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**The Three-Tiered World (Tam Phu) of the Tay  
People in Vietnam through the Performance of Their  
Rituals**

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# The Three-Tiered World (Tam Phu) of the Tay People in Vietnam through the Performance of Then Rituals

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## Abstract

The Tay people represent an ethnic minority in the mountainous north of Vietnam. As do Shaman rituals in all regions, the Shaman of the Tay people in Vietnam exhibit uniqueness in their languages and accommodation of their society's world view through their 'Then' rituals. The Then rituals require an integration of many artistically positioned and framed elements, including language (poetry, vows, chanting, the dialogue in the ritual), music (singing, accompaniment), and dance.

This paper investigates The Art of Speaking of the Tay Shaman, through their Then rituals, which include use of language to describe the imaginary journey of the Shaman into the three-tiered world (Muong fa - Heaven region (Thien phu); Muong Din - Mountain region (Nhac phu); Muong Nam - Water region (combination of Thuy phu and Dia phu) to describe dealings with deities and demons, and to describe the phenomenon of possession.

The methodic framework of the paper thus includes discussions of in the comparison between the concept of the three-storey world in the Then ritual of the Tay people with the concept of Tam Tu phu in the Len dong ceremony of the Kinh in Vietnam. Thereby, it clearly shows the concept of Tay people of the universe, the world of gods, demons, the existence of the soul and the body, and the existence of human soul after death.

The study contributes to Linguistics and Anthropology in that it observes and describes the world views of a Northern Vietnamese ethnicity, and their negotiation with spirituality, through languages of both a spiritualistic medium and society.

*Keywords:* Tay, Ethnic minority, Vietnam, Then rituals, Len dong, Linguistic Anthropology

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## Introduction

The Ethnic Tay in Vietnam reside in almost all localities of the country, but mainly concentrate in the Northeast provinces, from Quang Ninh, Bac Giang, Lang Son, Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Thai Nguyen, Ha Giang and Tuyen Quang to Lao Cai and Yen Bai. After 1975, a part migrated to the South, concentrated in provinces like Dak Lak, Lam Dong and Binh Phuoc. This ethnic group is a language-speaking Thai clan which has the second largest population in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Like many other ethnicities, the Tay also have the ritual practices related to import-soul phenomena that many term as Shamanism [Nguyen Thi Yen 2009, 80-82]. Highlights of this are ceremonial. This can be done through the journey into the world of three floors – the

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<sup>1</sup>According to the 2009 census of Vietnam, by April 1, 2009, Tay people had 1,626,392 people.

Heaven region, the Land region and the Water region (The Kinh ethnic in Vietnam often call this “Tam phu”) so as to then cure believers. This is a ritual that has the participation of many artistic elements such as the word art (poetry, prayer, chanting), art music (singing, musical accompaniment), dance, decorative arts, and art. Here, language plays a leading role in rituals, including in the lyrics used to describe the journey into the three-tiered world (Tam phu) that communicate with shamn gods, and that requires verbal communication between shamans and spirits, and devils. Here, words are used in the divine import. Other artistic elements may contribute to help supplement the ritual content. With that meaning, this study will introduce the world of the three tiers of the Tay through ritual performance art of the Tay, which we surveyed thought the provinces of Cao Bang, Lang Son in Vietnam.

### **The Three-Tier World (Tam Tu Phu) in the Conceptions of the Tay**

The name “Tam phu” (The three-tiered world) consists of Thien phu (Heaven region), Dia phu (Land region) and Thuy phu (Water region) or “Tu phu” (adds Nhac phu - Mountain region) which the Kinh call, and which is not common with Tay. However, based on the document of ceremonies recorded for singing in shaman rituals, we see that the concept ‘muong’ of the Tay people has the same meaning for one region of the universe as does the concept of “phu” of the Kinh people. Accordingly, it can be understood that “Tam phu” of Tay in relation to the concept of “Tu phu” of the Kinh people is: Muong Fa - Heaven region (corresponding to “Thien phu”); Muong Din - Land region (corresponding to “Nhac phu” as the Tay people reside in mountainous areas); Muong Nam - Water region below the ground, which is water; hell layer (corresponding to “Thuy phu” and “Dia phu” pooled). This concept of the Tay is called a “three-tier world” by the researchers and emerges clearly through ceremonies and ritual practices of the Tay. Thus, the three-tier world (Heaven, Earth and Water) illustrates the Tay’s concept of the universe in correspondence with the concept of the “Tam Tu phu” of the Kinh.

