

THE BELIEF IN GOD WORSHIP OF TAY PEOPLE IN VIET BAC REGION

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The belief in god worship is one of the elements of the popular spiritual culture in Vietnam, bringing the specific characteristics of the region. God Worship, in addition to showing gratitude for his merits to the nation, country and village, is also a wish that the gods will shelter and protect the villagers from natural and social disasters. This is the ultimate goal of god worship. Because according to the Tay people's concept, the gods have many magical functions, can bring blessings to help and protect the villagers, but can also bring disaster when people do what is considered wrong with the gods.

This article outlines the value of god worship, some conceptions of the Tay people's gods in order to preserve and promote the traditional cultural values, customs and habits of the people, because the gods are always good in the minds of Tay people. Those are the factors that create community cohesion and are also typical features in the spiritual life of the Tay people.

Keywords: *Belief; God; Polytheism; Ancestor; Culture; Tay People; Viet Bac region.*

1. Introduction

In the worship of gods, the Tay people do not have a uniformity between the designations to distinguish which is god, which is saint, which is ghost and demon. In general, belief is still in the form of polytheism. Depending on each village, each region, people call "Slan" or "Phi". "Phi" translated into Vietnamese has a very broad meaning, referring to all saints, gods, ghosts and demons such as heaven ghosts (Phi Pha), earth ghosts (Phi din), forest ghosts (Phi pa/Phi Dong), mountain ghosts (Phi Slan), ghosts in rivers and streams (Phi nguoc), ancestral ghosts (Phi pau pu/Phi pu cho/dam cho)... Thus, "Phi" (Ma) is a general term for supernatural forces that are present everywhere watching and supporting the world of the living. Therefore, the study of the Tay people's god-worshipping beliefs is not only to preserve the ethnic cultural identity, but also to let other ethnic groups know and appreciate these cultural values. In this article, the author uses a unified designation to name these ghosts as God.

2. Research overview

Research on the customs and practices of the Tay people in Vietnam in general and the Viet Bac region in particular, there have been published by many articles and works. First of all, the book "A brief introduction to Tay, Nung and Thai groups in Vietnam" by La Van Lo, Dang Nghiem Van, Khoa hoc Xa hoi Publishing House (1968); "Tay - Nung culture" by authors as La Van Lo, Ha Van Thu (1984); "Tay-Nung ethnic groups in Vietnam" edited by Be Viet Dang (1992); "Traditions and customs of Tay ethnic group in Viet Bac" by Hoang Quyet and Tuan Dung (1994),... Mostly, the issues in social life have been mentioned in a variety of ways by the authors. The most remarkable point of these works is the rich source of field materials, in which the authors have described the customs and practices very meticulously and elaborately, along with many theoretical and practical issues, about customs and habits of rural mountainous society.

We can mention about "Tay folklore" by authors Hoang Ngoc La, Hoang Hoa Toan, Vu Tuan Anh

(2002); “Cultural identity and traditions of ethnic groups in Bac Kan province” by Ha Van Vien and colleagues (2004); In particular, in 2009, the author Nguyen Thi Yen published the book “Tay and Nung folk beliefs”,... The works have given readers deep insights about the picture of Tay - Nung folk belief culture in Vietnam. Through rich ethnographic fieldwork materials, the works have clearly shown the concept of the Tay people’s world of three realms, including the upper realm (heaven), the middle realm (earth) and the lower realm (underground) and between the three realms there is only one difference in human form. The analysis, synthesis and classification of forms of cultural and religious activities such as: Tao, Mo, Then, Put,... of the Tay people in the exchange, acculturation and mutual influence between the Imported cultural factors and indigenous factors among localities, between different branches and lines of worship.

It can be said that these are particularly valuable works, providing scientific arguments and valid evidences about Tay - Nung folk beliefs, helping us to compare with field survey materials during research.

3. Research Method

In this article, the author has used some basic methods such as: Interdisciplinary research method. This method helps the author to use concurrently with specialized methods to get a comprehensive view of god worshipping beliefs and the overall culture of the Tay people associated with the mountainous cultural space of the Viet Bac region. Fieldwork, analysis, evaluation and synthesis methods will help the author: From the sources of investigation materials collected from the studied area. Then, synthesize, process and analyze documents that are scientific, objective, and accurately reflect the contents to be studied.

