

## **Mother goddess worship a unique characteristics in Vietnamese spiritual life**

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### **Abstract**

Analyzing the establishment and development of Mother worship in Vietnamese spiritual and cultural life. Emphasizes is placed on the crucial and objectively established link to wet rice cultivation in the genesis and development of Mother worship belief. Vietnamese people have always lived in harmony with the nature, appreciated morality, respected women especially the mothers who gave birth to and fed their children. Therefore, from the Northern to the Southern borders of Vietnam, the image of Mother has always been supernatural as well as moral support for those experiencing difficulties and misfortunes. Based on these points, the paper clarifies cultural, philosophical, moral and art values integral to Mother worship as well as somehow explains current extrasensory perception in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Belief, Mother, Vietnames Mother worship, spiritual life.

### **Introduction**

In more than 4000 years of existence and development, many types of beliefs and religions have been introduced into and generated in Vietnam, reflecting a diverse history and culture. They include Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity and Maxism. In this mix, Mother Goddess worship, as a unique characteristic of Vietnamese spiritual life, deserves focus. My research studies mother goddess worship. "Van Cat Goddess" by female writer Doan Thi Diem. "Tale of Princess Lieu Hanh" by Nguyen Cong Tru and "Collection of books in Chinese - Nom characters on legend of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh" by Kieu Oanh Mau are some among prose's and poems which mentioned the above topic first. This early writing he authors has sculptured the image of Mother Goddess Lieu and other mother goddesses as saints often helping poor people and fighting against focuses of violence. By the middle of twentieth century, a few French scholars such as M/Durand (*Technique et pantheon de Mediem Vietnamiens*); P.J. Simon, I.Simon- Barouch (*Hau dong, un cult de Vietnamien de poseion transplants*) delved into the phenonmenon of "going into trance" that marked mother goddess worship of Vietnamese people.

Since Renovation (*Doi moi*, 1986), Vietnam has had a clear view on belief and religious issues, so after the National Conference on Mother Goddess held by Institute of Cultural Studies in Vietnam at the Temple of Literature (Hanoi), academic research into the nature of mother goddess worship have escalated with a series of publications. Among them are Nguyen Dang Duy (1996), *Spiritual culture*; Phan Ngoc (1998), *Cultural identity of Vietnam*; Ngo Duc Think (2009), *Mother goddess religion in*

Vietnam, volume 1 and volume 2; Ho Duc Tho (2000), *Epilogue of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh*; Vu Hong Van (2017), *Taoism and expressions in Vietnamese folk beliefs*. These works have outlined the basic characteristics of mother goddess worship beliefs and how these both influence and are influenced by contemporary Vietnamese society.

Building on this knowledge, the current work explores the issue of mother goddess worship from a philosophical standpoint, posing and answering questions such as: What is the genesis of mother goddess worship? How is goddess mother worship manifested through rituals? What are the historical value and modern meaning of mother goddess worship in Vietnam?

Research to achieve these goals, applies philosophical methods, such as the unification method of logic and history, of chronology and synchrony, comparison and other methods of religious studies, sociology, psychology, etc. It should be noted that in Vietnam there are now a number of arguments surrounding the name of the mother goddess worship. Phan Ngoc (1998) calls it "mother goddess cult", while Ngo Duc Think (2008) - calls it "mother goddess religion". In our view, mother goddess worship is not qualified to be identified as a religion (because of lack of head of religion, dogma, religious law and religious association), and it is not true to the substantial aspect of the issue when it is called "mother goddess cult". Thus it should be called "mother goddess worship".