#### **Muong fa - Heaven region (Thien phu)**

In the Tay’s conception in general, Heaven is the place where the paramount gods decide on the survival and fate of human beings on earth. At the same, Heaven is also home to human souls after death, in contrast to Muong Din, where the human body exists. That’s why Heaven is a reversal of Muong Din, built through human imagination based on simulating the ground world. In general, Heaven is envisioned by the Tay as follows:

The highest reigning place of the Heaven world is the kings, god and the spirits with paramount power to decide on all matters of life, death and human destiny: Ngoc Hoang (Jade Emperor), Phat Ba Quan Am (Lady Buddha), Nam Tao Bac Dau (King of fate) and Me Biooc also known as Me Va (Flower’s mother),<sup>2</sup> i.e., the mother who gives life to humans on Earth, etc

Next is the residence of generals and soldiers under the control of the Jade Emperor. The subjects are the souls of the dead who will reside in the family lineage in villages such as on the ground or reside according to the category of people: the good, the wicked, widow villages, smart villages, big villages, idiot villages, good villages, etc.

The suong or thuong (the boatmen) reside in the rivers. Da Din, Da Hoai: Miraculous

<sup>2</sup>In the Tay and Nung languages, *bjóc* (bioóc) or va means all flowers. From here, we will agree on a common name for mother as Me Va.

species of spirits reside in deep, high mountain forests. Like on the ground, the Heavens also have access roads, villages, houses, gardens and wards, as well as busy markets. Tam Quang market is a famous market for people in the Heaven region to trade and meet people from the Land region [Nguyen Thi Yen 2006].

#### - Muong Din - Mountain region (Nhac phu)

Muong Din is a place where people reside and live. In the opinion of the Tay, apart from humans with the laws of the positive realm, Muong Din also has an invisible force belonging to the afterlife referred as phi, interpreted as ghosts - including good and bad spirits which are mainly stratified in the family, villages and nature.

Specifically:

In the family, there are mainly ancestor ghosts that are classified as follows; ancestors within 3 generation worship in the house; after 3 generations as a god to keep the door; from 9 generations or more who work as a god to look after cattle under the floor. In addition, there is a kitchen god (Tao Cong) worshipping in the kitchen corner.

In each village, there is a god of management, taking care of the afterlife of the village (Tho cong). This god may be a human being (a person with meritorious services to the village) or is set by the villagers itself, worshiped at a large tree or a small temple in the village.

In each of the Tay's residential areas, there is also the god of the mountain and the god of the river, which are quite important regional gods.

In Muong Din, there are ghosts of dead people buried outside the graveyard, belonging to the grave. The ghosts of those who die young, or die unconsciously are called phi suong. Phi met are ghosts that are not worshiped by the Tay in the house, so they often wander in crossroads – Tang Cap is adjacent to the three-tier world . According to Tay people, because this does not belong to any of the three worlds and is not to be worshiped, these ghosts often cause harm to the living.

#### - Muong Nam - Water region (combination of Thuy phu and Dia phu)

Muong Nam is under the ground, and is the residence of the Dragon King (Long Vuong), where the soul of the dead is held in 10 dungeons according to the Taoism. In order to travel to Dragon King, the shaman must undergo a very difficult journey, struggling with many challenges. They have to go through the elves, demons, and strange shape bodied creature (according to Then's in Quang Uyen district of Cao Bang province) [Nguyen Thi Yen 2009, 657- 663] or the water gates with different names, where each gate is being kept by the fierce and greedy god (according to Then's in the border area of Ha Lang - Long Chau of Cao Bang province) [Nguyen Thi Yen 2010, 111- 116].

In the concept of the Thai people (a Thai- speaking ethnic group in northwest of Vietnam, less related to Han culture), Muong on/under the ground is the Muong of the dwarves and it does not seem to be related to Muong Fa and Muong Din. Thus, the appearance of the Muong Nam and the 10 hells of Dragon King of Tay people are probably the manifestation of the Chinese people's exchange of Taoism.

Thus, if the concept of the 'Tam phu' of the Kinh is to worship 'three kings': the King of Thuy phu- Water region (Long Vuong – Dragon King), the king of Thien phu - Heaven region

(Ngoc Hoang – Jade Emperor) and the king of Dia phu (Diem Vuong – King of hell)<sup>3</sup> then for the Tay people (Eastern region of Cao Bang province): the King of Thuy phu was joined with the King of hell (Diem Vuong) with the power to govern the dungeon where the dead souls were held before returning to Heaven and was called the Dragon King (Long Vuong). Based on that, it can be known that Tam phu of the Tay is composed of the world's three floors with the concept of indigenous (Muong Fa, Muong Din, Muong Nam) plus images of Hell according to folk notions of Taoism. This is clearly shown through the performance of Then rituals of shamans.

### **The Three-tiered World of the Tay People through the art of Performing Then Rituals**

In Then rituals of the Tay people, apart from the formality of entering the fellow gods (similar to “Len dong” of Kinh), the shaman soul must go into the world three-tier to sacrifice to and beg the god. Through this ritual performance (offerings, performing arts of music and dance, prayer, etc), the three-tiered world of the Tay's is very vivid and concrete.