4. Research result

4.1. God at the family level in the concept of the Tay people

In the spiritual world of the Tay people, the soul of the deceased is always on the ancestral altar to be close to their descendants, daily to monitor and help them in doing business. Therefore, the ancestor worship not only shows gratitude to the ancestors, to the deceased, but sometimes is also a prayer, apology, forgiveness... to the ancestors. Because ancestors always have control over the good and bad fate of their descendants and have unpredictable powers. Therefore, the ancestor worship has been maintained for many generations, no one told anyone to do it forever and has become the core of fine customs and traditions and to be the most important form of worship in spiritual life of the Tay people.

The most commonly worshiped ancestors are three generations from parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. When a relative has just passed away in the house, it is not allowed to be worshipped with the ancestors (*Choong Cai*) immediately, but must be worshipped in a separate corner lower than the ancestral altar. Every day, when it comes to meals, the descendants share rice soup and put it on the altar for 3 years or 1 year, and in some places it is only done within 100 days.

The Tay-Nung proverb has a sentence: “Nam heet day, Phay heet mjac” means (Water makes good, fire makes beautiful). Therefore, in Tay families, they all worship the fire stove (worshipping the Stove God), “phi can phay, phi pinh phay” (god of the fire stove). According to folk beliefs, Phi can phay is the god who keeps the kitchen, keeps the fire, keeps the warmth and manages everything in the family, if the fire god is offended, the house and everything will burn down ash. People worship kitchen ghosts right at the fire, not having their own incense bowl. On Tet holiday, make a simple offering tray and burn incense by the fire. When the rice is cooked, the kitchen ghost eats incense, the delicious meal is tasted first, all the ups and downs, harmony or turmoil in the kitchen are understood. Therefore, the people abstain from speaking loudly, crying by the fire, not knocking on the pedestal or on the wooden frame which keep the earth on the fire stove, not burning dirty wood (especially the trees that were struck by lightning, the tree which used to carry the coffin,...). Every year, on the 23rd day of the lunar December, the family holds a ceremony to bring the Stove God to heaven and report to the Jade Emperor the work of his managed household on the earth. On the first day of the year (Tet), the Jade Emperor sent a new Stove God to replace him, so people worshiped this deity on the 23rd of lunar December and the first day of the year. When children go out to live separately, they must not ask for fire from other families, but must take fire from the kitchen of their parents’ house and this is also an important ritual in the ceremony to enter the new house. While lighting the fire at the new house, those present all shouted “Uu bau tay phay, day bau tay po me” (there’s nothing as warm as fire, nothing as good as husband and wife). The fire must burn continuously for three days without going out, there is the effect to make the new house cozy, and at the same time, the continuous fire will destroy the misfortune, evil spirits, and make new house materials to be dry.

In the funeral rites of the Tay people, there is a custom to light a fire around the four corners of the coffin before taking the coffin out of the house. On the way to carry the coffin, people use large torches to dry under the coffin. After the burial is

complete, the descendants take off their mourning clothes through the fire, which has two meanings: the first is to summon the spirits of the living (all members participating in the funeral procession, the tools used to fill the grave must pass through this fire); the second is that fire will protect the living from ghosts of the dead and other evil spirits that follow the living home. Thus, fire is a sacred object, a protective god in their family life.

Common in all Tay families, there is also an altar for Ma Bjooc/Me Va (Mother Hoa), which the Kinh call Mrs Mu (Midwife). Mother Bjooc Worship is similar to the form of Mother worship in Kinh folk beliefs. But the belief of Mother worship of the Kinh people was developed into a worshipping system with a very superficial scale “Mother Goddesses of Three Realms”, while in the Tay people, the belief of Mother worship, although not developed superficially, still holds a prominent and important position in the spiritual life of the people. Mother Va in poetry, then Tay - Nung also known as “Hoa Nuong Thanh Mau” is the god who governs the predestined affairs, birth, raising and protection of children. She is in the land of Muong Pha, she has a garden full of flowers. Whenever she give a family silver flowers, they will give birth to a girl, and if she give a golden flower, they will give birth to a son. Stemming from the conception that the fetus in the mother’s womb is a flower given by the midwife, so the altar of Mother Hoa was established on the day the child was full month (There are even families with a 3-day-old child who has set up an altar to Mother), people make incense holder out of bamboo that are plugged into the wall of the mother’s room, and at the same time, a small board is placed to place the ceremony, there are also families, the altar of the midwife is built very carefully. How many daughters-in-law there are in the house, there are as many altars as Mother Bjooc right next to the wall of the mother’s room. The altar of the midwife is also burned with incense like other altars in the house. The offerings at the Mother Bjooc altar are mainly things that children like to eat such as: chicken thighs, coc mo cakes, candies... Whenever grandparents and parents come back, there are presents and cakes that must be placed there to invite Mother Bjooc first then feed to the children.

