

The Impact of the Mother Goddess Worship in the Cultural Life of the Present Day Vietnamese People

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Abstract: In the Vietnamese folk belief system, Mother Goddess worship is one of many pure and popular Vietnamese folk beliefs with a long history, containing the philosophy of life, imbued with Vietnamese cultural identity and holds a special position in the spiritual activities of Vietnamese people; is a part of spiritual need of the people. Through the process of formation and development, the belief of Mother Goddess in Vietnam has developed to form the belief of Three Palaces, Four Palaces, in addition there is Earth Palaces. In the context of society increasingly heavily influenced by marketization, people often face insecurity, anxiety, crisis, Mother Goddess worship has become a solid support for people spirit. From the field studies (survey and participation) combined with qualitative research (in-depth interviews), the research results help to reaffirm the role and value of Mother Goddess worship in spiritual cultural life of the Vietnamese people nowadays.

Keywords: Mother Goddess, beliefs, culture, spirituality

1. Introduction

In recent years, religious life in Vietnam has had a revival and strong development. Which is the restoration and transformation of many forms of belief, traditional religion, the diversity of religious practices, rituals and especially the appearance of new religious phenomena on a larger scale, more novel forms, promoted by many different reasons, such as the development of economic, cultural and social life; changes in guidelines, policies, globalization context associated with the rise of the market society ... have made the religious and religious life of Vietnamese people today take on a new color that is more diverse and complex. ¹ Belief and religious activities are considered a part of social life and cultural life, meeting the cultural and spiritual needs of people. In particular, beliefs and religions have become a trusted spiritual resource, a measure of "psychotherapy" for people to have a more positive and meaningful real life. It can be said that, among the beliefs and religions in Vietnam today, Mother Goddess worship is a belief that has existed for a long time and is quite popular in the cultural life of Vietnamese people. Compared with many other folk beliefs, the Mother Goddess religion has gone through many ups and downs (there was a time when it was banned and considered superstitious) but it still silently existed despite all threats, society's prejudices and rumors.

2. Origin, formation and development of Mother Goddess worship beliefs in Vietnam

The belief in Mother Goddesses is an indigenous belief and may be one of the earliest beliefs of Vietnamese people before the introduction of the Three Religions: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Some researchers believe that the custom of worshiping the Mother Goddess dates back to prehistoric times when the Vietnamese worshiped the gods of nature combined with the belief in goddess worship very well in the matriarchal society (calling the goddess by the following name "Mẹ-Mẫu-Mé").²

Through the process of cultural acculturation, the original belief of worshiping mother nature has merged with other religions to become a unique indigenous belief of Vietnam. For a long time, ancient Vietnamese society operated according to the matrilineal system, so the mother played a very important role not only in the family but also in the daily activities of the clan, not only in the physical life but also in the spiritual life. Because, even in a matriarchal or patriarchal society, women keep the reproductive function, maintain the race, and create the main labor force for society.

From an economic perspective, under the matrilineal system, women play a key role in farming and animal husbandry and are also the master of the family's economy. Therefore, women become not only the center of material life but also the center of spiritual life. That leads to a sense of honoring women - mothers not only within the family but also within the clan. The worship of the Mother Goddess (Mẫu) as a figure with her powers of reproduction, protection and protection for people has easily entered the folk life, deeply rooted in the society and spiritual life of every human.³

If considered from a cultural perspective, the belief of Mother Goddess worship also comes from a typical wet rice farming civilization. For the agricultural population, the image of a mother from gathering has found a grain of rice to become the soul of rice. Among the crops, rice is the only plant in the period of doing

