

BRÂU RITUAL PRACTICES: PERFORMING CULTURE, SEEKING SOLUTIONS, AND TRYING 'MORE POWERFUL BUDDHISM'

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Introduction

The Brâu (or Brao, Prao) constitute an interesting case study within Vietnam's numerous ethnic groups. Living in the borderlands of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, they are facing precarious political, economic, cultural, and ritual conditions. Focusing on the ritual life of this people, this paper illustrates how their ritual practices today are much more complex than that of a 'traditional agricultural group'.

A border group

The Brâu speak a Mon-Khmer language from the Bahnaric branch. All Brâu people of Vietnam currently live in a frontier village, 10km from the Lao, Vietnam, Cambodia border junction (Dak Me village, Bo Y commune, Dak Glei district, Kontum province). With a population of only about 400 within Vietnam's territory they are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Vietnam. In other word, they might be seen as "a nearly-extinct (*tuyệt chủng*) group" – as one district cadre responsible for cultural issues put it to draw my attention to the Brâu group as well as to explain why this group have received many economic, social, cultural supporting programs from the state in order to preserve, to save their community. Actually, there is a remarkable number (total 27,700) of Brâu people living just across the border, on Lao and Cambodian territory. As a villager taught me about the history of the Brâu, they used to live together in a large valley called Dak Me (Me river) which now belongs to the Cambodian side. After the victory of the North Vietnamese Communists in 1975, the border lines between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were demarcated; this separated the original Brâu Dak Me people into different national zones.

The small Brâu group in the current Dak Me village in Vietnam is dealing with this situation. On the one hand, as a "nearly-extinct group" they have been the subject of many supporting projects from the government. On the other hand in daily life, they keep going across the border to visit their relatives, looking for future partners, and exploring land for cultivating or for ritual exchanges. Modernity has affected Brâu spiritual life. Vanished agricultural 'technical rituals' have reappeared in cultural heritage performances; curing rites still play a role in addition to hospital treatment. The Brâu people have also started trying what they consider more effective rituals of state-considered religions such as as Buddhism in order to solve worldly difficulties.

There are stories which I have learnt from Thao La, a Brâu man in his late 50s who hosted me during my stay in Dak Me village (January 2016).

From agricultural technical rituals to heritage performances

Like other groups living in the Central Highlands, the Brâu used to practice agricultural technical rituals for every step of a rice crop (choosing land; clearing land; seeding; harvesting, etc.). Since 1975, when they arrived at their current settlement, the Brâu have been under the state's fixed cultivation scheme (*định canh định cư*) which means they had to abandon their custom of doing shifting cultivation. "Since then, almost all of the agricultural rituals have gone", Thao La states. "We only do them [rituals] when the government opens their pocket, investing money for us to run certain rituals as cultural events in this village or as performances in Hanoi. That's it. If we were still doing shifting cultivation on our former mountainous fields, there would be still rituals". Their rituals today are mainly curing practices for sick people.



Thao La and his wife in Brâu traditional costume

Curing sick people: between scientific hospital and spiritual rituals

Almost every Brâu family in Dak Me village has a ritual column in front of their house. It is sign that a buffalo offering ritual has been performed in order to appease ancestors' ghosts to spare sick persons; or to wish for good luck. Besides this, Brâu people also do small rituals which involve offering a chicken and a jar of wine to treat certain light illnesses. Two years ago, Thao La's wife became ill. More than one month's treatment in hospital had not brought any positive result. La's wife was approaching a critical condition; she was almost unable to eat anything. La decided to go to ask a fortune teller for advice. After a small guessing-ritual using a chicken's egg to check what was happening to La's wife, the fortune teller said that her illness was due to Thao La's father's ghost wanting to "eat" a buffalo.

