he then chews the other part and spit it on the patient's navel or the pain area. Worshipers say they can identify causes for the disease and effective treatment by this way. Then the worshiper and the patient's family conduct treatment witchcraft rituals. Each disease is linked to certain supernatural forces and requires specific rituals that why Ve people's treatment rituals are diverse, each has its own procedures and offering depend on the cause of the disease. Although most of them aim at asking supernatural forces to forgive the patient; "take out" or "withdraw" objects "shot" at or "magically placed" on the patient's body; "call the soul" or "force the soul" to return to the patient's body; satisfying supernatural forces by re-organizing rituals, which were previously either not held or held erroneously, in accordance with customs and tradition with appropriate offerings. Of course, these rituals require direct or indirect support from gods who taught worshippers. Following the rituals, the worshiper and patient must divide a particle of salt into halves, then both will dissolve their divided salt particle in the mouth in a hope that disease will fade away similarly. According to worshippers, medicines offered by god must be taken to cure the disease, except for diseases relating to the soul as they do not need medicines. After the patient is subject to a witchcraft ritual, s/he will receive medicines from the worshiper. Each disease requires a particular medicine, though some diseases need a combination of different medicines. These medicines are usually unprocessed or just briefly processed, like having been dried up, fried or ground. Most patients receive one witchcraft ritual but have to take medicines many times before recovery.

After conducting the ritual, the patient's family usually gives presents to the worshiper, though regulations stipulate that worshippers are not allowed to ask for offerings from the patient's

family. The present's value depends on each family's well-being and how serious the disease is. Mr. Ploong Ech – village elder from ward number 58, Dac Pree commune said, in 1997, there was a cirrhosis patient, the district's hospital had to allow the patient go home and wait for death, but a local worshipper managed to cure the disease. The patient's family offered the worshipper one cow.

Thus, Ve people believe that worshippers are able to contact gods, to minimize harms by supernatural forces and to cure diseases with support from water or lightning god. However, as we observed, it is easy to notice that in Ve villages there are people who have profound knowledge of folklore treatments. Prescriptions are made mysterious by being used in combination with witchcraft and magical invocation to raise the worshipper's image and instill confidence in patients. In fact, worshippers being good at "casting a spell" to cure diseases are genuine shamans, though treatment worship has not become a career or considered to be a way to earn a living. The question is whether the worshipper's refusal to cure certain diseases under the pretext that his/her teacher does not know how to is because the worshipper himself does not know folklore prescriptions for such diseases. If true, this phenomenon is the same as the case of ethnic people in Russia, China and Australia, where witchcraft treatment is the combination of traditional medicines with magical invocation and witchcraft (Tokarev 1964).

## 2.2. Witchcraft in production

Witchcraft in production originates from human beings' inability to cope with the natural challenges. Production to earn a living does not always progress as one wishes but depends on natural conditions beyond human control. Consequently, people feel scared and have to resort to support of supernatural forces for good weather, bumper crops, and productive livestock

breeding. Thus, magical rituals in production take root.

**Witchcraft in planting:** This form of witchcraft is usually linked with lineage and family's sacred object. Families sharing the same surnames in the village recognize a lineage's sacred object. For instance, all *Xuyen lang* families in Dac Nang village (current is Dac Pree commune), have a small green stone as "a sacred object". Lineage and family's sacred object is used to pray for bumper crop and support for "rice soul". Female house owners always store it in paddy stockpile, where the "rice soul" resides. Lineage's sacred object is not necessarily kept secret as village sacred object but stored carefully to prevent it from getting contaminated.

A family uses their sacred object twice a year. **First**, on the first seeding day, the male household chief brings the sacred object to the field, washes it carefully and scatters this used water over the field in a hope that the "rice soul" will be "healthy" and rice plants will "grow strongly". Also on the first seeding day, Ve people scatter blood around the field and on seeds to worship as mentioned earlier. **Second**, on the first harvesting day, the female household chief puts the sacred object in a back-basket and goes to the field to reap a symbolic harvest. At the place where the male household chief washed sacred object and scattered blood on seeds in the first seeding day, she takes out 8 solid grains of rice and puts them in the back-basket, implying that the rice soul has "lied" in these rice grains. Then she stores both the "rice soul" and "sacred object" in her bedroom. After harvest time, they will be brought to their home at the family's paddy stockpile. They believe that these rituals ensure a productive harvest.