work that is called by the ethnic groups in Indochina “có Chừa” (Việt) = “Bun” (Coho) = “Mtian” (Giarai) as the mother; is the only tree “có Hôn” (Việt) = “Soan” (Coho)... For Vietnamese people in particular as well as Southeast Asians in general, who live on wet rice farming, the attachment to nature is even longer and stronger. The simultaneous dependence on many different factors of nature leads to consequences in the field of thinking which is synthetic thinking and in the field of belief which is polytheism, the negative nature of agricultural culture. The result in the field of social relations is an emotional lifestyle, respecting women, and in the area of religion, the prevalence of goddesses. And because the goal that Vietnamese people aim for is prosperity, our goddesses are not beautiful young girls but mothers and Mother Goddess. First of all, it is “Bà Trời”, “Bà Đất”, “Bà Nước” – the goddesses who govern natural phenomena, the most important and closest to the lives of wet rice farmers. Later, although due to the influence of nomadic Chinese culture, there were more which is Jade Emperor, Lord Of The Soil And The Ground, The God of Water, but the custom of worshiping this trio of goddesses still circulated in the folk in the form of Three Palaces with Goddess of Heaven (also called “Mẫu Cửu Trùng” or is “Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ”). “Mẫu Thượng Ngàn” and “Mẫu Thoải” (= Thủy) – govern the three regions of heaven, earth, and water.⁴

From real life, the people living by farming like the ancient Vietnamese have realized that there is a similarity between land, water, tree and mother in “yin nature”, hence the way it is called Mother Tree, Mother Earth, Mother Water is formed. But folk believe that the rain is decided by the sky, so the mother of heaven is honored. Mother is the symbol, the source of birth and growth. From that awareness, in their mind, the ancient Vietnamese deified their mother, treating her as a god.

During its development, the belief in Mother Goddesses was preserved during the process of building and defending the country of the Vietnamese nation by historical stories as well as legends about national heroes. That spirit of patriotism and love for the people is recorded in history books by the legends, then people based on that to create festivals, and the performance form of “votive dance”. The undying belief in the victory of good over evil, and boundless reverence for the national heroes (born as generals, at other times deities) have made the mother worship belief lasting in spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Through the form of “votive dance” worshiping Mother Goddesses, directs people to the aspirations of a better and happier life and gives them the strength to believe in the good. In contemporary Vietnamese society, in the life of ordinary Vietnamese, women still hold a special position. In the minds of the people, the mother (Mother Goddess) is still considered to have force majeure. Mother became a permanent symbol in all manners of Vietnamese people. Therefore, in Vietnam the mother is honored as a separate religion - mother worship (Mother Goddess).

3. The role of mother goddess worship in spiritual cultural life of Vietnamese people

Vietnamese people's belief in Mother Goddess worship is the same, the role of spirituality is always throughout the process of formation and development. The spiritual element is shown most clearly in the “ritual practice of beliefs” (folklore also known as the ‘hau dong’). It can be said that Mother Goddess worship is a method to “settle the spirit” for Vietnamese people in today's life in terms of: seeking health security, livelihood security, and liberation in the world after death; looking for self-spiritual points in today's volatile real life... Specifically as follows:

(1) The Mother Goddess is the spiritual fulcrum of the people before the fluctuations in real life.

According to some Vietnamese cultural and philosophical researchers (Ngo Duc Thinh): Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship contains the spirit of existential philosophy: directing people's beliefs to earthly life. The Vietnamese mother's doctrine teaches that people who live good deeds will have a rich, healthy and happy life, otherwise, if they live evil, and will be punished. This faith spiritually manifests the character of a mother who is both benevolent and gentle but strict with her children...

In the context of a market society, there are increasingly clear impacts like today: money becomes a measure of all values, social morality is ruined, identity is eroded... for immediate benefits. Humans can commit unethical and inhumane acts. Currently, it is not difficult for us to come across news about corruption, murder, robbery, child trafficking, counterfeiting ... rampant in newspapers and on the internet. In the context of market society, money becomes a measure of value, the power of money has pushed people into the abyss of moral corruption, eroding individual and community identities. In the surveys we conducted in the Central Provinces of Vietnam from June 2020 to September 2022, it was found that: 86/91 respondents said that they came before the bar to pray for peace for their family, repent of their wrongdoings in life, hope to be freed from the limitations in life.. “Ms. L.N.M who is the principal of a kindergarten in Thanh Hoa shared that: Every month she goes to worship, on major holidays of the year she comes to votive dance (hầu đồng). According to her, going to worship is to pray for peace in the family, that all family members do not get sick, and that the children in the preschool study, progress and be obedient. According to the sexagenary cycle, this year, she had a deadline, so she went to the medium lady to ask for a relieve “Ms. N.T.H, a seller at a market in Hue, shared

with us the following: She was very sad when she learned that her husband had an affair with another woman, their daughter knew her father had a lover, their daughter was upset and ran away from home for more than 10 days now. She came in front of the Mother Goddess to ask her to save her suffering, to neutralize her husband's karma, and to pray for her to bring peace to her daughter's family and bring her daughter back to her family".⁶