### **Origin of mother goddess worship in Vietnam**

*Any form of belief arises, exists and changes depending on the creating and nurturing subject (Man) in certain spatial and temporal contexts, so we call it three dimensions: M - S - T, and analyze the origin of mother goddess worship based on this model.*

- *Man dimension (M):* The Vietnamese is a common concept used to denote the entire population living in Vietnam, comprising 54 ethnic groups, of which Kinh is a majority ethnic group. With ethnic identity, Vietnamese people are of negative, emotional, feminine-inclined type, respecting for women, especially the mother who gives birth and brings up each person. Vu Ngoc Khanh said, "Mother creates children, taking care of children from the day they are in the cradle until mother dies". Since the first days of human history, people knew only the mother, did not know the father. The formation of society must also go through the first stage of the matriarchal period. Hence, in the view of humankind, the image of the mother is indispensable "(Vu Ngoc Khanh, 2012, p.11). Matriarchy was the historical stage in which women's roles were valued. As we all know, since ancient times, men were in charge of hunting, seeking food for their families. But food sources were very precarious because not every hunt had results. At the same time, women at home in charge of farming, breeding or gathering made up a stable source of food. In addition, in the matriarchal system, the community lived in a spontaneous fashion, and children only knew mothers - perhaps an important factor, a profound source of mother goddess worship in Vietnam.

- *Space dimension (S):* Vietnam is geographically located at the junction of the Indochinese peninsula, bordered by the sea on three sides with intermittent river flows, a hot and humid climate, heavy rain and sunny, unpredictable weather, storms and floods regularly hit impeding the advantages to be taken of agriculture.

In Vietnam, forests, hills and mountains make up three-fourths of the land area. Although there are two major rich rice-growing plains: northern and southern, the harvest depends largely on the weather. Living and working in a diverse and complex ecological environment, the Vietnamese cannot help but accept reliance on the natural gift of nature. Nature in the mind of the Vietnamese is the mother who nurtures humans. Nature is also a god, who governs the rules of eating and life and death. This reasoning is expressed in ideas such as "thanks to the sun and the rain for a harvest" (folk songs), "new or wish in heaven" (Nguyen Du), "intrigue in the core, success in the heaven" (proverb). Heaven here is personified into the mother image of the motherland, people, community and each specific person.

- *Time dimension (T)*: According to some researchers, mother goddess worship dates back to prehistoric time when Vietnamese people recognized the close relationship between nature and human life. They worshipped gods representing heaven, earth, river, and mountain and saw the gods as having superhuman ability to control the gratuitous law of nature and so, help people catch and cultivate necessary food, thereby potentially bring their worshippers happiness, wealth and longevity.

From an historical point of view, it can be said that the mother goddess worship originated from the tradition of worshipping Mother Au Co who gave birth to a hundred eggs hatching one hundred children. This is a well known origin myth as to the origin of the one hundred Viet tribes. It has given rise to the custom of worshipping the Vietnamese Rice Fairy. The worship of Mother Au Co is a tribute to the origin of the nation, so Vietnamese people all over the region call each other as "compatriots", while worshipping the Rice Fairy expresses gratitude and, respect for the mythical creator of Vietnam life. Both of these customs reflect the common humanity and shared moral principle "drink water, remember its source, eat the fruit, remember the planter".

In terms of catalytic factors shaping Mother Goddess worship across time, it can be said that the arrival of Taoism from China in the second century is a factor promoting the spread of mother goddess worship in Vietnam. Practices of rituals in worship (going into trance, going into saint) within Mother Goddess worship have the appearance and tone of Taoism. In addition, cult of ancestor worship, worship of tutelary spirit, worship of national heroes also increases the spirituality of mother goddess worship.

Mother goddess worship in Vietnam is defined in three basic points: the Vietnamese person with a negative personality; agro-ecological space - rural - farmer, crop failure; time axis over 4000 years of history along the ups and downs due to natural disasters and war. On such coordinates, Vietnamese live and experience spirituality, in which mother goddess worship is seen as a pure Vietnamese identity spreading from north to south, from the upstream to the downstream regardless of class.

### **1. Expressions and rituals in mother goddess worship**

Mother goddess worship is a purely Vietnamese spiritual phenomenon, so the expression and ceremonies are also full of Vietnamese cultural identity. Here we may sketch the appearance of some of the main mother goddesses worshiped by the people.

- *Mother goddesses in mother goddess shrines in northern Vietnam.* In the mother goddess shrines in northern Vietnam, typically in Nam Dinh, Hanoi, Lang Son, there are usually four mother goddesses, called four palaces.

