

Some Points regarding Religious Practices Throughout History of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Religious life of the Vietnamese is deeply engaged with history of the nation. At the beginning, there had been customs of worshipping genies of rock, tree and river. As society developed, Chinese and Indian civilizations with Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism were step-by-step introduced into Vietnam. In the 17th century, Christian missionaries came to Vietnam along with European civilization. Interestingly, despite strong influences of foreign religions some new indigenous religions such as Caodaism and Hoà Hảo Buddhism were formed at the first half of the 20th century. Although living in a multi-religious environment, the Vietnamese have never witnessed any religious war.

1. Vietnam is located at a cross-road, a place for exchanges of many ethnics, people, civilizations, and religious branches. Thus, it has got an important position regarding politics and geography. Vietnam also has a long history of fighting against foreign invaders. Consequently, the Vietnamese embraces a high nature of patriotic sense, community devotion, and a flexible ability to accept and integrate into foreign cultures.

Thanks to advantage of the nature, along with its hard-working residents, Vietnam has contributed to the creation of Botanical Age, Stone, and Bronze Age, especially the formation of the civilization at pre-Đông Sơn and Đông Sơn periods, which were called by the western scholars Austro-Asian Culture. W.G.Solheim II, a famous American archaeologist, stated that this is a place where husbandry and cultivation, forge works, seafaring, pottery, etc. appeared as earliest in comparison to other places around the world and expanded to the north up to Far East Siberia, and to the west coast up to Madagascar¹.

Based on the above indigenous civilization, a ethnical nation has early appeared along the Red River delta and the northern area of the Middle region, namely Văn Lang, Âu Lạc.

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On its religious practice of this newly-established country, worshipping Earth Genie, Tree Genie, Water Genie, natural Gods, and several human Gods was prominent. The popularity of personifying natural gods is uncountable, including from genies like stone genie, mountain genie such as Cao Sơn, Tản Viên, Cao Lỗ, Phù Đổng, Thạch Quang Phật to water-originated genies like Long Đỗ, Linh Lang, Hoàng Lê Mật, Trương Hồng, Trương Hát, and to genies who resided in banyan tree.

The appearance of agricultural production resulted in the birth of socio-politic communities (territory community) such as villages, communes, countries along with traditional communities based on bloodline. Then ethnical religions and ancestor worship came along. These beliefs worshipped genies/gods that had great contributions to the communities in every family, family lines, villages, and communes with agricultural ceremonies following production circles that concentrated on after Tết. The idea of worshipping the Heavenly God (being relevant with wet-rice paddy areas/countries) with the importance of the frog, earth genies originated from natural gods such as mountain, tree, lightning, thunder, etc., and the human gods.

Besides the religious form mentioned above, there exist among ethnic groups (mainly among ethnic minorities) many primitive religious forms such as taboo puppet, all kinds of wizardry, along with other forms such as praying for a child in pagoda or temple, couvades, omen, taboo by fortunetellers, ritual specialists.

Chinese and Indian civilizations via Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism² which were introduced into Vietnam were acculturated differently among social classes, and among different regions. During the time, the above religions were vietnamized to fit other local religions under various forms. Examples of the changes were lately recorded by Confucians in *Việt điện u linh* and *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* in the 14th or 15th centuries³. Recently, especially after the national independence (1954), the social and humanity scholars who gathered legends in the countryside have seen that fact very clearly. In fact, only a slight appearance was covered on subjects who were worshipped by the Vietnamese. Foreign cultures had slightly influences on the country whose indigenous culture was so strong and stable, and whose social geography is different from other religions and had not been sinoed at that time⁴. Some typical examples were the story of Man Nương that related to Buddhism and Brahmanism in Dâu pagoda with the tradition of worshipping stone gods (Thạch Quang Phật)⁵ and four dharmas i.e. Pháp Vân, Pháp Vũ, Pháp Lôi, Pháp Điện; the story of Lý Nguyên Gia and Cao Biền promoted Long Đỗ genie to tutelary god of Long Biên citadel; the story of Lạc Long Quân whose wife gave birth to 7 bundle of

eggs that was left under 7 tree. Thanked to the energy from the tree near West Lake, the eggs hatched to be dragons flying around the country and gathering all in one place that was named Thăng Long (ascending dragon) by the King Lý Thái Tổ; the fairy tale about Chử Đồng Tử and Tiên Dung; the story of Lý Ông Trọng, Cát Hồng, Cao Biền, etc.