A buffalo offering ritual was then held four days later. Many of La's relatives and friends from far

away (Mo Ray, Đak Xu) came to attend. The ritual cost Thao La approximately 25 million VNDs (1,100 USD). "You know, in the ritual, just when we brought the buffalo home, even when we had not offered it yet, my wife could sit up and ask to eat rice soup. She is fine now since the ritual as you can see, right?" he asked me. I asked Thao La what he thought about the state's and outsider's criticism that their rituals, especially offering buffalo rituals, are truly unscientific and wasteful? La replied, "I know what outsiders say. It is a modern time now and our rituals disturb government. But, first of all, one must understand that we never do rituals randomly. There must be a reason to do rituals, for instance to heal sicknesses or to ask for good luck. As in the case of my wife: I had brought her to the district and province hospital but she had not been healed. In this case, a ritual must be performed even if it would cost 10-20 million VNDs. It means that you have tried every chance to help a sick one". I asked him what would happen if a ritual cannot heal a sick person. Thao La responds: "It is also something normal, like being treated in hospital. One family may have paid 100-200 million VNDs treating an ill member in a good hospital in HCM city but their patient may die ultimately. It's fate! Doing rituals is like processing treatments. When we have done all but the patient still dies in the end, at least we have tried all the options".



“Please let me know which ghost harms me?": Fortune teller was doing a testing-ritual for a patient

Trying “more powerful Buddhism”

Some Brâu families, including Thao La’s family, have recently begun to ask a female Vietnamese ritual master to perform rituals to ward off bad luck (*giải xui*) from their family. The female master has been Thao La family’s friend for a long time. She runs a private temple at home; Thao La understands, considers and explains to me that the temple is a general Buddhist temple, “a place for worshiping Buddha” (*noi thờ Phật*) as La’s words. “During that time, my family had met many unlucky things”, Thao La explains to me why he asks for the Vietnamese ritual. “Try to quit that situation; we had done Brâu rituals but bad things still there. I then try a Vietnamese ritual”. The rite was held in Vietnamese style, which cost him nearly 2 million VNDs. Responding to my question whether that ritual works, La said that “things seem just a bit better; I do not know”. He then repeats his usual argument: “but at least we have nothing to regret because we have tried all the possibilities”.

Thao La even tries asking help from Buddhist temple in Laos. He shows me one picture of him, his wife, and his son and family, who are

living in Laos. They were standing in front of one of a very famous Buddhist temple in Atapeu, Laos; the picture was from a trip in August 2015. Going to the temple, Thao La has learnt from his son to ask for rituals conducted by monks (*a chan*) asking about his future. But most importantly La asks *A Chan* to do special harmful rituals in order to attack his debtors in Laos who had owed to La money from a gong-and buffalo-exchange business for over ten years ago but avoided paying it back. The ritual cost him 4,000 Laos Kip. Thao La happily shows me a buffalo as the first result of the effective ritual. He said that, this kind of ritual was only effective when repeated frequently; monthly is the best. “I will keep going to that temple [to ask for the harmful ritual] until all debts are paid back”, he affirms.

I asked him why he chose to ask for help from the Vietnamese ritual master and to go to a Laos Buddhist temple. Could a Brâu ritual master not perform certain rituals to remove a family’s bad luck, to read one’s future, or to help him to demand payment of debts? Are those Buddhist spiritual rites more powerful than those of Brâu ritual masters? Thao La explained to me that there are Brâu-style rituals for getting rid of one’s own or one’s family’s bad luck, but the ritual run by Vietnamese female master is different in that the female master uses special talismans (*bùa*) and written prayers in her ritual. “It looks more forceful than what Brâu ritual masters do as they only pray to Gods [*yang*] using words”, La evaluates. He then adds, “the Buddhist temple also has its *yang* [God] – its Buddha”. Moreover, in La’s eyes, the Buddhist temple must be authoritative because it is considered by the government as not as strict as in the case of Christian Church. “To be considered by the state, Buddhism must be more powerful (*có quyền hơn*)” Thao La concludes.



Thao La and his family in front of a Buddhist temple (Attapeu, Laos)

Conclusion

The stories that a Brâu man has shared with me illustrate the complexity of the ritual/spiritual life of an upland group today. Natural Gods (*yang*) of rain, wind, rivers, streams, and land who used to support for the Brâu's shifting cultivation of crops now mainly appear in heritage performances. Traditional healing rituals still play a role besides hospital treatment. Recently, powerful rituals performed by masters from an authoritative religion such as Buddhism have become effective solutions for them to rely on in order to solve their worldly difficulties.