*The first is the Thien mother* - the most important goddess, called the Queen of the world, in charge of the heaven, cloud, rain, thunder - four nature guardians. On the altar of the "goddess", the goddess Thuong Thien (or Heaven or Paradise) is in the central position. In the folk concept, God mother Lieu Hanh is considered the embodiment of the paradise. The story of God mother Lieu Hanh is quite detailed in "Van Cat Goddess" by Doan Thi Diem (early eighteenth century) and "Treasures of Vietnamese fairy tales" by Nguyen Dong Chi. According to these legends, she is the daughter of God, so she is called a princess, first referred to as the daughter of Le Thai Cong - a small member of An Thai village, Van Cat commune, Vu Ban district. After marrying Tran Cong's son named Dao Lang, she gives birth to a son, then a girl, and follow her father to heaven on March 3. The location of Van Cat village has been later built into a shrine by the local people and called Day temple and the date of *March 3rd* has been taken as the death anniversary of the mother, according to the saying: "August is father's death anniversary, March is mother's death anniversary." Subsequently Princess Liễu Hạnh was born and came to live in places such as Thanh Hoa, Ngang mountain pass (Ha Tinh), West Lake (Hanoi), Lang Son and people have marked this by building altars or temples.

*Second, the Thoai mother is the Goddess of living waters (rivers, lakes, sea).* According to the authors of "Goddesses of Vietnam", Thoai is the wife of King Thuy Te, who is worshiped by the villagers of Vi Xa commune, Yen Phong district, Bac Ninh province. Another legend says that she is the daughter of Long Vuong who lived in Dong Dinh Lake (China) and she is a very filial daughter and grows up married to Kinh Xuyen (the son of King of Land). She is filial wife but she is betrayed and arrested in the cage and put into the forest by her husband. Thanks to messenger who give this news to her father, she is rescued. Her God statue wearing white clothes is worshiped in the Thuong Temple (Tuyen Quang) located on the left bank of Lo River, also known as Quang Thuan Temple (Phan Ngoc 1998).

*Third, the Thuong mother is the God of the mountainous areas* - the living areas of ethnic groups. This is a large and complex area, containing many animals, fruits and forest products for human life. She is worshiped in two places: Suoi Mo (Bac Giang) and Bac Le (Lang Son).

The story associated with the place of Suoi Mo said that in the reign of Hung Dinh Vuong, Queen An Nuong is pregnant without birth. Until the third year when the queen is going to play in the forest, she gives birth to a girl named My Nuong Que Hoa. The Queen dies at that moment. Growing up and listening to the story of the mother, Que Hoa determines to mount the mountains looking for her mother. Being compassionated, a grandfather fairy appears to give her miraculous powers. She uses that miracle to help the villagers become prosperous. One day, there is a cloud of five colors to welcome Que Hoa up to heaven. Since then the people has honored her as the Queen of the mountainous area and set up the temple (Vu Ngoc Khanh, 2006).

The legend relating to the temple of Bac Le, Huu Lung, Lang Son said that Thuong mother is a princess La Binh, Son Tinh and My Nuong. She is just beautiful, good

and philanthropic and is titled as Thuong Princess governing 81 forest gate of Nam Giao land. Legend says that she teaches people to take water to crops to cultivate seeds, bring back many livestock breeds and grows fragrant grass flowers from the mountain forests. She repeatedly warns Le Loi to avoid the dangers of the resistance war against the Ming (Do Thi Hao, 1980).



This photograph depicts mother goddesses: *Thien mother, Thoai mother and Thuong mother*. *Thien mother* is Lieu Hanh mother.

These three Gods form the triangle temples, later to perfect the model of the universe, people add a *fourth goddess, called Mother Earth - representing the God* in charge of the land like all living things in the land, all the things that are in the earth.

- *The goddess on the sanctuary of Central Vietnam*. In the central area, there are two main worship centers, Hon Chen Palace and Thap Ba Tower.

