

# The art of ethnic minorities' traditional beliefs in Northwest region of Vietnam

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.22.3.16>

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## ABSTRACT

*Vietnamese culture is a culture unified in diversity from the cultures of 54 ethnic groups. The traditional religious culture of ethnic minorities is an integral part of ethnic culture and of Vietnamese culture in general. Northwest Vietnam is an area where many ethnic minorities reside with diverse and rich religious lives. Each type of traditional belief carries within it cultural values, ethics, customs, and artistic values imbued with ethnic identity. Along with the practice of traditional beliefs, the ethnic minorities in this area have preserved many unique traditional beliefs' art forms, contributing to the distinct cultural nuances of each ethnic group and the diversity of Vietnamese culture. By ways of analysis and compilation, this article focuses on identifying the appearance and characteristics of some art forms of traditional beliefs, as well as some basic values and rolls of the art of traditional beliefs in spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Northwest Vietnam today.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Art, traditional beliefs, ethnic minorities, Northwest, Vietnam.*

## Introduction

Vietnamese culture is a unified and diverse culture created from the cultures of 54 ethnic groups. The traditional religious culture of ethnic minorities is an integral part of the ethnic culture in particular and of the national culture in general. Surviving and developing in an organic relationship with the belief in the supernatural, religious culture has entered the daily life of each ethnic minority community in the mountainous Northwest of Vietnam, contributing to the distinct culture in each ethnic group and the diversity of Vietnamese culture. So far there have been many studies on different aspects of religious culture and various religious art forms of ethnic minorities in the northwestern mountainous provinces of Vietnam.

In *Introduction to Vietnamese Culture*, the late professor Tran Quoc Vuong and his colleagues studied the cultural and religious characteristics of each region in Vietnam. According to the authors, the religious culture of ethnic minorities in the mountainous northwest region of Vietnam has showed the "people's belief in the god of life and death, heaven and earth, and ancestors. Their gods are diverse, sometimes as many as mountain god, river god, and earth god. There is also the king, the *Giang Then*, the sense of community is strengthened through worshipping the god of life and death of the village. The sense of family and ancestry is strengthened through ancestor worship. Each family has an ancestral altar placed in the most solemn position in the house. In addition, in the house they also worship the king of the kitchen." [1] The authors said that the traditional religious culture of the people here is also expressed through the system

of shrines, pagodas, writings of some ethnic minorities, folklore works such as proverbs, folktales, sayings, riddles, traditional nursery rhymes, folk songs written on a rather elaborate canvas, folk festivals. Regarding some notable festivals of several ethnic minority communities in the mountainous Northern region, the authors assessed: "The festivals of the Tay - Nung people are very rich. The festival of the whole community is the *Long Tong* festival (To-The-Field festival), which takes place in two parts: the *Le* (ritual/rite) and the *Hoi* (festival). The main ritual is the procession of shrine gods and farming gods to the festival venue in the field. A grand feast is held right here. The *Hoi* (festival) part is traditional games such as *Danh quay* (spinning tops), *Danh yen* (traditional shuttlecock), *Tung con* (shuttle ball tossing), magic tricks etc." [2]

Lan Anh, author of the article *Worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the mountainous Northern region*, has outlined the religious art of worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region: "Worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous region are mostly religious artworks, associated with Buddhism or Taoism, however, worship paintings still bear the artistic features of each ethnic group, formed from their specific cultural origin and customs. Each ethnic group also has their own line of worship paintings with different characteristics from strokes, colors to the number of paintings in each set. In the mountainous Northern region, ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, Dao, Cao Lan, and San Diu all have the custom of using worshipping pictures in rites and funeral ceremonies. Particularly the Tay and Dao are two ethnic groups possessing many worship paintings. Worship paintings of mountainous region are present in funerals, expressing the wishes of the deceased's family to pray for the departed soul to escape from hell and reach Nirvana or the Immortal realm." [3] The *The unified-but-diverse culture of Vietnamese ethnic groups*, by Nong Quoc Chan and Huynh Khai Vinh, mentioned the popularity and specificity of religious beliefs in the spiritual life of Vietnamese ethnic groups. At the same time, the authors also analyzed several types of religious art forms shown in some traditional festivals of ethnic minority communities in mountainous provinces in the Northwest region of Vietnam: "The festival consists of two part: the *Le* (ritual/rite) part, performed by the shaman, is ritualistic, with a sacred and solemn purpose in order to convey a belief that the gods will bless the whole community; The *Hoi* (festival) part includes many folk games that everyone actively and happily participates in". [4] In which, "The Tay and Nung people have *Long tong* festival. Thai people have *Xen Ban*, *Xen Muong* festivals with *Nem con* (shuttle ball throwing), dancing in groups. People in the Northwest highlands (Hmong, Dao) have *Gau Tao*, *Nao Xong*, *Nhiang cham dao* festivals with the purpose of praying, taking an oath to protect the forest and practicing martial arts." [5]