Many Vietnamese people come to the Mother Goddess with the belief that she is the protector of health, the god of justice, meeting all their wishes and aspirations. "From 2010 until now, husband and wife L.H. K and N.T.T in Quang Nam always go to worship the Mother Goddess very regularly, and Ms. T always participates in the votive dance on major holidays of the year. Two of them shared that: : In 2010, Ms. T was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the doctors diagnosed that the cancer cells had spread. This news made the whole family depressed, seemingly without a cure. In the village, someone took Ms. T to the Mother Goddess to ask for blessings and ask her to cure her illness. After returning from the visit to the Mother Goddess, he and his wife went for a re-examination to find out that the disease was at an early stage and had not been stretched and could be treated. From then on, he and his wife went to worship regularly to ask the Mother Goddess to bless his wife and family. By 2012, Ms. T's condition had completely recovered, and he and his wife believed that the Mother Goddess was the one who gave them faith and gave her a blessing to help Ms. T recover from her illness".⁷

(2) The Mother Goddess is the fulcrum for livelihood fortunes

From a livelihood perspective, we conducted interviews with people going to worship at the following places: Lieu Hanh Mother Goddess Temple (Quang Trach District, Quang Binh Province), Tu Phu Mother Goddess Temple (Hue City), "Bà Chúa Thượng Ngàn" temple (Da Nang city). At present, the picture of people's livelihood has changed quite diversely. Before 2010, the life of people in many localities such as Quang Trach or the coastal area of Hue depended heavily on agriculture and fishing, most of the people in Da Nang were small traders, exploiting fishery products. However, the strong development of the market economy in Vietnam has brought more luck (lucky and bad luck) to all classes of society, creating fierce competition and wealth division. The market economy and market society push people into a chaotic whirlpool between money and value, making many people feel empty, anxious and alone in their current life. Especially in the current post-covid-19 period, many people doing business and trading think that they feel insecure, their investment decisions have made mistakes due to lack of experience in forecasting market supply and demand. due to the influence of natural disasters, epidemics, etc., these are risks that they themselves could not have foreseen.

"Ms. N.Q, who sells souvenirs at "Cho Con", Da Nang - is an agile, dynamic person who always knows how to capture the tastes of tourists in choosing souvenir items, so that the imported goods are always popular with tourists. In early 2020, she imported goods in large quantities, including conical hats, innovative ao dai and products made from agarwood to catch the consumer tastes of Chinese tourists and Korean tourists. However, she did not expect that the covid-19 pandemic has made the city's tourism industry crippled, goods without buyers leading to obsolete. Currently, although Korean tourists have returned, consumer tastes have also changed, tourists no longer like to buy ao dai and conical hats as before".⁸

Or the story of H.T. K in Hue: "ince the first outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, Ms. K quickly imported a shipment of masks from Japan to sell with a value of more than 50,000 USD with the desire to export to China. But when imported, the shipment was of poor quality, regular customers did not receive the goods, which made her not to know whether to laugh or cry". Mr. L.H.D's family in Deo Ngang, Quang Trach, Quang Binh shared: "He and his wife were born in a difficult situation, he has been at the sea since he was 13 years old, his wife, Ms. N.H, stayed at home selling fish and taking care of children. Before 2016, the seafood resources of Quang Binh in general and the North Central Coast in particular were very rich and abundant. With a small wooden boat with 25 horsepower, each day he and his boatmates can earn an average of 125 USD. He and his wife decided to borrow money from a bank to build a new ship with the hope of fishing far from the shore and increasing the family's income. But unfortunately, the ship had just finished construction, before it was launched, the Formosa marine environmental incident occurred, causing his family and the family of a boatmate to fall into debt, so far only paying a part of the debt to the bank. While not going to the sea, Mr. D and his friends contributed capital to play in the stock market in the hope of having money to pay the bank. At first, I was not used to it, so I failed many times, but then I also won a big amount. But he thought it was luck. For good luck, he set up a Mother Goddess altar at home to pray for good luck. At that time, they were also very diligent in attending worshipping and participating in the Mother Goddess guild in Ngang Pass. He shared that worshipping Mother Goddess in the house gives him a strong belief that Mother Goddess will help him and his family".⁹