*Hon Chen Palace* is located on Ngoc Tran mountain, Ngoc Ho village, Huong Ho ward, Huong Tra town, Thua Thien Hue province. Ngoc Tran (meaning cup of jade), folk are still accustomed to call Hon Chen because it is related to the anecdote of King Minh Mang dropping the cup of jade. Hon Chen Temple is the original temple worshipping PoInur Nagar of Cham people. According to the legend, he is the son of the God who has the merit of creating the earth and all kinds of wood, with flavor sweet rice. Receive from Cham people, the Vietnamese have translated PoInur Nagar into Yana Thien. On the shrine, Thien Yana sitting between the two Goddesses : Thoai Mother and Thuong Mother.

*Ponagar Nha Trang Tower* is a Cham PoInur Nagu Temple by the Cham people. According to the legend, he is the God who turns himself into the beautiful girl in the orchard of an elderly couple with no children in Dai An village, Khanh Hoa province. Due to missing her old countryside, the girl transcends into an agarwood, drifting to the sea before floating ashore in the land of China where she charmed the prince, then once again turn herself to the tree, drifting back to the old countryside. At that time, her elderly parents dies and she set up a worship shrine at Mount Dai Chi, from which the girl is often represented as a mother goddess of good works (Nguyen Dang Duy, 1996, p.136).

- *Mother goddess on the temple in the South*. When moving into South Vietnam, due to the changing ecological space, the religious beliefs have changed significantly. The two main centers of worship in the south are Linh Son Mother - Ba Den (Tay Ninh) and the temple of lord of area - Ba Chua Xu (An Giang).

*Linh Son Mother Goddess - Ba Den* is worshiped in a cluster of pagodas on the mountain suddenly rising in the middle of the plain (higher than 1000 m above sea level), so the folk call Mot mountain. There are many different legends of goddess worship here. In one such legend the tale is of a very famous indigenous officer named Đênh. He is

eaten by the tiger and his soul is dreamt by the monk and he is set up the temple by scared people, gradually called deviate to Den.

*Ba Chua Xu temple* is located on Sam mountain, Sam Mountain ward, Chau Doc town, An Giang province. Researchers are unclear about the background of Ba Chua Xu because the statue worshiped here has been restored many times, changing its appearance markedly from the original. According to Ngo Duc Thinh, the PoInu Yana is the identity of the goddess worship in the South. Thus, the center of the northern goddess is Princess Lieu Hanh, while the center of the centre and southern goddess is the Po Inuya Yana or also known as Mother Yana.

- *"Going to trance" - a special ritual in the worship of Mother*

Mother goddess worship is not merely a submission of offerings (flower incense, fruit and cakes), but is associated with specific rituals such as *going into trance, chant sung for a trance or going to heaven*. The same is a form of expression of ancient Shaman, "is a way of communicating with the God, or the God entering the soul of the sorcerer master, or the sorcerer master going up to the heaven to see God. It is "going to trance" to hypnotize the surrounding people and therefore the sorcerer master makes people believe in the supernatural" (X.A. Tocarev, 1994, p.330). "Going to trance" is the kind of direct religion that people and gods are directly related to each other through Medium stage - it is the individualistic religion, ie the experience of each person "(Nguyen Duy Hinh, 2007, p. Going to trance is an indispensable ritual in the worship of the goddess. The servant of the bargain called Thanh Dong, the male is called "he", the female is called "she or madam." There are many "titles" in the field. When Thanh Dong became a general as a major, a reincarnation of a dancing girl. The dance of Thanh Dong varies with the character of "title." "Title" of a major is usually flag dance, sword dance, long dagger, jack; while title of a madam is fan dance, pre-dance, hand dance; Title of the prince are the dragon dance, flag dance; Title of the girl is the dance fan, flower dance, rowing, embroidered dance, silk scarf dance, dance; Title of the boy is dragon dance, lion dances. Thanh Dong giving the money which are considered to be the benefits of the goddess, so people pick up and keep (not spend) for the luck.



*"Going to trance" - a special ritual in the worship of Mother. Nguôn.*

The song of going into trance is also a unique feature, usually the song "is the essay by the archivist compiled to praise the god "... The purpose of singing is to create

atmosphere for the introduction, identity, characteristics, features of the gods who are going into trance, accompanied dance ... the singing rhythms cover all the songs from the northern delta, chamber music, any folk performance, folk songs, mountain folk songs, dances "(Phan Ngoc, 1998, p. 381).

