

LÊN ĐỒNG (HẦU BÓNG): A LIVING MUSEUM OF VIETNAMESE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Lên đồng or *hầu bóng* is a multimedia performance genre, combining ritual and theatre, music and song, costume and custom, dance and trance. It can best be understood as a special form of “cultural performance,” as described by anthropologist Milton Singer. For Singer, conducting his research in Madras, members of Indian culture “thought of their culture as encapsulated in these discrete performances, which they could exhibit to visitors and to themselves” (Singer 1972:71). These “cultural performances” in India included plays, concerts, and lectures as well as “prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic” (Singer 1972:71). While some forms of religious activity are personal and private - think, for instance, of prayers - many others have a public, performative dimension. What struck Singer about the performances he was observing during his fieldwork in Madras was how they expressed and exhibited so many important aspects of Indian society and culture. Even if the events were infrequent or occasional, they exhibited the typical features of Indian culture in a stylized, artistic form so they could easily be experienced and understood by members of the culture and by outsiders alike, and so that young people could see and learn the customs of their parents and ancestors.

Singer’s anthropological conception of “cultural performances” converges with the understandings of folklorists and semioticians who have been concerned with folk drama. Folk theatre has as its task the presentation of selected moments of human social life and selected forms of human communication, drawn from life in all its complexity and communication in all its channels. The traditional performer must combine a tradition of conventional or stylized conceptions of how people behave, how they move and speak, with his or her own perceptions of life around him. The characterizations the performer creates are inevitably unique, yet they must be recognizable to the audience. Like folk artists in other genres, actors in folk drama must possess acute perceptive abilities and a talent for presenting *their* perceptions to their audiences. They must have keen ears and eyes and observational skills to observe and then to represent the speech, gestures, movements, and behavior of other people.

The insight that semiotics offers to students of folk theatre and other forms of cultural performance is the understanding that during a theatrical performance, the signs that are exhibited on stage are second-order signs - signs of signs. Consider, for instance, the insignia of rank that allow us

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to look at a military uniform and know, from the number of bars or stars, whether the person wearing that uniform is a captain or a general. These insignia are conventional symbols with rules that govern who may wear them, and indeed when someone is promoted to a certain rank there will typically be a formal ceremony in which they are awarded the symbols that indicate their new status. On stage, however, those stars or bars do not have the same function that they do in everyday life: they are no longer signs of a real status of the person wearing them, but they become signs of the status of the fictional character (or *dramatis personae*) the actor is representing. They are signs of signs, rather than signs of some real status or position of the person who wears them.

Because the signs in theatre and other performing arts are signs of signs, rather than signs of real things, they are typically abbreviated or reduced - only certain elements of the first-order sign need to be represented in the second-order sign, yet the meaning can easily be conveyed and understood. The costumes, props, scenery, gestures, actions, speech - all are only partial, selective representations of the things they refer to outside of the performance. They make use of the semiotic process we call metonymy or synecdoche -taking a part to stand for the whole (in Latin, *pars pro toto*). This is a particular kind of communicative sign and a particular mode of making meaning, in which the sign bears only certain elements or details of its referent but is understood nevertheless. As the Russian folklorist and semiotician Petr Bogatyrev notes, “the theatrical costume does not, nor does the house set or the gestures of the actors, have as many

constitutive signs as a real house or real dress would have... Theatre uses only those signs of costume and construction which are necessary for the given dramatic situation” (Bogatyrev 1938). Within Vietnamese theater traditions this is a very frequent artistic device, what is sometimes called stylization. For instance, facial makeup exaggerates a few features and abbreviates or eliminates most others, so that we may easily recognize who is a virtuous character and who is an evil one, or who is a child and who an elder. Similarly, with costume or props, there are conventional sign systems that allow us to tell from just a few details or elements who the intended character or object is.

To say that signs in the performing arts are abbreviated or reduced does not mean that they are impoverished or unable to communicate. At the same time as they are selective, as Bogatyrev points out, “theatrical productions are distinguished from all other artistic works and from other material objects, which are also signs, by their great abundance of signs... a theatrical performance is a structure composed of elements from various arts: from poetry, the plastic arts, music, choreography, and so on. Each separate element brings a number of signs onto the stage.” However, he continues, “Some of these signs may fall away... may lose a portion of their signs on the stage. On the other hand, however, in combining with other kinds of art and with technical theatrical devices, they may acquire several of their elements of sign anew...In this way, certain elements of various kinds of art in combination with other constantly acquire new signs” (Bogatyrev 1938). We have, then, signs that are typically reduced or abbreviated from the forms they might

have in real life, but because they are part of a multimedia, multichannel performance, together with other signs, they take on new and complex meanings.

To return to *lên đồng* or *hầu bóng*, we can usefully consider this and similar mediumship ceremonies as performing arts, sharing many characteristics with traditional theatre. Like various forms of Vietnamese folk opera, the *lên đồng* ceremony combines music and singing, dance and gesture, speech and mime, costume and props. To be sure, it would be incorrect to consider *lên đồng* as pure theatre or performance, since it is intended to have real consequences and efficacy for its participants - both medium and spectator alike - where theatre is typically for entertainment. So in looking at *lên đồng* as a performing art, I do not intend at all to suggest that its participants are just “play-acting” or acting insincerely or inauthentically. Indeed, the *lên đồng* ceremony involves trance or spirit possession in which the medium’s body is inhabited in turn by the pantheon of spirits in the tradition. Some mediums are criticized for simply “acting” or “imitating,” but the ideal and typical case is one where the medium is genuinely receiving the spirits and incarnating them in his or her body. Nevertheless, to consider *lên đồng* as a kind of ritual drama or religious performance can offer many interesting insights and understandings.