They also believe that bad death persons cause floods and droughts. When heavy rains may damage crop, house owners or their wives set fire on tombs of bad death persons in the village and pray for the bad spirits to produce sunny weather and to save rice and corns. This ritual is called *sec*

*plen to*. If drought prolongs and threaten crops, people pour water on a dry gourd and place it on the tomb of a bad death person, then pray for rain. This ritual is called *plen den*.

**Witchcraft in livestock breeding and hunting:** This form of witchcraft is usually linked to the family's sacred object. Households having sacred objects are considered more fortunate than the have not. Some households have three or four different sacred objects with different functions. To have one sacred object, in dreams, the household chief meets a god or a family member who has died recently who then informs the dreamer of the sacred object. When the household chief wakes up, s/he notices a strange object in his/her hand. Then this object become the family's sacred one. These sacred objects are usually small plants with the shape of turmeric. Each plant corresponds with one's good luck offered by the god or some dead family members. For instance a blade of grass may help the family to breed many buffaloes and cows, having both *nha nao loo* and *nha nao bral* plants may help the family hunt many wild animals, *nha nao cho lo* may bring about plenty of rice and paddy. After receiving the sacred plant, the owner grows it in a secret place and just goes there to take it when necessary. They usually use the sacred object in these ways: *putting it in the back-basket while harvesting in a hope that rice field may yield more crop than previous crops; putting it in the arrow-holder to go hunting, when identifying traces of the prey, the hunter uses the sacred object to touch traces, then follows the trace in a hope to catch the prey.*

On the other hand, if one sees a creeping plant having an 8-figure loop, which they call *se cut*, s/he takes it home and stores it at *proong* where is hang head born of wild animals was hunted by family. At night, if any of the family members have a dream of rivers, streams, or beating snakes, which stand for good omens, then *se cut* is really a sacred object. If they have dreams about dead animals or go fishing, which stand for bad omens, *se cut* must be thrown away. Any

family having this sacred object will hunt many animals and grow many cattle.

Ve people believe that, if sacred objects are damaged and contaminated by other people, or the owner dies, then sacred objects lose power. They also believe that, if these sacred objects are lent to other families, their efficiency to serve the owner deteriorates in proportion to the number of borrowers. Consequently, most families having sacred objects do not want to lend or share them with others.

### 2.3. Witchcraft to inflict harms

Witchcraft to inflict harms is a religious phenomenon having existed among many ethnic groups around the world. When human beings, their families or communities face risks such as: *epidemics, high mortality rates and murder*, they believe that these incidents are caused by supernatural forces or "spell cast" by village members, or by worshiper from another community. Consequently, there are continuous suspicions and accusations, leading to constant warfare between communities. In a society where hostile and warfare between communities had once been constant due to various reasons, mostly religious ones, believing in witchcraft to inflict harms or "thinking that one is being harmed" by other people and villages are popular in Ve society. Depending on how serious the harm is. Ve's witchcraft to inflict harms is categorized into two groups: *individual and community's witchcrafts*. Individual witchcraft is mostly to settle conflicts between two persons or families, or serve a specific personal religious purpose. In most cases, only one person suffers from the witchcraft. Community witchcraft is usually linked to the usage of village's sacred object to conduct rituals and magical proceedings for settling conflict and warfare. Most members of the affected community suffer consequences, sometimes the whole villages die. However, in Ve society, both these witchcrafts aim at other communities as rules and regulations prohibit this practice within the village.

**Witchcraft to harm individuals:** Although no one was caught yet when performing witchcraft to inflict do harms, but they believe that within their community, and in other ethnic groups, there are worshippers taught by the god of lightning to harm others by: *casting a spell on food, drink and clothes; "shooting" a spiky object at the body* and the victim just feels like a light wind has passed by, even it is not windy at that moment. People are mostly harmed when they walk alone, especially in villages involved in warfare or conflict. If food or dresses are cast with spell, it is difficult for the victim to survive. If the victim is shot by a spiky object, other worshipers may use magic power to "withdraw" or "take out" this object and give medicines.