The influences of the Chinese regimes were weakened partly because of the instability of regimes in China, partly because of the intervention of indigenous rebellions, and of the invasion of neighboring countries such as Chiêm Thành (Cambodia), Nam Chiếu. Moreover, Vietnam at that time was in the establishing process and managed to unite to be a nation. The multi-ethnic groups presented in two main groups, i.e. Tày-Thái and Việt – Mường, which were integrated with other ethnic groups. If we see our geographic areas nowadays of Vietnamese map, we see that the Tày – Thái area is concentrated on Thao river area upto Việt Trì, and around Hà Nội, Đông Anh, Gia Lâm, etc., especially Cổ Loa area where the King Âu Lạc lived, and he was in fact originated from Tày – Thái ethnic⁶. The long establishing process of the Vietnamese nation was mainly because of over one thousand years of foreign invasion.

Thoughts of Confucianism, especially Sino-Confucianism by Đông Trọng Thu imported into our country via Nhân Diên, Tích Quang, Sĩ Nhiếp, etc. These thoughts found its standing point and had certain influence, or as described by Phan Ngọc, had a clear refraction⁷ thanked to the fact that the Vietnamese had priviously their own cult of ancestor worship. Confucianism was actually not the dominated religion in our country. The fact that some historians later on criticized the Ngô dynasty, Đinh dynasty, or pre-Lê dynasty's actions that were against common belief, morality, obligations or Confucian deity's belief⁸, or they criticized the Lý and Trần dynasties' believing in Buddhism showed clearly and objectively the unclear influences of Confucianism to the upper classes. Moreover, Confucianism at that time was blended with elements of the Taoism and Buddhism.

Is that possible that Buddhism and Taoism (the magic branch) influenced as much as Confucianism on the society at that time? Taoism penetrated in our country with high magical characters that were easily accepted by the Vietnamese. Is that true that indigenous religious characters made Taoism change, represented in Tản Viên, Cao Lỗ, Long Đỗ, Bạch Mã, etc. Tạ Chí Đại Trường cited some cases like Chinese governor Trương Tân “likes spirits, and usually wears red scarf on his head, plays musical instruments, burns incense, and reads religious books, saying that he could help educating the people⁹.”

According to Nguyễn Duy Hinh, Buddhism entered the Central and the Southern regions of Vietnam at the beginning years of BC, then was replaced by the Hinduism or concealed to blossom in around the 9th or 10th century in the Indochina with Dừa (Coconut) clan, or completely substituted by Hinduism then Sivaism with Cau clan¹⁰. In the north, relating to our territory at that time, Buddhism integrated into our country at the beginning of BC, not later than the 2nd century¹¹ with Mahjivaka, Khâu Đà La and the legend Man Nương, following with Mâu Tỵ and Khương Tăng Hội. In the 5th – 6th century, Zen sect appeared with Vinataruci, Pháp Hiền, and especially Vô Ngôn Thông. Buddhism absorbed deeply into the grassroots because it integrated with not only Confucianism and Taoism, but also indigenous religions, especially with agricultural rituals and the worship of fecundity. Buddhism followed two different trends, one was academic and the other was folk. The latter was more developed and prominent, aiming at doing good things, rejecting the bad, which held a strong Vietnamese nuance. Thus, we can explain why when the country gained its own independence, Kings and his people all followed Buddhism.

Right from the beginning, even though Buddhism had established schools, it was still different from those in China. It was accepted as a religious organization rather than an ideology which paid more attention to saving the nation, helping the miserable rather than salvation. Monks participated in social activities, even in the apparatus of government. It was until Trần dynasty, Buddhist studies was carried out by the upper class as a religious thought, but this had not become big trends as in China and India¹². Monks were highly intellects, and the majority of them were scholars, which outnumbered the Confucian and Taoists. Thus, during the independent periods, Buddhism was considered a base for the government. High monks were used at important functions; some were entitled state teachers by Kings. The Kings and royal families themselves were pious; one king even became the head of a Buddhist school. Many pagodas were built. People followed Buddhism in a vast number but they still maintained ancestor worship and were influenced by Taoism. The trend of integrating the three foreign religions with indigenous religions started right at the beginning. It was very difficult to separate those religions despite of the fact that each still held its own independent characters.

2. At the beginning of the second millennium, the need to establish a divine integrated with royal state model, which in K. Marx's theory was the Asian mode of production¹³, had changed the religious countenance throughout the country. Independent dynasties had to base on the existing religions to create a consistently

religious system, from the central to the grass root levels following two main lines of territory and bloodlines with relationships among nation – village - family¹⁴.