In addition, researchers are also interested in in-depth research on the traditional beliefs of each ethnic minority community living in the mountainous provinces of Northwestern Vietnam to identify the unique cultural identity of each community here. In research papers, the authors have also pointed out the forms of religious art used by the people here when practicing traditional beliefs. In *The Treasure Tree in Muong mythology and totems in the beliefs of some ethnic groups in our country*, the author Phan Huu Dat has studied the tree-worshipping ritual in the daily life of ethnic minorities in the mountainous Northern region of Vietnam. [6] The author Vuong Duy Quang in *The spiritual culture of the Hmong in traditional and modern Vietnam* has clarified the economic, cultural and social characteristics of the Hmong. The author also partly mentioned the rituals in births, marriages, funerals of the Hmong in Vietnam [7] The author Vuong Anh in *Mo and the Muong epic* has deeply researched on the Muong's epic and the traditional ceremonial songs used in funeral rites containing many traditional cultural values of the nation. [8] In *Culture of ethnic groups in the Northwest region of Vietnam*, the authors mentioned cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups in

the Northwest region, pointed out the differences in the culture of some ethnic groups, and analyzed in depth the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region of Vietnam. [9] The author Nguyen Thi Thanh Nga, in the article *Basic issues of ethnic groups in the Northwest of Vietnam*, mentioned the characteristics of material culture and spiritual culture of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region of Vietnam. In which, the author emphasized the cultural and spiritual characteristics of some ethnic minority communities here: "Most of the ethnic minorities living in the Northwest region follow polytheistic beliefs and a concept that the universe around man is made up of many layers of the world. The Hmong and Dao believe that the world is made up of heaven, earth, water, and underground. Thai people believe that heaven alone is composed of three world layers." [10]

Overall, many studies have analyzed and clarified the diversity and richness of traditional religious life and the uniqueness of traditional religious culture of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region. By inheriting the study results of previous researchers, and means of analytical and compilation methods, this article focuses on clarifying the appearance and features of some traditional religious art forms and their role in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in Northwest Vietnam today.

## **Research Results**

### **Overview of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region**

Northwest Vietnam is the mountainous western region of Northern Vietnam, including the provinces of Hoa Binh, Son La, Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Lao Cai and Yen Bai. This is the living area of more than 20 different ethnic communities such as Kinh, Thai, Muong, Hmong, Tay, Nung, Dao, Kho Mu, Cong, La Ha, La Hu, Mang, etc. The whole region has an area of 5.64 million hectares and 4,690,600 people. [11] The Northwest region has a very complex topography, composed of medium and high mountain ranges, along the Northwest - Southeast direction. This is the place with the highest, most fragmented, and most dangerous terrain in Vietnam. The climate of the Northwest region is tropical with two distinct seasons: hot and humid summer with lots of rain, and cold, dry winter with little rain. The long dry season combined with the hot dry West wind makes it difficult for crop and livestock cultivation. In December to January, there are frequent hoarfrost and ice, at the beginning of the rainy season there are often whirlwinds, hail and mountain floods, flash floods causing abnormal destruction to land, production, and life.

The Northwest region is home to 25 ethnic groups belonging to 3 out of 4 language families in Vietnam, including:

*The Austroasiatic language family:* Viet - Muong group has 2 ethnic groups: Viet (Kinh) and Muong; Mon - Khmer group has 4 ethnic groups: Kho Mu, Xinh Mun, Mang, Khang; Hmong - Dao group has 2 ethnic groups: Hmong and Dao.

*The Thai-Kadai language family:* Thai group has 8 ethnic groups: Tay, Thai, Nung, San Chay, Giay, Lao, Lu, Bo Y; Ka Dai group has two ethnic groups: La Chi and La Ha.

*The Sino-Tibetan language family:* Sino group has 1 ethnic group: Hoa; Tibetan - Burmese group has 6 ethnic groups: Ha Nhi, Phu La, La Hu, Lo Lo, Cong, and Si La.

The Northwest region forms three distinct landscapes: The low valley is home to ethnic groups under the Vietnamese - Muong, Thai - Kadai language groups. The mountain slopes are inhabited by ethnic groups under the Mon-Khmer language group and the high mountain ranges are inhabited by ethnic groups under the Hmong - Dao, Tibetan - Burmese language groups. Living in the same natural conditions, the ethnic groups here have formed religious cultural traditions with many similarities. However,

due to the profound influence of ethnic and historical factors in the process of adapting to the environment, survival, and development, so each ethnic group has its own unique cultural and religious identity.

The ethnic minority people in the Northwest region have a rich and diverse spiritual and religious life. Most ethnic groups follow polytheistic beliefs, worshiping many different deities. Notable traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northwest can be mentioned such as:

### **Ancestor Worship**

Ancestor worship is a traditional belief and practice that plays an important role in the spiritual life of many ethnic communities around the world. [11] In Vietnam, ancestor worship is popular and kept in many different ethnic communities such as Thai, Muong, Hmong, Tay, Nung, etc. [12]

#### *Beliefs related to the community*

Ethnic minorities in the Northwest region, in addition to worshiping ancestors, also have some common beliefs of the community such as: village ghost worship, etc.

The Thai people believe that the *Phi Ban*, *Phi Muong* (the Ghosts of the Village) are a unity of souls of all members of the community residing in the *Ban* or *Muong* (village). In which, the grand soul is the soul of the first person who founded the village. Besides, Thai people believe that there are still many other supernatural forces coexisting within the village such as *Ma chu at* (landowner ghost), *Ma chu nuoc* (water owner ghost), etc. Therefore, *Phi Ban*, *Phi Muong* are the soul of the village, the gods who look after and protect human life. These are also the guardians of the mountains, forests, crops, and the plants and animals living in the area. (cam, 1978, p.386-402) Therefore, each village of Thai people always has a shrine to worship the gods. The shrine of the Ghosts of the Village is always built next to a forest at the entrance of the village.