*The musical instrument* is the lute, the beat, the flute, the drum, the gong. Folk opinion is that when going into trance, the soul of the dead entered her/his body to talk to the relatives witnessing the "going into trance" performance (called incense person, disciples). Through chat, the living person will know the requirements of the deceased grave to adjust and worship accordingly, the living also (Holy Spirit) told his future destiny (pain, sick, to do or not to do, or anything).

## 2. Socio-cultural values and a new expression of mother goddess worship in Vietnam

Mother goddess worship is a phenomenon associated with real life which should meet the values of philosophy, social psychology, culture, ethics and politics. Those values from the formation and until now have not faded but consolidated in the direction of modern.

- *The cultural and social values of mother goddess worship in Vietnam*

*On the philosophical aspect*, mother goddess worship reflects the generalized and symbolized thought of Vietnamese. Vietnam is the country of the wet-rice civilization with a cultural constellation of three farming factors: agriculture, rural areas and farmers. In such a space of living, from ancient times to modern times, it is embodied in Vietnamese thought of that central to life is agriculture and this includes culturally highlighting essential elements for agriculture such as weather, land, water and plants. That is why there has been deification and personalization of natural phenomena, attaching to them the power that governs the failure of farming. Of course, farmers seeking rain with good wind, lush crops, green trees then admire and worship Gods to ensure this outcome. In order to perform their functions, the divine power is divided among the rulers. Among them, Thien Mother dwells in the sky, ruling clouds, rain and lightning, Water gods reign in the waters and places with a density of rivers and large lake; gods of the Land dominate in the midland and plains where there are fields of cultivation; the Tree goddess reigns in the mountains and forests for trees to build houses and house wild animals. Nguyen Huu Thu said it is reasonable that "worshiping Mother Goddess is a cultural product of the Vietnamese in relation to nature and society, which is based on the rice farming system with the small farmers' rights central in a closed village environment" (Nguyen Huu Thu, 2008, p.1). The symbolic thinking of the Vietnamese expresses in the combination of worship of Mother goddess with the theory of five elements. Each of the gods wears a different dress color. Red, Yellow, White and Blue. These gods do not sit alone, but other gods (the king) and goddess (She) accompany and protect them.

*On the moral aspect*. On the "mother principle" (Tran Quoc Vuong), the Vietnamese are always grateful to the mother who gave birth and nourish themselves according to the principle of "drinking water remember the source, eat fruit miss planter". Hence, the cult of worship has a great educational function, directs the followers to good,

promotes the role of women, and the ideals of liberating women and men. The reality of human beings with their desire for health, fortune and luck is a need in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese, giving them strength, belief and attraction to all classes in society. When entering the shrine, there is a palpable mood of arousing virtue with a clear sincerity of disciples before god. When praying, the disciple says that all prayers will be sacred because of the holy ones, so believe in it, the faith awakens and urges the realization of the objects in ideal form. In it, the cult of worshiping performs the function of providing cohesion to community on the principle of: the community - the benefit - the destiny - the compassionate. The formation of Thien Yana is a typical example. Both the Vietnamese, the Cham, the Khmer and the Chinese worshiped a goddess, showing solidarity, accepting to unite each other in the midst of ethnic confusion. As a result, for generations to come, different ethnic groups have been living together peacefully with the Vietnamese in the South.

*On literary and artistic aspects.* The worship of the goddess is a source of inspiration for a line of folk literature - the lines of popular literature, such as *Viet Dien U Linh* (Ly Te Xuyen), *Linh Nam Chich Quai* (Tran The Phap), *Truyen Ky Man Luc* by Nguyen Du and *Truyen Ky Tan Pha* by Doan Thi Diem. These are ancient writings about Vietnamese legends and the origin of the gods.