To protect oneself from being harmed by witchcraft, Ve people usually put their food and drink at the bottom of back-basket when traveling. They do not let others see, touch the food and do not share food with strangers either. Meanwhile, they bring with them sacred object capable of defending life and health. These sacred objects are mostly cap of tusk, boar canine teeth and tiger claw, which were informed by gods in dreams that these objects were god's presents. These sacred objects will be more powerful if they are crammed with medicines made by grinding fetus of armadillo, deer, pangolin, as well as dried leather of white buffaloes and dried feather of white chicken. The sacred object is then worn in the chest. People without a sacred object given by the god can produce some for themselves by putting the above mentioned medicines in a bamboo cylinder and brought it in the chest or put in a back-basket before traveling. However, self-made sacred objects are not as effective as ones given by the god. In case of sickness when traveling, they also take these medicines for treatment. They believe that these sacred objects have such effects as: *preventing the holder from being harmed by witchcrafts from others (especially when spell is cast on food or drink, the caster is backfired and suffer all consequences); minimizing cases when gods,*

*spirits or worshippers "shoot" spiky objects, causing illness, death or damaging the holder's soul; avoiding injuries and death when fighting with other villages.* In our view, apart from the belief that sacred objects are given by god, Ve people believe that tusk, boar canine teeth and tiger claw represent the most powerful, dangerous and cruel wild animals. Thus, these objects may strengthen human soul and minimize bad effects by supernatural forces. On the other hand, these medicines are probably traditional prescriptions to prevent and cure flu, then made mysterious by Ve people.

**Witchcraft inflicting harms on the community:** Information available shows that witchcraft to inflict harms on the community is popular among Ve people and mostly relates to war. Before 1954, conflicts and wars between villages in Ve region were common. Community members always believed that the hostile village had used their sacred object in rituals to cast a spell, thus the victim community was scared and did not dare to launch a war. A victim community may face an epidemic and massive death, thus losing strength and become conquered.

According to the elderly, not only Ve people but also most ethnic villages in Truong Son region have at least one sacred object for community use. The usage and power of this sacred object differ from village to the other. For an object to become sacred, the village chief must be informed by gods in dreams about the place where a sacred object is stored, its usage and effects. Then the village chief informs house owners about the event and organizes a team to visit the place as previously told by the god. During the interval between the informant's dream and the returning of this fact-finding team, if many more village members have dreams similar to the chief's, this object is officially recognized as the community's sacred one. The sacred object must stay intact and hidden secretly where the god placed it, without letting people from other villages know about it. They believe

that if the sacred object is damaged or contaminated, it will not only lose power but also punish the owner village. Therefore, around the place where the sacred object is stored, activities such as: *production, woodcutting and discharges of dirty things are absolutely forbidden*. That is the reason why village people must keep the secret to prevent other villages from undermining the power of their sacred object. They also believe that it is no use if people from other villages steal their sacred object without knowing how to use it.

Only men aged above 18 (qualified as soldiers) are allowed to know the community sacred object's storage and relating rituals. Women and members under 18 years of age are not allowed to know about or participate in rituals relating to the village's sacred object. According to Ve people's explanation, women may get married to men from other villages and are likely to reveal their village's secret. Members under 18 years of age are not able to keep secret and may tell people from other villages about the sacred object. In addition, they may be curious and go to see the sacred object, violating rules, thus making the secret object lose power and punish the whole village. As a result, since early childhood, Ve children are told by family and community not to reveal the secret or discuss about the sacred object and must respect it. However, we can explain the phenomenon in another way. Originally, these sacred objects are not really sacred, but made mysterious to create a confidence in the sacred object's support and protection for village people and soldiers. On the other hand, other villages may be scared and avoid launching wars to take revenge on the village "having sacred object". With such a purpose, they turn an untrue story into a mystery by preventing women and children from knowing about it, as these people may reveal the village's secret.