Beliefs related to the Muong community are also very diverse and rich. [13] The Muong people worship *Quoc Mau Vua Ba*, the god of Tan Vien Mountain, the earth god, the village god, etc. In which, *Quoc Mau Vua Ba* is the god that is worshiped and placed in the most dignified position in the public temples in many Muong localities. *Quoc Mau Vua Ba*, is actually the *Ba chua Thuong Ngan* (the mother of the mountains). The God of Tan Vien Mountain is respectfully called by the Muong as *Bua Thø*, *Pua Ba Vi* (the king of Ba Vi Mountain). Every year, the Muong people hold a festival to worship the God of Tan Vien Mountain with many special rituals. In addition, in each different locality, the Muong people have different gods who are honored as the village guardian.

In the belief of the Tay people, the earth god is the common deity of the village. The Tay people have many ways of calling different village gods such as: *Muong Pha Han*, *Man Phia Tien*, Fairy Princess *Ngoc Can*, etc. These gods are the protectors of the village, crops etc. Therefore, the Tay people worship community deities such as *Tho Cong*, *Coc Ban*, *Tho Dia* (The Earth Gods), and worship the regional gods.

The Nung also worships the earth gods, the kitchen god, the village guardian, who are the community gods of the whole village. For the earth god, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, families often bring offerings for the rite at common worship places of the whole community. For village guardian worshiping, almost every locality with many Nung people also has a place of worship, but not necessarily every village has a shrine. Sometimes a few neighboring villages have a shared community hall, every year in the spring, families in the villages gather to perform rites and ceremonies for the village guardian.

In the religious life of the Dao, *Ban Ho* is a legendary figure mentioned in folk tales, myths, poetry-based stories and is considered the ancestor of the Dao people.

Therefore, the Dao have the belief of worshipping *Ban Ho* or *Ban Vuong* (The *Ban* King) in each family and clan and is worshiped together in the community shrines.

### ***Beliefs related to the nature***

Currently, people of ethnic minorities in the Northwest still worship a lot of natural phenomena. With the concept of "*van vat huu linh*" (animism), people here believe that all things and phenomena in nature have its own Phi (ghost). Therefore, ethnic groups have many worshipping beliefs related to nature such as: Thai people have beliefs in worshipping *Phi chau đin* (landowner ghost), *Phi hay* (crop ghost), *Phi na* (field ghost), *Phi đong heo* (graveyard ghost), *Phi đon*, *Phi co ba* (banyan tree ghost), *Phi nguoc* (sea serpent ghost), *Phi huoi* (stream ghost), etc. Muong people worship many natural phenomena such as worshipping the Earth god, the Stone god, the Fruit god, the Tree god. The Muong people believe that the land has its own governing god and the trees that are worshiped as sacred objects by the Muong are the *Si* tree (*Ficus microcarpa*), the *Chu Đong* tree (the Treasure Tree), the Banyan tree, the Cotton tree (*bombax ceiba*), etc. In *Cơm mới* (new rice) festivals, the Muong have the custom of worshipping upland rice. People here believe that the rice plant also has a soul/spirit, and by praying hard, the mother rice will call the spirits of the young rice to return and proliferate, helping the life of Muong people.

### ***Beliefs related to production***

The ethnic minorities in the Northwest region make their living by farming and animal husbandry, so the forms of beliefs related to agricultural production are present in the religious and spiritual life of the ethnic groups here.

The Muong people mainly participate in wet rice agriculture, so they have formed a system of religious rituals related to crops according to the growth cycle of the rice plant such as: Worshipping the agricultural god King Dol, the belief in *Via lua* (rice spirit) etc.

The Thai, the Tay, the Nung, the Dao, the San Chi, the Giay, etc. all believe that everything has a soul, and that there are gods supporting agricultural production. Every year, before the production season in the spring, the people of the ethnic minorities in the Northwest region conduct to-the-field rituals, also known as the *Long Tong* festival, the harvest festival to ask the gods to bless them a favorable and bountiful crop, all things prosperous and flourishing.

The Ha Nhi people in some localities in the mountainous Northern area have a harvest festival somewhere in June near the end of summer to ask Heaven, Earth, the Mountain God, and the Forest God to bless good crops, etc.

Some ethnic groups such as the Thai and the Lo Lo people also have rituals to pray for rain in drought years to ask the gods to bless favorable weather, bountiful crops, and hope for a fulfilled life for the people etc.

### ***Beliefs related to the life cycle***

Life cycle rituals are rites expressing beliefs related to the person from birth to death. Life cycle rituals are rites that families, clans, and communities perform for each person through each stage: The birth stage has taboos before and during pregnancy, the rituals before, during, after birth and various rites until adulthood; The adult stage also has ceremonies marking the coming of age and marriage ceremonies; The death stage includes rites for the dead, rites during and after funeral. The ethnic minorities in the

Northwest region have a very diverse and rich system of life cycle rituals with certain taboos and rites revolving around important milestones in the cycle of a person's life.

### **Notable traditional religious art forms of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region**

For a long time, ethnic minorities in the Northwest region have lived on the high mountainslopes, with fresh streams nearby, which have contributed to the formation of folk beliefs, customs and practices expressing the concept of human life and profound human values. Contributing to the uniqueness of all traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region is the diversity and abundance of belief art forms. In particular, the diversity and abundance of transmission forms and methods of several belief arts such as traditional performance, literature, and worship paintings have contributed to the transmission of spiritual life and traditional belief values in the cultural life of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region.