Unannounced events are always in a state of lurking, can strike at any time, robbing property and upsetting people's lives. "Struggling in the marketplace has transformed their lives, causing malfunction, a sense of helplessness and a sense of being controlled by distant, powerful, and invisible social forces".¹⁰ Saleminck

believes: "What really brings up a deep sense of economic vulnerability and insecurity is the influence of fickle market forces or unexplained business decisions, whose effects action that is not perceivable or predictable".¹¹ To reduce those constant worries, they turned to Mother Goddess with the belief that she would help them avoid terrible events that could happen. The forms of going worship, borrowing money, opening the palace, opening the government have become an effective way to build and strengthen trust in the help of the Mother Goddess in doing business, trade and many other productive labor activities. In these forms, the rite of passage plays an important role in creating the economic security (security of livelihood) of the followers – which is the customers.

The belief in blessings that will be bestowed by the Mother Goddess after worshiping, associated with randomness in creating opportunities, economic security, expensive trade, etc. has strengthened people's faith in Mother Goddess. In fact, research in some guilds has shown that borrowing – paying from Mother Goddess worship place has become very popular. Most people who come to borrow money think that borrowing money from the Mother Goddess - the divine blessings to do business will bring them a lot of luck, high profit opportunities. That is why, after hard working days, after expensive trade shipments, the borrowers do not forget to pay with the belief that "Mother Goddess is the owner of the vault", is the one who keeps the money and support them in doing business (lending them to do business). In addition, the people who came to borrow money from Mother Goddess worship place helped them position themselves, point them in the right direction, sponsor them in times of market volatility to preserve their capital. Therefore, most people doing business, selling, and business owners have faith in the help of the Mother Goddess. They believe that, if they put their trust in the Mother Goddess, they will get whatever they ask for.

(3) The Holy Mother is the fulcrum for belief in liberation

In Vietnamese culture in particular, Asian conceptions in general have faith in the soul's life after death. Through surveys in the localities, we have concluded that people go to worship not only to pray for peace, to do business smoothly... but also to pray for the deceased to be freed, to be at peace in a place of ecstasy. Many people go to the saints to ask the saints to call their souls to find the graves of people lost in the war. Salamin calls it "the search for existential safety" through connecting with the deceased and searching for the remains of the deceased through special rituals and the power of mediums (Mother Goddess children)...¹² In fact, the mediums and midwives have participated very effectively in this work - those who, after serving the saints, will have their souls transferred with the ability to prophesy spiritually and enter the soul.

*"With the heart to do good deeds and especially the spiritual ability in calling souls, finding the body of the dead people, Ms. L has a lot of visitors in the village, outside the village, neighboring areas and in other provinces. With the ability to see and interact with dead people, the medium lady L often helps families to meet the deceased, talk to them. After burning the incense, she asks the name, address, date of death, the medium lady will call up the soul of the deceased. She acts as an intermediary to let dead people enter her body and talk to family members. During some surveys at Miss L's shrine, I have witnessed many spirit calls, meetings between the living and the dead".*¹³

For Vietnamese people, "death without finding the body" is both a pain and an anxiety for family members. In addition to psychological reasons (anxiety, guilt, insecurity), cultural reasons (not full of filial piety), in other aspects, not completing spiritual work also makes family members feel worried because it might affect their life adversely: health, illness, disease, disadvantage in life, family happiness... They are afraid that when the dead person has not been properly buried, the soul will be? wandering, hungry, homeless, will rebuke and punish family members. Therefore, the search for the remains of the missing person is both a responsibility and an obligation of the living person and has a sacred and important meaning. They come to the Mother Goddess and ask for help from the medium man, medium woman *"Mr. N.V.A's family in Son Tra, Da Nang has a younger brother who was lost during the chaotic war (1975) and now does not know where he is. This made his family feel unassured and wanted to find a grave to bury him. Mr. N.V.A went to see her and asked the median lday N.M., she accepted to help. After a while of searching the area where his brother fought in the past, N.M found Mr. N.V.A brother whereabouts. The family came looking for it and indeed found it..."*¹⁴ As a result, *their family feel peace of mind, serenity and relief when their worries have been relieved - a "spiritual peace" in real life.*