Every dynasty tried to gather all deities and gods into Thăng Long (Hanoi nowadays) where the royal court resided¹⁵. The King claimed to be the son of the Heavenly God and reined the earth and the world of spirits on His behalf.

It should be note that of all gods and deities who founded the religious system from the central to the grass root levels in Vietnam, due to the high sense of Independence, Self-Control, even though royal courts once preferred Buddhism (Lý and Trần dynasties), and then Confucianism, mostly they were Vietnamese in characteristics. This comment might be right for gods who were worshiped as village or national tutelary spirits in ceremonies to reinforce the central and local authority.

After moving the capital to Đại La, that afterward changed to Thăng Long (in 1010), the first things King Lý Thái Tổ did were to confirm the importance of the capital where was the centre of the world. He promoted Long Đỗ genie to be the Great tutelary of Thăng Long; reserved Nùng mountain to be the place for gathering all gods, genies from the whole country; set up Đồng Cổ temple in Hồ Khẩu ward nearby (it is now in Tây Hồ district); organized annually ceremonies in the spring for his followers to vow to be loyal to the King.

Apart from establishing Kính Thiên temple to worship Heaven and Earth, from the Lý dynasty, the citadel was protected by four tutelary gods who would patron the four capital entrances.

3. Ceremonies offering sacrifices to Heaven and Earth were held by every dynasty. According to Lê Quý Đôn¹⁶, Phan Huy Chú¹⁷, there was the establishment of Phong Vân mound to pray for rain, Xã Tắc mound which imitated Chinese style, Vu Đàn mound in the south of the citadel to pray for good harvest all around the year. On the first day of the spring, at the ceremony to welcome the spring and to worship the Agricultural god, the King himself ploughed in the royal field. During the year, the King visited different areas in the country to see how people worked and cultivated in their fields. Remain of Xã Tắc now can be found in Xã Đàn, but Phong Vân left no trace. Ceremony to pray Heaven and Earth was held by the royal court by building a praying mound called Nam Giao. However, it was, in Lê Quý Đôn's opinion, difficult to examine procedures of this ceremony during the Lý and Trần dynasties. Phan Huy Chú in his book only mentioned that up to the reign of Lý Anh

Tông (1153) when Viên Khâu mound was built. I suspect that ceremony at Nam Giao was the combination of both rites in winter and summer at the same time.

Until the Hồ, then Lê and Nguyễn dynasties, ceremony at Nam Giao came into its full format which was clearly described by L. Cadière in Huế¹⁸.

Ancient kings in China believed that the Heaven was deeply engaged with the Earth. The concepts of “heaven” and “earth” came into existence before Oriental religions appeared and were explained which then became theory.

The King is the son of the Heavenly God, who should establish his capital in front of a high mountain and next to deep river. As time went by, things changed, and the only evidences existed and heard were that Xã Tắc, Phong Vân, Nam Giao mounds were built in the south of the capital during the Lê dynasty. Till Hồng Đức dynasty, Nam Giao was rebuilt and upgraded, including Chiêu Sự temple. It was then rebuilt again in 1663 by Trịnh Tạc. The Nam Giao was in ruins in Nguyễn dynasty, and then totally destroyed by the French colonist.

In people’s religious belief, heaven is the far above blue sky where there exists the Heavenly God. He has no form, no biography. He sponsored divine kings, and the national community. Divine kings were the transformation of Heavenly Gods’ sons who came to the earth to rein human beings. That was the heritage of concept of the god of the strongest ethnic group who successfully conquered the gods of the weak ethnic groups to become the national god then protected the leader of the nation and of the community. The foundation of a country was always associated with the establishment of a pantheon. In Vietnam, however, the highest one of the pantheon is the Heavenly God. The pantheon of the Vietnamese is very difficult to rebuild despite efforts of many scholars due to intervene of a 1,000-year of Chinese domination¹⁹. The Heavenly God (Trời) in some places was replaced by the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế) with his subordinates, which were extracted from Chinese or Vietnamese pantheon. The mixed-up pantheon was fortunately added by Taoism in many places to fit the local conditions. However, the Heavenly God was still close and supportive. In religious belief of the grassroots, the Heavenly God is a being whose uncle is a frog that has an ugly appearance but can control Him. It is because the frog could foretell people of rains which were vital to agricultural production. Especially, to Xơ Đăng people, the frog is the ugly but very kind wife of Thunder God (Thần Sét). The Xơ Đăng has no idea of Heavenly God and considers Thunder God the highest. According to A. Doré, toad (or the frog) was the mistress of the Jade Emperor, a female god who can help calling showers for

better crops. She let her children descend to the earth to catch worms and insects. When they call her at the same time that meant it was time for rains. Thus, it is a coincidence that the Choang (Guang Si, China) uses cobber drums in the ceremonies to worship Ya Kue - the toad god. Therefore, the toad images are carved on the drum's surfaces²⁰.