#### ***Traditional performance***

Ethnic minorities in the Northwest region have diverse and rich arts of traditional performance and are expressed in rituals, wedding ceremonies, funerals, festivals, and New Year etc.

In rituals, the ritual oration is often recited or sung by the *Mo* masters and shamans. This art is demonstrated in *Mo* funeral nights of the Thai and Muong people. Singing *Mo* is a form of folk song singing of the Thai and Muong people associated with rituals, festivals, funerals, etc. It is not only the prayers to the gods, peace for the souls of the deceased but also the songs about the history of the universe, the country, the people, the formation of the community, and moral and ethical advice in life.

Traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities are present and associated with all aspects of people's lives. Rites are not only in funerals, but also in weddings or other occasions to celebrate new house, celebrate the elderly, celebrate new rice, people all practice rites with different arts of traditional performance. In the traditional weddings of ethnic minorities in the Northwest region, the ceremony has many folk songs characterized with ethnic cultural identity. Folk songs of the Thai are songs about love between people, the community, nature, the homeland, and the spiritual realm. In weddings of the Thai, there are singings throughout such as singing for the bride, singing for the soul of the bride and groom, singing for receiving possesty, singing for giving possesty, etc. In weddings of the Hmong, there are songs asking to open the gate, singing for offering possesty, singing for taking the bride etc. In weddings of the Tay, there are greeting songs, betel invitation songs, thank-you songs, singing for laying mats, singing to the gods about the new bride and groom.

During the holidays, New Year's Day, festivals and important events of ethnic minorities here, the worshiping ritual of the gods often has ritual oration, traditional music (*Khen* (panpipe), drums, gongs etc.); In addition, the festival always has folk games and fun traditional performances, singing and dancing. Thai people has folk-song responsive singing in community activities, singing to find friends and the *Xoe* dance. The *Xoe* dance of the Thai people shows the iron-solid solidarity of the community. Everyone participating in the *Xoe* dance is hand in hand, their feet rhythmically followed the sound of gongs, drums and sings folk songs of the community.

In religious rituals of the Dao people such as *Tet nhay* ritual (Dance Festival), *Lap Tich* ceremony (maturity ceremony), *Thanh Minh* festival (Grave-Visiting festival), full moon of January, July, etc., the Dao people perform a special *Mua chuong* (bell dance).



*Mua chuong* is a traditional dance involving 6 or more people and the more people participating in the dance, the more fun it will be. The bell dancer holds the bell to lead the beat while singing ancient songs recounting the process of living on the new land, getting married, giving birth to children in each family. In particular, the *Múa chuong* in the *Tet nhay* festival is a thanksgiving ceremony for ancestors and *Ban Vuong* who have protected the life of families and clans and praying for the ancestors to continue to protect family members and clans to be healthy, prosperous in business, blessing all people in the village to have a happy and prosperous life. In addition, the Dao people also have a *Mua rua* (turtle dance), which is a dance that describes the movements of catching softshell turtles in rituals to thank the gods, the heaven and earth to have saved the Dao people to live in peace, earn a living and do business on new land and pray to the gods to bless everyone in the village with a peaceful, happy life and bountiful crops. In festivals and cultural activities of the community, the Hmong have panpipe dance, flute, lip lute, etc.

Worshiping rites and festivals of the Hmong are never without the sound of the *Khen* (panpipe). The Hmong's panpipe shows their thoughts and feelings for friends, community, nature, mountains and to pay respects to supernatural beings, such as village ghosts, house ghosts, or spirits of the deceased.

The Kho Mu people have *Tom* songs that vividly reflect their spiritual life. When celebrating a wedding, the Kho Mu people have a song called *Tom Đuong Kmun*. When building home, they have a song called *Tom O Grang My*. When boys and girls go to the fields, work in the fields, or go to the forest, or attend a festival in the village, they have a song called *Tom Can Cho*. The Kho Mu people also have dances that recreate activities in daily life such as: *Mua ca luon* (gliding fish dance), gong dance combined with bamboo tubes, *Danh dao* (pitch-and-toss) dance, *Mua sap* (bamboo dance), *Mua khan* (towel dance), *Mua choc lo tra hat* (seeding dance), waist dance, dance in a circle, and sing songs such as love-exchange singing, etc. In religious ceremonies, dances combined with costumes and music have created unique and characteristic performances, sending thoughts and feelings to the supernatural beings and pray to the gods for a healthy, peaceful life, with favorable weather and a bountiful harvest. Through dances, the Kho Mu people encourage each other to overcome difficulties, work hard in production, express their aspiration for love, solidarity, and community cohesion.

Ceremonial dance is a characteristic traditional performance art of traditional beliefs of ethnic minorities. This is a type of dance to offer possession to the gods, give thanks to them or through the dance the shamans can reach out-of-body state to communicate with gods or evil spirits.