If a couple has been married for a long time without having children, they must perform a ceremony to ask Mother Bjooc to give flowers (for children), the people call it “the ceremony of asking for flowers”, so the Tay proverb has the sentence “Me bjooc pan ma, me va pan hau” (Mother of flowers shared, mother of flowers divided).

In fact, the Mother worshipping custom of the

Tay people is not as loud and spacious as that of the Kinh people in the lowlands. The Mothers of the Tay people often originate from the tradition of respecting fertility mothers associated with fertility beliefs, from an agricultural way of thinking that wishes for all things to flourish, such as the legend of Pu Luong Quan of the Tay people in Cao Bang with the legend “Bao Luong Sao Cai” (Bao Luong - Big Boy and Sao Cai - Big Girl) was the first giant husband and wife of the Tay people to teach people how to farm. Thus, the symbol of the woman, the mother Sao Cai has met the needs and aspirations of people’s daily life, as well as the mother goddess of agriculture Au Co of the Vietnamese people in the Northern Delta. From the belief in the worship of Me Bjooc, the Tay people create Mother Moon and 12 fairies with the annual Nang Hai/Luon Hai festival, which represents the worship of the Big Mother - Sao Cai, further increasing the mystery of the Mother in folk beliefs of the Tay people.

Families who have people who do worship (Tao, Then, Put), gather medicine for treatment, hunt... also have their own incense bowl (worshipping the god of profession) which is placed together with the ancestral worship hall to bless the family professional work. On Tet holidays, there is a tray to offer vegetarian food. For Master Tao, the incense bowl for worshipping the god of profession is placed on the right side of the ancestral altar from the door looking in¹. The altar of Then women is usually on the left side next to the ancestral altar². The altars of Master Tao and Mrs. Then are conventionally divided into two parts: the inner part is for placing incense bowls, the outer part is for sealing seals and presenting offerings. After each ceremony for a certain family, the Master of Tao, Then, and Put will be repaid (obligatory) by the owner with a chicken (if the Master’s house is far away, they can catch a live chicken so that the Master’s family can take care of it themselves; if the chicken is boiled, it must be a chicken that has not been used for the ceremony), a few tubes of rice, a liter of wine. All of these offerings will be put up by the master to report

¹. There is always a red sheet of paper on the altar to place offerings. In front of the altar, there is a bag containing seals and cards, a few sheets of Taoist paintings and a picture of a swallow made of colored paper. Because according to folk concepts, the swallow is an animal that sends messages back and forth between the sorcerer and the god, the bird that brings the souls of the dead to the flea market during the “Lin en” festival (Thin, 2012, p.310). Below the altar of the craft ancestor is the burden of props and costumes of Master Tao.

². Then altar is decorated with colorful colors, across the front of the altar hang strings of flowers in the shape of a fruit, a bird, a flower, each string is 1-1.2m long, cut from red and green paper (Y, 2010, p.377).

to the ancestor of the profession with the meaning of thanking the saint for helping mortals complete the work. If the owner does not have a chicken to repay the master, then the master is forced to catch his own chicken to give thanks to the god of profession.

4.2. Gods at the village level in the concept of the Tay people

In the areas where Tay people reside, although communal houses, temples and pagodas are not common like in the lowlands, it is not absent. In fact, in the provinces of Cao Bang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, Bac Kan,..., due to the conditions of contact and cultural exchange with the Kinh people, so new architectural ensembles of worshipping communal houses, pagodas and temples appeared. Other regions, especially the regions as the Northwest and Central Highlands, to be almost absent of these architectural ensembles.