In addition, many Vietnamese believe that the Mother Goddess has the ability to change their fate. Many unbelievable cases have been witnessed with our own eyes, for example, Ms. M.H.D in Hue was crazy and sick, but since the day she went to worship the Mother Goddess from July 2021 to till now, she has been better. The psychological state is relieved, the madness is no more, Ms. M.H.D has gradually led a normal life, re-integrated into the community. Some people claim that: *"Going worship helps them feel relieved and comfortable when they receive psychological, spiritual, health and work support and is blessed by the Holy being."* Or the case of Mr. L.H.Q in Trieu Son, Thanh Hoa shared: *"Since presenting and becoming a disciple of medium man K, every*

day I help him, meet and help people like myself, I feel happier, life has more meaning. What I like best is the fact that I don't have to find ways to hide my true gender anymore, can live as myself and find a safe environment for myself".¹⁵

4. Values and limitations of Mother Goddess worship beliefs in contemporary Vietnamese society

Through our research, we found that the Mother Goddess religion has its perks, and the Mother Goddess has become a necessary spiritual fulcrum in the uncertain context of contemporary society. In addition to the Mother Goddess, other figures worshiped in the Mother Goddess temples are real historical figures who are trusted and worshiped by the people. In Mother Goddess temples and shrines, there is always a space to worship heroes who have contributed to the country and are honored as saints by the people. Local people believe that the national heroes are children of heaven, sent by heaven to help the people and the country when there is a foreign invader, when they have won the victory, they will return to heaven. One of the special features in Mother Goddess worship is the honoring of the position and role of women. Through the images of Mother Goddess of Heaven, “Thánh Mẫu Thượng Thoải”, Mother Goddess of Mountains and Forests, Mother Goddess “Liễu Hạnh”... people have praised the merits of women and mothers in the family and society. From there, it shows the deep gratitude of Vietnamese children to their mothers. This spiritual value is the successor to the tradition of “When drinking water, remember the source”, Gratitude is the sign of noble souls: of the Vietnamese people. In addition, the practice of mother-worshiping beliefs also contributes to building a cultural lifestyle and educating people on good living ethics, especially the young generation.

The core value of the Mother Goddess religion is the Mother's good heart. People who come to Mother Goddess must have a bright mind, in life must show that they know right and wrong, live in harmony, know for the good of the community; In the family, they must practice filial piety, sincerely worship their ancestors, and above all, they must be grateful to the heroes who have contributed to the country and the people. Unlike many other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, etc., the practice of mother worship does not direct people to believe in liberation in the afterlife, but must be liberated in the mundane world, the present world, world where people need to have health and wealth. Those are positive wishes, consistent with the existential conception of people in the modern world.

However, in the current social context, the belief in Mother Goddesses is changing in a negative direction. Many people take advantage of Mother Goddess worship and votive dance seek personal gain and gain illicit wealth. The fact that there are now many forms of commercialization, the atricalization of the votive dance, distorting the form and spirit of the cult is gradually becoming popular. The ritual is increasingly being metamorphosis by fanatics and those who use the name of “Saints” for their own advantage. In the force of the mediums, there are still many people who take advantage of the people's trust for their own advantage to make slanderous and irresponsible statements that frighten the listeners force them to buy big ceremonies, and spend a lot of money on the medium. Many superstitious phenomena, selling gods and selling saints gradually lost people's trust and eroded the national cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

From survey studies associated with in-depth interview methods, we affirm that the Mother Goddess worship belief has positive values in the increasingly clear socio-political context like today. In this context, the belief in Mother Goddesses has become an important spiritual support, where they find peace, faith and protection from the lurking events that come at any time. At the same time, the religious practices of Mother Goddess worship have contributed to human positioning, moral education of the young generation to live more honestly, to live a good life for the community. However, changes in Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam today also pose many challenges for researchers and policy makers. What needs to be done to preserve and promote the national identity and humane spirit of Mother Goddess worship, prevent negative manifestations and behaviors in ritual practice, superstition, selling gods, commercialization of ritual practices are big questions that need to be further studied.

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