Our findings in several Ve villages show that the community's sacred objects are usually stones

or field of stones with special shapes or beautiful colors. Besides the major function of serving war and killing each other, some sacred objects could be used to pray for rain. Ve people believe that community's sacred objects help the village people to avoid robbery or murder carried out by other villages, to fight and defeat enemies easily and able to "cast a spell" to harm enemies. For example, Dac Nang village has a sacred stone (*hmo dien*). Before fighting with another village, the commander and soldiers go to the sacred object storage, slaughtered a pig and paint its blood on the stone, then praying for its support to gain victory and survive in battles. Then all troops shout three times. If there was a small white stone dissembling from the sacred stone, it implied the sacred object's full support and the troops would prepare to fight. If no white stone ran out, fighting with the other village should be delayed, as the sacred object did not allow the troops to fight, otherwise, they would lose and be killed. After gaining support from the sacred object, soldiers washed the sacred object with water, then poured this water into bamboo jar and brought it with them during the fight. It was believed that this would help them win and save their lives. After the victory, and before returning to their home village, the soldiers poured this water in the upstream river of the defeated village in a hope that the later would use water from the washed sacred object, thus would not take revenge or could be threatened on their way to fight back and had to retreat.

After studying the case of a community's sacred objects and their usage, we assume that this is a case of using witchcraft to inflict harms by poison? In all villages, water used in washing their sacred objects is poured in water sources for daily use, after that people bathing by or drinking this water are poisoned and get sick. It is very likely that this poison is similar to that used to catch fish in streams and rivers, but due

to constant flow, the poison is diluted and cannot be fatal. In our view, the water used to wash sacred objects could be poisonous with various degrees of toxic substances. Ve people then make this water become mysterious to scare the victim village and prevent their revengeful action?

### 3. ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

- Religious beliefs are a product of the people, originating from their demand in daily life. In Ve's underdeveloped society, people frequently feel weak once dealing with nature, and incapable when involved in more diverse and complicated social relations, thus they usually rely on religious beliefs (both religious belief and behaviors). They pray to gods and other supernatural forces to help them overcome difficulties in daily life such as illness, natural calamities, and offer them strength to defeat enemies as well as to pray for support to individuals and the community's development.

- Religious beliefs bring about positive impact on human's ethical life. For Ve people, religious beliefs serve as a doctrine encouraging people to conduct good behavior towards not only each other but also the surroundings. People who use their power, assets and witchcraft to harm others or violate the community's rules and regulations, to cut woods and destroy forest, to slaughter animals unreasonably, are considered bad and deserve punishment. As a matter of fact, in both Ve and other ethnic communities, thanks to religious beliefs, many social order and doctrine have been ensured. Another hand, in their society, due to the lack of written rules and regulations, religious beliefs and their obligations have contributed to the adjustment and management of relations within the community, among members of different communities, and relations between different communities as well as human beings and nature.

- Religious beliefs have contributed to the foundation and development of human psychology and characters, reflecting the genuine economic, cultural and social life of Ve people in the past and at present. For example, religious beliefs are the symbol of community's cohesion: a Ve community is consolidated by a common religious belief, by community or individual's religious rituals or customs, believed to be stated by the god. This community cohesion regarding religious beliefs is mirrored in both angles: *common fate and common sentiment* (Ngo Duc Thinh 2001). In brief, common fate means community members are closely related, thus they all share similar responsibilities and obligations concerning the community's survival and development. Based on daily experience, community members are aware that each individual should not commit evils nor offend gods, consequently making the whole village suffer punishments. At the same time, when necessary, all community members join efforts to attack enemies, to realize or protect the community's religious beliefs. Common fate results in common sentiment. i.e. the harmony among community members in religious rituals, whether they are rituals of the community or individuals to sanction or celebrate good luck. Common fate and common sentiment result in the foundation of common rituals for the whole community and the active participation of village members in an individual's ritual. When participating in religious rituals, people develop respect, admiration, "sympathy" and believe that the gods are present with them. As a result, members are more closely tied thanks to deeper mutual understanding. They also respect gods and feel equal in the eyes of gods.