Popular within the village or inter-village of the Tay people is a form of worshipping Tugong and Tudiye (Thu ty/tho ty/coc ban) is the god of the earth, who manages, looks after, protects the village community. However, the places of worshipping Tugong are not completely the same, there are areas worshipping Tugong right at the ancestral altar, there are also families, other regions worshipping Tugong on the floor... According to the concept of the people, the Tugong will help the family drive away the evil spirits out of the housing area, take care of livestock from the clutches of tigers, leopards... livestock multiply and crowded, people are peaceful and happy.

According to the Tay people's concept, these gods are the people who have merit in the discovery of the Muong village, when they die, they are remembered by the villagers as their guardian deity. For example, in the case of Yen Thinh commune (Bac Kan province) worshipping the god of the Ma family (the hereditary chieftain family from Tuyen Quang) has cleared the jungle, created fields and villages (La & Toan, 1999), in Na Ngan communal temple in Thuong Quan commune worship Dinh Quang Tuong and Chu Quang Hau; Cao Ky communal temple; Tau Da communal temple in Cao Thuong commune (Bac Kan province) worships people who have discovered and established communes, villages like today. The evil gods are sometimes worshiped, because they think that when they die at the sacred hour, the village will be peaceful. For example, Dong Kham communal temple and Lang communal Temple (Bac Kan province) all worship the fierce gods Luong Dinh Xe, Ma The Do, Ma The Ninh,... Some are also famous historical figures who have contributed to defeating the enemy to save the villagers, in the case of Ky Sam temple (Hoa An - Cao Bang province) worshipping Nung

Tri Cao, a famous leader of the Tay-Nung people in 11th century; under the Ly dynasty. There is also a god who was originally just an animal (buffalo, tiger, snake), but due to his merit in protecting and helping the villagers do business, the people are grateful and worshiped as the god of life as in the case of Khon Cha communal temple (Lang Son province) worshipping snakes without their tails, because snakes have contributed to helping the people make favorable rain and wind... Most of these gods do not have names, but are just collectively called "Earth god".

The place of worshipping the Earth God has a small scale with an area of less than 1m², built quite sketchy and somewhat makeshift, usually just a hut about 80cm high, made in the style of "four columns, one roof" with various types of materials such as bamboo, cork, palm leaves. Even at a large tree or under a stone roof with double wicker roofs enough to place an incense tube and a cup can also become the village's temple of Tugong. The place to worship the Earth god is usually located at the top of the village, the trees are luxuriant, including the old trees with huge trunks and far-reaching foliage, shading the whole large area, no one is allowed and also no one dared to go there and chop it down. On the occasion of the Lunar New Year or the season of praying for the harvest, the families in the village bring fruit cakes, incense, and paper money to the temple to light to worship the Earth god. When someone in the village dies, has a newborn baby, builds a building, digs the foundation of a house,... they all have to buy a package of cakes to burn incense and pray to the Earth god (optionally) (Y, 2010, p.378- 379).

On such a basis of worshipping the god of life, later living next to the Kinh people and under the influence of the Dai Viet feudal court, the Tay's tutelary emperors, also like the Vietnamese village's tutelary emperors, they were all consecrated by dynasties and had various titles. Thus, the worship of the community's guardian deity has transformed into the emperor of the village and the whole region. The case of Duom Temple (Phu Luong district, Thai Nguyen province) worshipping the god Duong Tu Minh (Thinh, 2012, p.311) is a famous and sacred temple, frequented by visitors from all over the places coming to pray and worship. Currently, the State has granted this temple the certificate of national historical and cultural relic.

Unlike the worshipping place of Tugong, who only sticks incense at the root of a tree or makes a small shrine with double wicker roofs, the community's guardian deity temple usually has 3 compartments, located in a high place, far from home, with a custodian who burns incense called

Po Thai. However, due to wars and turmoil, natural conditions, along with the campaign to eliminate superstition in the 20th century, made most of the communal shrines and temples in the area of the Tay people in Bac Kan province dugged up, excavated, or completely destroyed, leaving only vestiges such as the communal temple yard, the playground, the ancient banyan tree or some sections of the city wall.

In short, whether the gods have different backgrounds, to be human gods or angels, true gods or evil gods, national heroes, historical figures or ordinary people “divinely dead”, the purpose of worshipping these deities is to pray for peace and good harvest (peace and prosperity).