In the life of the Muong, *Mo* is a type of traditional performance conducted in funerals, religious ceremonies, and life cycle rituals. *Mo Muong* expresses the concept of human life, the process of world perception, reflecting the worldview and cosmology of the Muong. In the practice of funeral rituals, the Muong people often have *Mo* songs and *Mo* dances (funeral dances) overseen by a *Mo* Master for the descendants of the family to repay their gratitude to their parents and relatives for the last time and the preparation for the dead to go to the realm of *Muong ma*. Besides, in the rituals of exorcism and healing for the sick, the Muong also have the *Moi* dance. In the ritual practice of *Moi*, the music and dance of the *Moi* practitioner and the *Mo* Master are very important. The *Moi* dance is also used by Muong people in many festivals to express their aspirations and dreams for a free, prosperous, and happy life and to praise couple love between the Muong people. In New Year's festivals and agricultural rituals to pray for a new year of luck, favorable weather and good harvest, Muong people often practice *Sac Bua* singing and dancing (New Year's Dance). *Sac Bua* dance is a folk performing art form in *Sac Bua* Festival. This type of collective performance of the Muong is associated with ritual

activities, greeting New Year, warding off evil spirits, seeing off the old and welcoming the new and wishing for good things in life. This type of traditional performance is a community ritual inherited, distilled, and transmitted through many generations, preserving the order and strict structure of ritual, traditional performance and meaning of this traditional belief art form.

According to the concept of the Tay and Nung people, when people are sick, they need to be treated with medicine and combined with worshiping rituals. The Tay and Nung people invite *Then* and *Phui* masters to their home to treat the sick in the family with spiritual therapy. In the process of organizing the ritual of worshiping and curing the sick, the Tay and Nung have *Then* songs and *Then* dances. *Then* songs and dances are used by the Tay, the Nung, and the Thai people in worshiping ritual of treating diseases, ritual of relieving somebody of his run of bad luck, ritual of praying for bountiful crops, *Cap sac* ritual (maturity ritual), Tet greeting ritual, etc. and performed by *Then* masters. For the Tay, Nung, and Thai people, the *Then* ritual is a spiritual rite that connects people with gods. Depending on the purpose of the prayer, the *Then* masters will wear vestments, present offerings, pray and use *Then* songs in their ethnic languages and different *Then* dances. The *Then* master is the creator of both lyrics and melodies of *Then* songs. When performing rituals, then singers and dancers use musical instruments such as gourd lute to replace words that they wish to say, express their feelings, use music shakers, fans, yin and yang cards, swords, etc. These instruments are considered to be the bridge between people and the spiritual world. People here transmit *Then* songs by word of mouth, *Then* dances are transmitted through the practice of *Then* ritual. There are some typical types of *Then* singing and *Then* dancing of the Tay, Nung and Thai people such as: *Then* dancing for good luck, *Then* dancing for divination, *Then* dancing to send off the dead, *Then* dancing to pray for rain, *Then* dancing to bless, *Then* dancing to recognize maturity to *Then* practitioner, etc.

During funerals and death anniversary of the Hmong, the host often invites reputable, knowledgeable and well-known *Khen* (panpipe) masters to play the *Khen* as a shaman and all ceremonies are performed through the sound of the *Khen*. Depending on the time of the different funeral, *Khen* masters play different songs suitable for each situation. Each *Khen* playing session usually lasts from 15 minutes to 30 minutes. The Hmong people believe that in the funeral, if there is no sound of the *Khen*, the soul of the dead cannot return to their ancestors. During the funeral, when the drum master and the *Khen* master dance and play the *Khen* around the coffin, the people attending the funeral also dance along. The Hmong's death anniversary takes place 13 days after the funeral and the *Khen* master is the one who presides over the death anniversary. At the beginning of the death anniversary, the *Khen* master plays the *Khen* around the house and goes out into the alley. The *Khen* master plays the *Khen* while having the movements of stooping, kneeling to play the *Khen*, etc., which means inviting the soul of the deceased to the family to celebrate the anniversary. Then, the *Khen* master kneels in front of the altar and plays the *Khen* to express the family's grief and mourning for the deceased.

The *Cap Sac* ritual (maturity ritual) is an important rite in the life cycle rituals of the Dao people. The *Cap Sac* ritual is an important rite to recognize the maturity of a Dao man. When performing the ritual, the shamans must perform many prayers, *Cap Sac* dances (maturity ritual dance for men) and do magic gestures according to the *Cap Sac* book. Through the prayers and folktales read by the shamans, and the dances and reciprocal singing performed in the *Cap Sac* ritual, it reflects the rich spiritual life and beliefs of the Dao people, helping them to have more spiritual strength to overcome difficulties in life, love and respect everyone, always do good deeds and look forward to good things in the future. In the *Tet nhay* ritual (Dance Festival), the Dao have *Tet nhay*



dances (the ritual dance to worship *Ban Vuong* - the primitive ancestor of the Dao ethnic group). During the *Tet nhay* ritual, the shamans together with a group of dancers, hold flag, drum, *Chieng* (gongs), *Sap Seng* (cymbals), etc., dance in a circular dance, then dance with swords, knives, ring dance, etc. The dances are unique and are performed continuously, showing the ingenuity and sophistication of the performer in the ritual.

In the religious activities of ethnic minorities in the Northwest mountainous provinces, there are musical instruments. The musical instruments of ethnic minorities here include: *Khen* (panpipe), flute, drum, beat, *Cong chieng* (gongs), *Tu Va* (horn), hand shaker, etc. Music plays an important role in rites to gods, weddings, funerals, and festivals of ethnic minorities in the Northwest.