4. The king – the son of Heavenly God - was born to be physically like many ordinary people but in order to be the ruler; he must be born in a magical way. In historical books, the kings who had great positions in history always had human and god origin: a star fell into the mother' womb; the mother put her foot into an extraordinary footprint; dream of giving birth to a king.

The divine king united his personality with the community. This was a traditional thinking of the Vietnamese ever since the establishment of the country. Thus, in the eye of the grassroots, the prosperity or decline of the divine king always related to the prosperity or decline of the country. So, Mã Việ̣n once passing by a bronze pillar, a symbol of the king's power, pronounced a curse "Whenever the bronze pillar falls, the Giao Chi people will come to an end." Therefore, as in many other neighboring countries, Vietnam had a custom of setting up a bronze pillar whenever a king was crowded²¹. The bronze drums were also symbols of the king's power, which was compared with the thunder when it rained. Thus, the divine king was rightfully untouchable, and could lead an extraordinary life.

Moreover, in order to turn the country's leaders into semi-divines, there were many stories associating the capital and the whole country with the kings, such as the king Lý Thái Tổ with the ascending dragon; Lê Lợi with the story of golden tortoise regained its sword; and many other legendary stories of the past associated with the Hùng King, Thục Phán, Hai Bà Trưng, Lý Nam Đế, Triệu Quang Phục, Mai Thúc Loan, and Bồ Cái Đại Vương.

Therefore, worshipping the Hùng King, Heaven and Earth defines the length of history, and the width of the national territory. It created the sense of the country, of the origin among the Vietnamese who had seen his/her duty to protect the country and the descendant of Dragon and Fairy.

In order to strengthen the principle of worshipping the Heaven and Earth God and the Hùng King, all kings saw himself the representative of the Heaven – King – God.

According to K. Marx, the king was "partly a real oriental dictator, partly an imagined character, meaning God"²². He had the sole power over land properties and

managed people, including both the living and the death. Because of the very tight combination of divine and royal power, the son of Heavenly God was responsible to appoint or degrade any deities or gods according to their contribution or failure to the nation and this was judged by the religious feelings. Each village had one good genius, some even had two, three, or sometimes had five or seven depending on the promotion of the royal court. Promotion of province's tutelary genius depended on the area the king could manage, and on the country's development.

Blood-line ancestor worship strengthened the genius system in the country as they were the ones who had great contribution to the family lines, their villages, and country. Thus, that was the source of genius provision for the country. *Family – Village – Country* was a unified cooperation and the core of religious feelings in Vietnam.

5. Screening all genius worshipped, we can see that they all come from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism; geniuses promoted by people like founders of a village, of a master of a profession, etc. At first, the place to worship the geniuses was not the communal house like today. The place could be a shrine, a small temple, a house, or a sacred or even unnamed area. Under the Lý and Trần dynasties, Buddhism was promoted, the genius were infected by characteristics of Indian culture; then under the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties, the Confucius characteristics had been seen. However, from Han Confucianism with Đổng Trọng Thụ and Song Confucianism with Chu Hy, the harmonization of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism was prominent but it did not transgressed indigenous religions which expressed clearly through customs in the community ceremonies. Buddhism and Taoism still developed separately, depending on each history period and still remain until today while Confucianism was only flourishing in certain time in the past. It had lost its role in religious life and became an ideology after the collapse of feudalism.

In the southern region, the Champa characteristics influenced our religious system. We can see the evidences clearly in the north in the areas where Champa prisoners were imprisoned, i.e. from Cổ Nhuế to Dị Nậu, with the fact that the Lý-Trần dynasties worshipped Thiên Y, Lady Banh, etc. It was most clear in the south, after Nguyễn Hoàng and his children wanted to create differences between the North and the South. The task of expanding and strengthening relationships with the mountainous regions where many ethnic minorities lived, as well as transgressing the coast lines, had attracted more geniuses of the residents' geniuses (Sea God, Whale

God, Mountain God, Tiger God, Gods of ethnic minority people like Champa, Khmer, Chinese, etc.)