4.3. Gods in the universe in the concept of the Tay people

As mentioned above, anywhere on the earth surface: forests, mountains, fields, land, rivers and streams,... there are gods who govern, Kinh folk have a saying “the land has Earth God, the river has Water God” to remind people to respect the land. The earth god has the duty to protect everyone living in the area he governs, and at the same time he also has the right to punish those who offend and destroy it. Therefore, if you want to have a peaceful life, easy to do business, and have a good harvest, you must respect the god, behave in a way that pleases him so that he can bestow blessings on everyone. Thus, every time people do something important related to the land such as digging a well, building a house, clearing the fields, plowing... they have to make a ceremony to ask the permission of the Earth God called “earth breaking ceremony”. If you are reckless, you will be punished by the gods - you will move the dragon god/geomatic vein, people will not live in peace, the crops will fail.

Likewise, when entering the cultivation season, they pray to the gods for good land and safe exploration; entering the planting season, the cultivation ceremony is performed to request permission to break ground; during the period of fertilizing, they pray to heaven and earth for favorable weather and good crops; when the rice is harvested, a new rice offering ceremony is performed to give thanks to the gods;... However, the ceremony to pray to the gods from the time of clearing the forest, sowing the seeds until the harvest mainly takes place within each household, however, within the village or inter-village, the Long Tong festival has fully gathered all the rituals to pray to the gods for a year of favorable rain and wind, the good harvest, the people and the village being peaceful and healthy. The ritual within the family, the offering is very simple, just a boiled chicken and a pack of sticky rice (Traditional of the Tay people,

after the sticky rice is cooked, it is wrapped with banana leaves or forest fern leaves), fruit cakes depending on the family; within the village or inter-village, apart from sticky rice, chicken and cake, there must be roasted pigs to offer.

In the production cycle, when they have chosen an auspicious day, they only burn incense and ask their ancestors for help in clearing the land and sowing seeds that are not destroyed by wild animals, rarely bringing offerings to the forest. Unless there are sick people in the house, cattle and buffaloes suddenly die, if fortune-tellers find ghosts (gods/devils) in a certain forest, accidentally causing alarm by cutting down the forest, they must prepare a ceremony to invite a high priest going to that forest and begged for forgiveness.

During the funeral, before entering the ceremony, Master Tao must prepare a ceremony tray to go out on the floor/outside the yard to ask for permission from the mountain god who governs this area to bless him so that he can perform the ceremony, to avoid the intrusion of evil spirits, eagles and owls, tigers...

People in the lowland have a saying “God of banyan tree, ghost of rice tree”, considering that these trees are all inhabited by gods, the Tay people also have the same opinion in mountainous areas. Not only each type of tree has a god, but on every deep water, a river, a stream,... there is ruled by a water serpent king, which the Tay people call a tua nguoc/phi nguoc, having the supernatural power to become a specific animal, can be described in shape and color to every detail such as a beard, a crest, but in reality no one has seen it. Because the ancestors said that, if anyone sees the water serpent, they will die or go crazy or that year the villagers will not be at peace... With such a concept, when worshipping water (not often), the Tay people pray for the water serpent itself (beg the water spirit) and not the water stream in general. Specifically, on the morning of the first day of the Lunar New Year, if you get up early to go to the stream to carry water, you must bring an incense card to ask the Water God to protect and continue to support water for the villagers. Like a well of Kinh people, with the concept that Well God is a god who directly affects village life, he is often worshiped all year round or on New Year’s holidays.

Water can wash everything away, so in funerals before burial, master Tao with his band of music drums, gongs and his descendants had to go to the stream to get water to wash the deceased’s face. At the stream bank, Master Tao chanted a passage asking Water Dragon King to ask for water, then he held his sword and pointed it down to the stream, the eldest son immediately took a pipe and scooped

it along the stream to bring back water (au nam mau, meaning to get new water), with the meaning of bathing the deceased one last time, getting rid of all suffering in the physical world, for the soul to be purified when going to heaven to meet the ancestors.

5. Discussion

Folk beliefs in general and worship of gods in particular of the Tay people have positive elements. Worshiping a god is protecting the village, creating a sacred rope connecting members of the village community. Those are the factors that create community cohesion and are also typical features in the spiritual life of the Tay people. Not only are there rich and diverse folk beliefs, but the cultural and artistic life of the people is also very diverse and rich. Therefore, the worship of gods and the concept of gods of the Tay people are a characteristic, there is a good meaning, to be traditional cultural values, customs and habits that need to be preserved and promoted.