### Literature

Folklore works serving religious rituals of ethnic minorities are very rich such as: myths, legends, fairy tales, poetry-based stories, proverbs; poems, folksongs, prayers, funeral orations, system of *Mo* songs, etc.

The Thai people have their own script, so in the folklore treasures of the Thai people, there are treasures of myths, fairy tales, folk tales, legends, poetry-based stories, etc. In which, there are a system of literary works, books on history and society, books on customary law, etc of the Thai people. The folk works have high cultural value, contain many profound human values and are the pride of the Thai people such as: poetry-based story *Xong chu xon xao* (Farewell to the lover) consists of 1846 verses, stories *Luu Hong and Ms. Ngam*, *Collection of An stories*, etc. Besides, the ritual folk songs of the Thai people are also very rich and diverse such as: Agricultural ritual folk songs (praying for bountiful crops, harvest festival, etc.), wedding ritual folk songs, funeral rituals folk songs, spirit ritual folk songs, longevity wishing ceremony, housewarming ceremony, etc. For a long time, the Mo masters transformed folk songs into ritual songs to serve the people's traditional religious activities. The ritual folk songs of the Thai people are valuable such as: *Rowing boat*, *Cultivation song*, *Sowing song*, *Weeding song*, *Bird chasing song*, *Weaving song*, *Spinning song*,...

The Muong people have *Mo* songs, which is a collection of rhyming poems performed on the nights of mourning *Mo*, *Via* (spirit) praying *Mo*, etc. The *Mo* songs of the Muong are divided into chapters, acts (also known as *Cat Mo* or *roong Mo*). Each chapter of the *Mo* song has a different theme and content used in each ritual item. *Mo Muong* includes *Mo Ma* (Ghost Mo), *Mo Ma Nha* (House Ghost Mo) (prayer), *Mo vai* (venerating Mo), etc. Some *Mo Muong* sets have a capacity of up to tens of thousands of verses with many works such as: The Birth of the Earth and Water, *Mo* of thousand surnames, *Mo* to accept surnames, etc. House Ghost *Mo* includes a system of worshipping songs. *Mo vai* has thousands of verses (singing songs to pray for soul and spirit. *Mo Muong* is considered as a folk encyclopedia of the Muong people, created by the Muong people to express the concept of human life, the process of world perception, reflect the Muong's worldview and human outlook on world perception, elements that make up Muong culture such as history, literature, society, fine art, beliefs, etc. In which, the epic *Mo* of the Muong - *The Birth of the Earth and Water* has reflected labor and production activities of the Muong and the process of fighting wild animals and harsh nature to survive. Besides, *Mo* (*roong Mo*) chapters such as *Mo asking for fire*, *Mo for building stilt houses*, *Buffalo Mo*, *Laying chicken*, *Kuong Den*, etc. have honestly reflected the life of the Muong people in the early days when they came out of life in the caves to live in the flat lands and low foothills to form residential communities. Besides, there is *Dang* singing (poetry singing) of the Muong. *Dang* singing of the Muong people

is also very diverse, such as *Dang Moi* sung in the *Moi* festival, *Dang Van Va* talking about histories, legends, epics, folk stories and good traditions of the clan, etc.

The Tay and Nung people have religious ritual folk songs that narrate the journey of people to Heaven to ask for the blessing of the Jade Emperor, which are performed through the traditional performance art of *Then* singing. The content of the ritual folk songs of the Tay and Nung people contains profound humanistic thoughts, love of nature, love between couples, affection and gratitude of wife and husband, moral lessons about human morality, praise of the village, wish for healthy people, favorable weather, bountiful crops, etc.

The treasure of folk songs and beliefs of the Hmong is diverse and rich, such as singing to move into a new house, singing at wedding ceremonies, singing to send off the soul, etc. In particular, the ritual songs at the funeral conveyed the compassionate feelings of loved ones towards the deceased. In the funeral of the Hmong, there are 20 songs that are deeply human and educational for people towards a better life.

A basic feature of literature related to religious activities of ethnic minorities in the mountainous provinces of the Northwest is that poetry and folk songs are not for reading but mainly for singing in the rituals of sacrifice to the gods, in wedding ceremonies, in the healing ceremonies, in funerals, etc. Literary and religious works convey faith and respect, supplication or thanksgiving to the gods, the souls of the dead. Besides, it also reflects people's aspiration for a full, happy, and peaceful life.

### ***Worship paintings***

The ethnic minorities such as the Tay, the Nung, the Dao, etc. all have the custom of using worshiping paintings in ritual sacrifices and funerals. Those are the ethnic groups with the custom of having worshiping paintings in rituals to look after the souls of the dead and advise human beings on how to live so that when they die soon, they will be liberated. The worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the Northwest mountainous region are mainly religious paintings, associated with Buddhism or Taoism. Stemming from their own cultural roots, customs and traditions, each ethnic group has a line of worship paintings bearing specific artistic features ranging from brushstrokes, colors to the number of paintings in each set. The set of worship paintings is divided into two types: the creator side and the master side. The master's side is the teaching direction, teaching how to live, directing people to a better life. On the other hand, the creator side is a line of worshiping paintings that deter human beings if they live alone on earth, they will suffer harsh punishments when they die.