Thus, the characteristics of religions in the Middle, the North, and the South, inland and coastline areas, delta and mountainous areas are all different. The differences are from the transgression to the new territories influenced by Indian culture, as well as the stronger influences of the royal court to border areas, where resided the ethnic minorities.

Taking the situation in the South into consideration, while in the North and the Middle, Mahayana Buddhism was prevail and maintained there appeared a primitive Buddhist school that allowed monks to get married, and the Khat Si School that was deeply influenced by the Hinayana Buddhism of the Khmer people. The Mekong delta was excavated, attracting many people to gather under the leaderships of some leaders. Whereas because the royal court had not reached its hand to this remote area, law was undisciplined and individual reputation was of high opinion. In this situation, many “floating” religious sects were established with thousands of followers. The most typical sect was *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*, a redeem movement in the Southern region with the emphasis on mystic characteristics added with strong patriotism. That was why G. Coulet was mistaken when accusing a hidden association like *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* an anti-French movement²³. Hòa Hảo Buddhism established in 1939 was an indispensable result of the above movement. Apart from that, the appearance of Caodaism in 1926 was the combination of Western and Eastern religious elements. In the highland, there appeared a movement taking “holy water” by Xăm Brăm (1935-1945) also with the thought of fighting against the French.

6. Western civilization was introduced into Vietnam in the 17th century, along with the appearance of Christian missionaries. At first, the evangelization seemed to have little difficulty due to the tolerant and integrated trend of the traditional and indigenous religions. That is why even though the government favored a single religion; *there was no religious war throughout the history of Vietnam*. That was a typical characteristic of religions in Vietnam, which was contradicted the European history in the ancient and medieval periods²⁴.

The conflict between the royal court and Catholicism, at first, partly represented the conflict between the two civilizations, and partly because of “rough”, intolerant nature in Catholic faith, teachings and rituals. The conflict reached its peak when it

was associated with politics. One side wanted to protect the nation while the other was the invaders. The conflict lasted from the middle of the 19th century, developed rapidly during the French colonial time²⁵, and went through the two recent wars of resistance. The conflict led to the favour given to Catholicism by the foreign invaders, the revival of Buddhism (1920-30), the foundation of Caodaism (1926), and Hòa Hảo Buddhism (1939). Buddhism was reorganized and modernized in order to compete with other religions and the conspiracy to make Christianity to be the national religion under the American-Diệm regime. The conflict remained spattered until now. Protestantism was introduced into Vietnam in 1911 by the C.M.A. At first, the religion developed very slowly and was expanded during the war against the American. Some Protestant denominations appeared under the American and their Vietnamese puppets' regimes and still operate illegally in the mountainous areas.

After the unification of the country, living conditions have changed. Every religion has been independent in terms of structures, organizations, and there are no longer foreign dignitaries. With the spirit of unification and cooperation of the various religious followers and non-religious followers, all desire to contribute their effort to build a strong, prosperous, equal and civilized country, and heal separations caused by the enemies' past policies, and by the religious leaders supported by foreign forces.

Moreover, the trend of secularization, along with the globalization of religion, there appears some "new religious phenomena" in our country. Some of them have acted illegally, such as Vàng Chử or Thìn Hùng among the Hmông, Dao people.

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³ Lý Tế Xuyên. *Viện điện u linh* and Vũ Quỳnh, Kiều Phú. *Lĩnh Nam chí chích quái*. Translated version by Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 1960.

⁴ Two famous books written by Từ Tùng Thạch were recently republished in the book *National studies before Appearance of five upper classes; History of Vietnamese, Thai, and Choang people*. Guang Si People Publishing house, 1993 (in Chinese).

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 - ²². K. Marx, *Ibid.*, p. 74.
 - ²³. G. Coulet. *Les sociétés secrètes en terre d'Annam*, Sài Gòn, 1926.
 - ²⁴. It can be seen in books about the world ancient and medieval history. The phenomenon of using a religious flag to cause bloody holy wars is still stinging to many people. Apology from Vatican Church recently was an acknowledgement and an encouragement. Regarding religious conflict at the moment, see Đặng Nghiêm Vạn. *Types of Religious Conflicts during the Globalization*, in *The Yearbook of Scientific Conferences: Looking back the 20th century and Looking forward to the 21st century*, Hanoi, 1999 (internal circulation).
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