Protestant worship has created sacred spaces of worship that respond to the spiritual needs of the public as well as destinations of tourists. Many works of visual art and Vietnamese painting art are also inspired by the worshiping models - the statues of the gods on the shrine, the folk lines of Dong Ho, the Hang Trong painting. The content and form of the performance of literary songs and poetry have literary values, which are the legendary treasure, the divine, the myth of the divine. It can be denied the stage value of the dance and music that are used to perform the work, and nowadays the "going into trance" happens with the participation of many professional stage actors for both artistic and economic purposes.

*Mother goddess worship reflects the peculiarities of Vietnamese cultural identity - a mixture of cultural and multi-cultural issues.*

The worship of the mother goddess absorbs rituals in the "going into trance" and the conception of the feng shui, the dwelling place of the Taoist elves. According to the Taoist conception, if the land has any war or disease epidemic, the fairy should appear to help people escape. In mother goddess worship, there is a Buddhist feeling, such as the conception of reincarnation, the law of cause and effect with happy ending motifs. Worshiping ancestors, worshiping national heroes, worshiping the lord is also present in the worship of the goddess. National heroes - those who have made great contributions to the defense of the country, such as Hai Ba Trung, Hoang Muoi, Tran Hung Dao, Pham Ngu Lao, Ba Chua Kho, etc. also worshiped on the shrine.

Mother goddess worship is not only found in the Kinh people but also in many ethnic groups in Vietnam. In the Muong people, the fairy rice is considered the most sacred form of the goddess because she brought the rice seed to the transplanted people. On the altar worship, the four kingdoms present many deities from ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, Dao.

*- Mother goddess worship with the current psychic problem in Vietnam.*

The current model of mother goddess worship in Vietnam has been transformed

by the market economy mechanism, manifested in the most extreme way by the phenomenon of psychoanalysts for the purpose of finding the grave for genealogy. The famous psychic such as Phan Thi Bich Hang (Hoang Anh Suong, 2016), Nguyen Ngoc Hoai (Nguyen Ngoc Hoai, 2012), Hoang Thi Thiem (Hoang Thi Thiem, 2017), apply their special ability to help many people find family genealogy, family line, find lost relatives. The ritual they used to be close to souls of dead people is the rite of Taoism.

The ability to find graves is real and many cases are verified by the family. The famous psychiatrist Hoang Thi Thiem - who is dubbed the third eye in the autobiography "Living between two worlds - Talking to the invisible world", said that from the age of 14 she had "dreamed of adventure to save flight to heaven". From then on, when looking up to heaven she often encountered the mother goddess in "majestic, gracious and gentle form" looking at me with both warmth and tolerance, and I try to work out every day. My teacher teaches me to eat, to learn to speak, and to transmit energy to me. The mother goddess also said she is a fairy on the tenth floor "(Hoang Thi Thiem, 2017, p.48, 61).

The decease to meet the dead souls is a modern form of "going into trance", which contains both the phenomenon of penance. Through the messages of death, the living has done much good for the dead, especially to find their lost burial site. Although not recognized by the State, but the phenomenon of finding graves of the deal are still being publicly announced. On the ethical side, this phenomenon is of great educational value, the sentimentalist Nguyen Ngoc Hoai wrote: "I am confident that the perception of a world that continues after death will make people live more mentally and love and less greed "(Nguyen Ngoc Hoai, 2012, p.15). GS.TS. Pham Duc Duong, director of the Oriental Research Institute, said: "The solution to build a sacred and eternal afterlife, to build a holy faith is not dead, I think is a positive solution to help people create the values of truth-good-aesthetic culture, make people love life more and not be too afraid to face death "(Nguyen Ngoc Hoai, 2012, p.7).

## Conclusions

Mother goddess worship is the crystallization of spiritual values and the reunion of the gods that reflect the identity of a culture of fusion between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism together with the characteristics of the Vietnamese nation connecting the past, the present and the future. Highly appreciate the cultural and social value of the worship of mother goddess, on December 1, 2016, at the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting session of the Inter-governmental Committee for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage at the city of Addis Ababa, the Democratic Republic of the Union of Ethiopia, the legacy of the "Vietnamese Mother Goddess Triangle Temple", was officially registered by UNESCO on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage Representatives of Humanity.

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