Worship paintings are used by ethnic groups here in funeral rites to express the wishes of relatives in the deceased's family to pray for the soul of the deceased to escape from hell and go to Nirvana (Buddhism) or the Immortal realm (Taoism). Many worship paintings depict gruesome executions in hell for those who commit serious crimes on earth with the purpose of deterring people from doing evil or promoting thoughts and behaviors that violate morality. At the same time, admonish human beings to know how to behave reasonably with human beings. Some typical worship paintings such as: The *Cau Hoa* worship painting of the Tay people worships *Me Bjooc* (*Me Hoa*) with the purpose of praying for the birth of a boy or a girl. The *Than Nong* (Scorpius) worship painting is the god of farm work and cultivation, often seen in the *Building rice bamboo basket* festival of the Cao Lan ethnic group held every year on the occasion of going to the fields to open a new rice season. The painting depicting the image of *Ban Co* (the primitive ancestor of the Dao ethnic group, according to legend) are hung for worship, in order to commemorate the merits of protecting the nation during the ancient migration to the South, etc.

The worship paintings of ethnic minorities in the Northwest have their own aesthetic nuances and values. Worship paintings are painted with gouache on paper and worship paintings have a narrow, long, and dense layout of divine characters. The same topic, however, each ethnic group can handle the layout of the worship painting differently, creating many variations. Worship paintings serve the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in the Northwest mountainous provinces, so the colors are often dark and deep gray, with colors such as red, blue, white, yellow, etc. commonly used are gouaches and some colors taken from nature such as vermilion stone, indigo leaves, styphnolobium japonici, bamboo charcoal, scallop shell powder, etc., less mixed such as red, yellow, white, black, green, etc. Some ethnic groups also use goldleaf and silverleaf to add to their paintings to create a warm, fresh, and sacred blend. Those colors in the worship picture are approximate, more symbolic than realistic. Every detail on each worship picture has a meaning associated with the morality and identity of each ethnic community.

The worship paintings are full of different layers of real and virtual space, time. The main gods, auxiliary gods, demons, and top humans appear on the same side of the painting. There are worship paintings depicting all scenes from the ground to the sky, from mountains to rivers to the sea, from hell to fairyland depending on the imagination of the painter. That has created immense space in paintings, endless time in paintings. This is a liberation in terms of ideas, a success in artistic thinking of artists who draw worship paintings.

The worship paintings depicting mythical figures and main characters are drawn according to the rule that the characters with great power are drawn large, the visual details are carefully selected, highly symbolic and occupy central position of the painting. The less powerful gods are drawn simpler and smaller.

In daily life, people in the Northwest mountainous region do not use paintings to decorate their living space, the goal of using worship paintings is for worship, not for decoration. Worship paintings are only used when the village or house has an activity such as worship, rite, funeral. It is not a picture hanging on the wall, but it is widely applied, the real-life nature is put into the picture more. Worshipping paintings also keep burning incense sticks, grease stains, ethnic people's lives intertwined in the painting. When the worship paintings are torn, they are restored and pasted. Taoist worship paintings - drawn and copied by artists - are included in a system of items for worship such as robes and hats, offerings of swords, command cards, masks, musical instruments, worship books, etc. The items are owned by *Tao* Master and only displayed on every occasion of worship. Today, worship paintings serving the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in the Northwest mountainous provinces still have their cultural, human, and artistic values intact. The worshipping paintings are still carefully preserved by the people here. [14]

### ***Role of traditional religious art of ethnic minorities in the Northwest***

The religious art plays an important role in preserving religious beliefs and is a way to practice traditional religious rituals of ethnic minorities in the Northwest. The ethnic minorities here have created religious art forms to serve the purpose of expressing their belief and worship towards supernatural forces. However, over a long period of time, traditional religious art has affirmed its sustainable value and important role in the spiritual life of the ethnic minorities in the Northwest, contributing to enriching the national culture.

### ***Enhancement of awareness, aesthetic sensibility, and profound educational value***

Religious art forms are always present in the daily lives of the ethnic minorities in the Northwest. People here believe that gods are supernatural forces that can help human beings avoid all dangers of nature, avoid bad things, and get lucky. Therefore, in folk songs serving rituals, they express human beings' perception of the world, reflect the worldview and human outlook, and are the words of praise for human beings' health and happy life, praise human labor in the face of difficulties and harshness of nature, present moral lessons, moral teaching to human beings, etc. For example, *then* singing of the Tay and Nung people not only conveys spiritual life and beliefs, but also are lessons to educate human beings, praise morality, criticize bad habits, praise love of couples, love of nature, country, etc. The agricultural ritual folk songs of the Thai people have reflected the activities of daily life and production, expressing the creativity of the material culture of the laborer.

Ritual folk songs in human life cycle rituals such as funerals, weddings, etc., reveal a profound outlook on life, reflect concepts of formation of the universe, formation of the world, origin of the world, origin of man's birth and feat of conquering nature in the early days of human history, thoughts, aspirations and good relationships in the community. In particular, funeral songs are also epic lyrical songs expressing the mourning and loving feelings of loved ones for the deceased. Funeral folk songs have also reflected human beings' perception of the human spirit world. The folk songs of the wedding ceremony reflect the hard work of parents who have struggled to raise their children and express gratitude and respect to them. The lyrics clearly show traditional wedding customs such as custom of chewing betel, custom of seeing chicken feet, etc., reflecting the concept of free love and happy marriage. Good qualities such as sincerity, frankness, respect for the roots, gratitude to parents, ... are always educated and taught by the previous generations to their descendants. At the same time, educate the next generations about the history of the clan, advise them to overcome difficulties in life and believe in a good future.