#### **- Offerings and Supplies for the Journey:**

Depending on the specific rituals, homeowners must prepare various offerings. Basically every ritual must have salty food (pig, chicken, duck, fish, wine, etc), vegetarian food (sticky rice, candy, fruit, etc), and coded and symbolic objects. The items necessary for monks are the two-three stringed instrument made of gourd shell (tinh tau) and metal wires to create music (chum xoc nhac) for musical accompaniment in ceremonies. There is also a fan made of paper for the monk to cast magic, the bell for signal and direction during the journey, burning incense to communication and to create a path between the earth and the underworld.

#### **- Preparation for the Journey:**

The Tay's notion is that the master shaman is a martial arts commander of the army who goes into the underworld to fulfill the demands of the owner. To prepare for the journey, firstly, the shaman must perform procedures to invite generals. These are the men who command the shaman army in heaven to report on the purpose of the ceremonies, and the ceremony aims to invite these men to help the master. Following is the procedure of “Call incense” (burning incense, ordering the smoke from the incense burner to inform members throughout the three realms), followed by the «Commanding of the incense» (ordering of the incense). After obtaining the troop, the army descends to the Land region, stationed at the “front garden”. At this time, the shaman performs the procedures for the army (offering for soldiers), and then disinfects the ceremony (purifying the offering), offers “secretary” procedures, i.e. lễ vật. Finally, the shaman arranges the offerings on a horse to be ready to leave for the ceremony, under his command. This ends the preparation for leaving. All of the above contents are presented by the shaman through the content of prayer, lyrics, music, gestures and related rituals, under the help of the homeowner.

#### **- Journey on Muong Din (Land region):**

<sup>3</sup>Three kings of Tam phu are still worshiped at Tam Phu temple in Nguyet Ban beach, Cao Duc commune, Gia Binh district (Bac Ninh province) and Tam phu temple in Thay pagoda (Hanoi).

As mentioned earlier, according to the Tay's in Muong Din, where people live there is still another invisible spirit world. So when going to the ceremony, the shamans are forced to enter these doors to report the offer ceremony.

First, the master shaman enters the ancestral door (the altar of worship) and the door of the kitchen god (Tao cong) at home to offer the offerings. He uses the prayer to ask his ancestors and kitchen gods to go on a ceremony with the master.

Next, he commands the troops of Then to go to the offering in the main door on Muong Din: Tho Cong or Thanh hoang (God governs the village), Tang cap (temporarily known as the junction of the three contiguous places of 3 roads on Muong Din, going to Muong Fa and going down to Muong Nam). The shaman stops to pay the ceremony for phi sluong, phi met - the souls of those who have a horrible death, an unexpected death and are not worshiped.

The content of the ceremony is expressed through the lyrics, the sound of the instruments and especially through the sound of the music that symbolizes the army of horse soldiers on the road. To each 'gate' of each god, the masters stop the instruments (stopped horse) to enter the rhythm of the offertory (homeowners coordinate to pour wine and burn joss paper). Once completed, the shaman continues the instrument for the next gates.

After finishing the offering for the gate phi sluong, phi met is at the end of procedures of offering the ceremony to the phi of Muong Din, but this depends on each ceremony that the shaman will perform, and whether the shaman turns down to Muong Nam or goes to Muong Fa.

#### - Journey to Muong Nam - Long Vuong Thuy phu (Water region):

In the rituals of the Tay, only the skilled shaman has magic that can enable the shaman to go to Muong Nam. Through this survey, we found that only the shaman were men that have enough power to be able to go to Muong Nam to find the lost souls of the ill (Then at Quang Uyen District of Cao Bang province) or to break the prison so as to free the soul of the dead (Then at border area of Ha Lang - Long Chau, Cao Bang province).

The way to Muong Nam to find the lost soul for healing of the shaman starts from a water field where the watershed is located at the Tang Cap- the junction of the roads to the world of the three-tier. On the way down to Muong Nam, Then military face many difficult obstacles as they face many goblins, and demons. The shaman must use many spells to fight back. In total, they have to go through three gates under Muong Nam:

The Long Cung Ha Ba gate: This is the gate where the Ha Ba governing python army, the snake military, and the land territory are envisioned as villages and communes in Muong Din. The shaman master enters to pay the ceremony, collecting souls and moving on.

On the way, the army has to meet a demon that transforms into a human form to fight against the Then army. The shaman, by using miraculous magic to dry up the water that shows the avenue of stone built bricks, makes the fish and snakes enter the surface to breath.

Ngu Hai Long Vuong gate: This is the place of the snake, pangolin, and where the ducks swim, as well as where the hundreds of flowers bloom white. He goes to submit offerings and asks for a soul and then moves on again.