The life experiences of the Tay people show them that, if they cannot conquer a danger, the best way to survive or to escape, or worship it. Because disaster cannot be avoided, they believe that the only way to limit it is to submit to and worship those supernatural forces. With a simple way of thinking and reasoning, the Tay people personified supernatural forces and gave them roles related to success or failure in life, from which the gods were born.

The gods in the minds of the Tay people are always perfect, without defects, all good things converge in the gods. So when they step foot to the place of worship, they all think that this is a sacred place, and they all show respect from gestures, dress neatly and speak very slowly. Therefore, the sacred place is also meant to arouse the honesty and sincere nature of people because they want to show their goodness in front of the gods, hope after that will be protected by the gods, helping to have a peaceful and healthy life.

According to the Tay people's concept, there are two types of gods: lucky gods and evil gods. Lucky

gods are worshiped by the Tay people, including ancestral ghosts (dam), earth gods (Thu ty/coc ban) who are the earth gods, kitchen ghosts (phi can phay/Ping Phay) who are the gods of the kitchen, ghosts (Mother Bjóoc/Mother va) is the protector of fertility and children, those who practice worship and those who specialize in preparing Southern medicine, worship the ancestors of the profession. Wrathful gods include forest ghosts (phi pa / phi dong), ghosts of rivers and streams (phi nguoc), mountain ghosts (phi slan or than)... are all kinds of aggressive gods that are demanding and harass people. However, the distinguishing boundary between good and bad gods are only relative, any god can bring happiness or harm to people, if people behave badly. These gods are stratified mainly according to the family, village and nature levels.

6. Conclusion

In short, the gods are the companions of mankind up to now. The existence of the gods is due to man's inability to interact with nature, society, and when people have not yet been able to control and regulate it, they must obey and pray for god to protect, help to overcome all damage and risks. Thus, humans have implicitly accepted it, so that in everyday life, people cannot pay attention to or respect the gods. But will the gods exist forever with humans or not? That is a question that seems to have an answer, and it seems that there is no final answer. Of course, if humans ceased to exist, then gods would also have no reason to exist.

Belief in worshiping gods carries a high responsibility and community of the villagers in the rituals of the New Year. Moreover, up to now, in human life, people have always faced difficulties in natural disasters and epidemics in working life, pains due to diseases and contradictions that people cannot solve by themselves. People often pray to the gods to help them get rid of the accident and everything will be at peace. Although this is unthinkable, it is also true that people have beliefs beyond nothingness, and have a good meaning.

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TÍN NGƯỠNG THỜ THẦN CỦA NGƯỜI TÀY VÙNG VIỆT BẮC

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Tín ngưỡng thờ thần là một trong những thành tố của văn hóa tinh thần phổ biến ở Việt Nam, mang những đặc trưng riêng của vùng miền. Việc thờ thần, ngoài tỏ lòng biết ơn công lao của thần đối với dân tộc, đất nước và xóm làng, còn là sự mong cầu các vị thần sẽ che chở, bảo vệ cho dân làng trước các biến cố do thiên nhiên và xã hội đem đến. Đây chính là mục đích cao nhất của tín ngưỡng thờ thần. Bởi theo quan niệm của người Tày, thần linh có nhiều chức năng phép thuật, có thể giáng phúc cứu giúp, che chở cho dân làng, nhưng cũng có thể giáng họa khi con người làm điều được cho là sai trái với thần linh.

Bài viết này nêu giá trị tín ngưỡng thờ thần, một số quan niệm về thần linh của người Tày nhằm bảo tồn và phát huy những giá trị văn hóa truyền thống, phong tục tập quán của đồng bào, bởi thần linh trong tâm thức của người Tày lúc nào cũng tốt đẹp. Đó là những yếu tố tạo nên sự cố kết cộng đồng và cũng là nét đặc trưng trong đời sống tâm linh của người Tày.

Từ khóa: *Tín ngưỡng; Thần linh; Đa thần; Tổ tiên; Văn hóa; Dân tộc Tày; Vùng Việt Bắc.*