### ***Reflecting origin of the formation, development and change of life of the clan***

In the cultural, religious and spiritual life of ethnic minorities in the Northwest, many art forms such as *Mo* songs, *Mo* dances, *Then* singing, *Khen* (panpipe) blowing, *Khen* dance, etc., hide and display the long-standing historical and cultural values of the clans.

Then singing of the Tay and Nung people is a genre of traditional performance of folk religious music that narrates the process of human beings going to Heaven to ask *Then* (meaning Heaven) to give human beings a lot of luck and a good life. *Then* singing originates from the working life, so it absorbs the historical and cultural values of the clans. *Then* singing has reflected the problems in human life, stories of love, marriage, mourning, village, etc., showing the human outlook, worldview and cultural identity of the Tay and Nung people.

*Mo* Muong is a unique creation of the Muong people. The *Mo* songs performed by *Mo* masters in the rites have different themes depending on the purpose of use for each ritual item in the series of rituals conducted at the funeral. In particular, the epic *Mo* has realistically reflected human life, reflected productive labor activities, battled with wild animals, harsh natural disasters, etc. The details and legends in the epic *Mo* show the Muong people's awareness of the world from the early days of creating their life in the wild. The *Mo* (roóng) chapters such as *Mo asking for fire*, *Mo for making a stilt house*, *Buffalo Mo*, *Laying chicken*, *Kuong Đen*, etc. have reflected the change in the life of the

lineages from the period of living in caves to living in the flat lands, low foothills and the formation of residential communities. At the same time, reflecting in detail human life from devouring to describing in detail human lives with fire to keep warm, how to create fire and use fire to cook food, reflecting the process by which human beings know how to build houses to live in, know how to take trees from the forest to plant their gardens, know how to tame wild animals to make pets, etc

### ***Creation of cultural identity, community cohesion and transmission of ethnic cultural values***

In the process of production, in order to survive and develop in the face of the harshness of nature, the ethnic minorities in the Northwest have created unique traditional cultural heritages that reflect a cultural identity of each ethnic group. Cultural and religious values are preserved and passed on by ethnic groups for generations. Until now, religious art forms are still practiced by the people in rites and play an important role in the spiritual life of each ethnic group.

Besides, with religious beliefs, the rites in religious practice have expressed the dreams and aspirations of each ethnic group. When performing the rite, everyone in the family, in the community participates in practicing religious art forms such as singing, dancing, etc., contributing to strengthening the community's strength and showing their respect. to ancestors and to the gods.

In the cultural and religious treasure of the Muong, Mo is a traditional performance activity conducted in rites associated with the religious life of the Muong. Mo is often performed in the space of each family and the common space of the community to perform a certain rite. Mo Muong is the crystallization of experiences in production labor, cultural behavior, human philosophy, expressing love for human beings and life, homeland, reflecting the personality and soul of human beings and mountainous area of Muong village in the Northwest. Mo Muong contains many values that make up Muong culture in terms of ethnic formation history, traditional culture, art forms, beliefs, etc., reflecting the Muong's human outlook on world perception, history of clan formation. Experiencing the development process from the past to the present, Mo Muong has been preserved and transmitted by generations of the Muong people by word of mouth and sustainably promoted the unique values of Mo Muong, created vitality, far-reaching influence, contributed to the formation and nurturing of the character and soul of generations of the Muong people.

The Thai people are an ethnic group with a long-standing and rich religious culture in forms with many genres of traditional performance in ritual practice such as reciting poems or singing along with the lyrics (*Khap*),... The content reflects all issues in the social life, material life and spiritual life of the Thai people. The religious art forms of the Thai people have been preserved and passed on for generations by word of mouth and recorded on paper or on leaves. The Thai people have their own script, so the folklore treasure of the Thai people is preserved intact, with conditions to preserve and strongly develop the ethnic cultural identity. Today, many works of folklore have been included in the curriculum in high schools.

The Hmong people have many customs and traditions, traditional beliefs expressed in folk songs, folk dances, rites of ancestor worship, god worship, traditional festivals, etc. which is valuable in terms of culture, moral education, moral and humanistic lifestyle of the lineage. In particular, the traditional performance activities in the funeral rites have contributed to strengthening the solidarity of family members and clans and uniting the village community. Especially, the rites and behaviors in funeral and ancestral worship rites have demonstrated the filial piety and morality of children and grandchildren

towards their father, reflecting the union and sharing of family members and community, strengthening morality, filial piety and passing on profound human values to future generations.

### Conclusion

For the people of ethnic minorities in the mountainous provinces of the Northwest, religious rites follow throughout a person's life from birth to death. Since she was a fetus in the mother's womb, the mother had to abstain a lot. When born, each person, even from different ethnic communities, has to go through various birthing and naming ceremonies. When coming of age, there are maturity, marriage rituals. When being sick, there are rituals to pray for treating diseases, and when they are old, there are funeral rites. Along with the rituals that follow throughout the life of each individual person, in each family, people of ethnic minorities are immersed in community rituals with special festivals, bearing cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. In order to express their beliefs and practice religious cultures, ethnic minorities in the Northwest have created many unique religious art forms such as singing, dancing, music, improvised singing, story-telling, festival, and worship painting. The presence of traditional religious art forms has contributed to the creation of ethnic cultural identity, enriching the spiritual life of ethnic minorities in the Northwest of Vietnam.

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