Next, he encounters an elf disguised as women. With his knowledge and intelligence, the master is able to deal with the trick that the elf uses, using paper money (counterfeit money for dead people) to give to the elf so that it does not seduce the soul of the sick, and to release the

sick into the earth.

Continuously, the master encounters an elf that is disguised as a seductive young boy and girl, and that entices and sings, and sits in busy markets as in Muong Din. Here, the shaman urges the military and horses to hurriedly pass without stopping.

Hai Giang gate: This is the gate that keeps the sea, crowded with boats that go back and forth and have security checks. The shaman goes to pay the ceremony, continuously taking the souls of the sick people and continuing the journey. The army has to go through the crowded streets, and through elves who infiltrate the market and other spaces. Finally, the troops arrive at the place of the magnificent palaces of the Dragon King.

Entering the palace of the Dragon King (Thap Dien – Ten Palaces): This is an important gate and also the final destination of the journey to the Dragon King. The palace of the Dragon King appears through Then's words as both deep and mysterious and antiquated with many levels, and many layers of beasts which guard objects such as Bach Xa (White Snake), Ho Lang (Tiger), which bares fangs, and growls. It is finally possible to come to Ten Palaces, where each court has a watchman. The master invites all 10 official custodians of Ten Palaces to sit on the throne and to ask for redemption for the sick, to submit to the ceremony - and to call the souls to the sick to bring the world of the living. After finishing the job, the master commands the army to return. On the way back without words, he only chants the spell, and moves very quickly to the Tang cap Junction.

- Journey to Muong Fa (Heaven region):

Muong Fa is the main worshiper of all Then ceremonies, conceived by the Tay as Muong Din upside down. So the journey to the heavens was envisioned as going from the village to the district and the province, but the farthest was the Jade Emperor's palace corresponding to «the central». The road to Muong Fa also begins at the junction Tang cap, depending on the content and purpose of the work of the ceremonies, he goes to different gates on Muong Fa for the offering. For example, if he performs the healing ceremony for children, the Shamen must go to gate Me Va (The mother administers childbirth), while for the treatment for the elderly is on the door Me Va, Nam Tao Bac Dau (king Fate), and so forth. Particularly for the ceremonies of Shaman master himself related to the worship of the profession, he must go to the gates of the minister of the Then profession, the Then monk's door, the Then ancestor and the Jade Emperor (Ngoc Hoang) palace. Rituals start from the journey on Muong Din (as mentioned above) and then from the junction (Tang Cap ), the shaman commander of the army rises to Muong Fa. The shaman describes the journey through the lyrics, the accompaniment and the sound of the music symbolizing the sound of hooves, passing through many places in fields, mountains, rivers and streams. There is a name in Muong Fa which is the same as on Muong Din. At the gate of every god, he will stop his horse and present his work, offering, and then continue to play music. Homeowners assist through butchering chickens, pigs, incense, pouring wine, and offering gold, depending on the rules of each gate. Sometimes, attendees also participate in ritual performances such as in the pouring of rice in the feast during the ceremony (similar to happy life) for the elderly. With big rituals such as having to cross the river or the sea, there is a section called 'to row the boat across the sea,' which is expressed through rowing and dancing. When coming to the ancestors, the general gate has a soul entry for the ancestors or the generals to talk, drink, perform games with the people, and to receive offerings. When entering the

entrance of the Jade Emperor, there is an illustrated dance section. With the Then lineage of the Tay people in Bac Son district, Lang Son province, the souls that enter are many, and there is a regulation on color which is similar with the 'Len dong of Kinh.

After going through all the gates in the heavens, the shaman will command the army of soldiers back to earth. When carrying heavy items, it is necessary to stop at many points on the road, and hence the journey is slow. When returning light, he can go fast, and ten lines are made to be one. Here, the shaman master accelerates by accelerating the tempo of the music. He then goes to the place where the master 'camped' outside the 'flower garden in front of the door' and then performs the ceremony banquet for soldiers, sending the soldiers to the Muong Fa. For the festivals, the section invites the generals to play and interact with the people, then leads the guests back to Muong Fa.

## Conclusion

In the history of the Tay and Kinh people of Vietnam, there is a deep exchange in many aspects from ethnic backgrounds to languages, cultural aspects, and so forth [Nguyen Thi Yen 2009, 29-39 and 47-51]. This is also expressed through the Then ceremony of the Tay people and the Len dong ceremony of the Kinh people. It can be seen that, through the Then ritual performance, the three-tiered world has been realized, vividly reflecting the Tay people's conception of the universe, of the spirit and devil worlds, and of the existence of souls and bodies, as well as of the world of human souls after death. Therefore, studying the art of performing Then ceremonies will make an important contribution to pointing out similarities and differences within the concept of the three-story world in Then rituals of the Tay people, and within the concept of Tam Tu phu in the Len dong ceremony of the Kinh people.

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