- Religious beliefs are an important part of culture and serve as an environment to formulate, gather and preserve numerous cultural values. Through religious activities, part of the ethnic knowledge is maintained, preserved, created and passed on to the next generations, within and between communities... Many researchers have

discussed the value building and anti-value building aspects of religious belief. As far as value building is concerned, S.A. Tokarev 1994 and later, a group of researchers from the Institute of Folklore Culture Research (Ngo Duc Thinh 2001) made clear that: *social relations lie at the center of religion*. Through the symbol of gods, religion aims to formulate behaviors among humans themselves and between humans and their surroundings. Religious beliefs gather people together and create cohesion. Everyone is equal in the eyes of gods. Whether the gods support human beings or not depend on the latter's sincerity and transparency. On the other hand, religious beliefs existed in the society for long has gradually formulated stagnant and inactive attitudes, like just waiting for supernatural support with belief in chances. This undermines confidence in self-ability and human capability... Religious beliefs are able to gather people of the same religious beliefs and separate people of different beliefs. This feature may go to the extreme when one only recognizes his/her religious community and rejects other religions, labeling them as "heretic". In many cases, this feature is misused to serve purposes of the state or certain forces, leading to religious wars. Among Ve people, there used to be constant wars causing great human and property losses, and deteriorating relations between local communities. The main reason usually originated from religious beliefs or behaviors like belief of blood and blood hunting custom.

#### **4. THE DIRECTION OF CHANGE IN VE PEOPLE'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

Since 1945, changes in political and social regimes, the end of inter-village wars and community cohesion in the resistance wars against the French and the US, outcomes of the State's policies, programs and projects in regional social economic and cultural development as well as in security and national defense, better access and opportunities to learn from other ethnic groups and various sources of information, have

all brought about changes in Ve people's spiritual and material life, including their religious belief. These changes are in the following direction:

- Their religious beliefs have become both more simplified and complicated than previously. Most beliefs and traditional religious activities have been maintained, though some rituals have no longer existed or been simplified. For instance, the belief in totem and witchcraft have deteriorated, especially among the youth; beliefs and rituals relating to war and outdated customs unsuitable to the current situation have been abandoned absolutely such as: hunting human blood for offerings and teeth sawing. Community's seasonal rituals for tranquility do not require human blood offerings and whole-village participation as in the past. However, disease treatment and funerals have become more complicated and last for more days with more animals slaughtered and complex worshipping proceedings created by worshipers or copied from the Ka tu and Kinh ethnic groups. Disagreements between worshippers who practice disease treatment and people who left their home village and returned have widened, as the latter are more confident in modern medicine than treatment worshipping.

- Their religious beliefs have become more mixed. In the process of practicing and absorbing religious belief values, they have maintained their traditional characters and taken up new ones from other ethnic groups, which Ve people know and consider as "reasonable". However, many new characters have not been subjected to sufficient evaluation. Thus, there have been new "positive" characters like: formation of habits to worship ancestors, during New Year festival some families clean ancestors' tombs and burn incense - which used to be neglected. On the other hand, negative phenomena are unavoidable, such as learning prays to call or capture soul from the Ka tu people, or some people returning to their home village tend to consider the Kinh's culture as a standard to follow, even in religious practices.

- In fact, these changes develop in both directions: *positive and negative*. Several complicated and troublesome rituals in production has been lifted or faded away. The most outstanding and major changes are in Ve people's religious life. The removal of obsolete and burdening habits and customs such as: "blood hunting" and "head returning"; witchcraft to inflict harms; families with bad death must leave all assets move to live in forest for 6 months or one year, or even move to another village; pregnant women and those give birth in violation of rules and regulations are forced to live in forest and sever all ties with family; has all freed up people from unreasonable and strict obligations, thus facilitating socio-economic development. Besides positive impacts noted earlier, there are "new phenomenon" worth paying attention to. In funerals and worships for treatment, there is a belief that a lot of cattle should be slaughtered for offerings and that numerous rituals and big meals should be offered as a token of wholehearted behavior. Common house and many community religious practice reflecting Ve people's cultural identities have gradually lost their social roles and functions. Especially since 1996, after "doi moi - renovation" 10 years as the market economy has penetrated Ve community, its cohesion and mutual support and *la lanh dum la rach* (the have support the have not) between village families and members have gradually faded away, and have been replaced by self-reliance without concerns for others.

We could say that in the on-going development, their religious beliefs have faced challenges. Their ethnic culture, including religious belief, has been affected and modified in the direction of absorbing new cultural characteristics, especially from the Kinh people. Nevertheless, the point is whether all the "new characteristics" that they have absorbed will fully match their life.

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