To return to Singer, *lên đồng* as a “cultural performance” offers an opportunity for Vietnamese to display Vietnamese culture and tradition to Vietnamese, selecting certain aspects of Vietnamese cultural history to be represented and omitting others. It constitutes a kind of cultural reservoir or repository for many traditional art forms - a deep cultural

well, we might say, from which the mediums draw during their performance. Indeed, *lên đồng* constitutes a living museum of Vietnamese culture and history, an occasion to exhibit a broad range of elements of tradition that have little place in modern Vietnamese society.

The *lên đồng* performance, for example, displays the costumes and textile crafts that once figured into the daily life of the court and mandarin, but today no longer have that same context and are rarely seen outside of *lên đồng*. Craftspeople continue to create the costumes and practice needlecrafts that would otherwise have no market in today’s modern economy. The costumes worn by the *ông đồng* or *bà đồng* are not necessarily completely accurate recreations of those worn in the imperial court, but instead abbreviated and selective. For instance, Quan Lớn Đệ Ngũ (Quan Tuần Tranh) always wears two command flags tucked into his back, to symbolize his military office. Today’s Vietnam People’s Army no longer makes use of such traditional insignia, but they live on through the performance of the *lên đồng*. Similarly, the *heo* carried by the Princes (Hoàng tử) represent the steeds on which the Princes ride. On the richly embroidered gowns of the other mandarins, holy mothers, dames and princes, the traditional needle arts of Vietnam continue to find a precious place, even while today’s daily clothing is mass-produced and indistinguishable from international clothing styles.

By depicting in performance the typical actions and gestures associated with historical and legendary personages, *lên đồng* also brings alive characters from the distant past. Thus a historical personage such as Tran Hung Dao becomes more than the name of

a boulevard or the subject of dry history lessons: he is invested with life when he descends into the medium during the *lên đồng* performance. In the same way, each of the ten Princes is identified with a hero from Vietnamese history, each honoured with shrines and temples in his homeland, and each brought alive during the *lên đồng* performance. Finally, the legendary goddess Lieu Hanh, whose birthplace in Phu Giay is a centre for *lên đồng* performances and their associated beliefs.

As a “cultural performance,” *lên đồng* also presents in artistic form stereotypical images of gender and ethnicity, as the medium is possessed in turn by male and female deities, by lowland Kinh (Viet) and by highland minorities. In each incarnation or *gia*, the medium presents a few selected aspects and elements of the character’s identity, and participants imagine an entire world and cosmos of which the character is a part. For instance, Thánh Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Goddess of Forests and Mountains) is identified as being ethnically Dao, as are Chau De Nhi, Hoang De Nhi, and others. Chau Luc is ethnically Nung, while Chau Muoi is ethnically Tay, but is able to “speak like the Dao, and like the Muong” (Be bai giong man e a tieng muong).

The costumes that each spirit wears are not faithful and accurate depictions of the traditional clothing of the Dao, Nung, Tay, or Muong (whether today or in the past), but instead represent stylized stereotypes of ethnic clothing - how the Viet (Kinh) imagine the ethnic minorities to dress. Certain details may be relatively accurate - for instance, the silver tube necklaces that are typical of highlanders throughout northern Vietnam - yet other details are simply intended to

invoke the image of highlanders in the imagination of participants in the *lên đồng* ceremony. The precise headdresses and scarves worn by ethnic minority figures during the *lên đồng* performance were probably never worn by members of those ethnic groups themselves, yet they signal to participants in *lên đồng* that this or that personage is from a highland minority.

For a student of Vietnamese culture, such depictions represent a precious window into Viet (Kinh) perceptions of the other ethnic groups that inhabit their shared motherland. Through *lên đồng* we are able to see the incorporation of ethnic minorities into the shared Vietnamese culture, as the pantheon of the Four Palaces is enriched by the contributions of spirits of ethnic minority origin. We are also able to see how ethnic minorities are seen through the eyes of their Viet neighbours. Indeed, we might even say that *lên đồng* constitutes a kind of “folk ethnography,” where the *ông đồng* and *bà đồng* are presenting their view of how the ethnic minorities look, dress, and behave. Like academic ethnographers, the mediums in *lên đồng* should observe the costumes and behaviors of their highland neighbours, then represent some aspects or elements of them for the benefit of others. Again, we are not so concerned with whether or not this perception is an accurate or realistic one - instead, we are interested to see how some members of Vietnamese society see their neighbours, and how they present them to others. And again, these observations and perceptions are not presented in some dry scholarly journal or a book that gathers dust on a shelf, but they are performed and enacted in the dynamic, vibrant *lên đồng* ceremony, in all their rich sensory value.

This was the aspect of *lên đồng* that first attracted my attention a decade ago when I saw videotapes from the Folklore Institute documenting performances.

In the same way, the *ông đồng* or *bà đồng* is presenting his or her perceptions of how males and females should behave, how they should hold their bodies and how they should move. An important characteristic of *lên đồng* is that a single medium is called upon to incarnate in sequence as many as 35 or more spirits, about half of them male and half female. Certain elements of the costumes allow participants to know who is male and who is female, but this is reinforced and amplified by the way the medium comports himself or herself - how they stand, move, dance, gesture, and behave. At the top of the pantheon, the personages all move in a stately, serious manner, and the differences between male and female are perhaps not so evident from movement and gesture. Here, the costumes and props are more important than physical movements in distinguishing the male from the female personages. Even so, from observing how the medium sits or dances, and how he or she speaks with participants, we may also see differences in gender. But for the minor characters at the bottom of the pantheon, especially the mischievous and comical *co be* (damsels or maidens) and *cau* (boy-attendants or pages), the *ông đồng* and *bà đồng* demonstrate stereotyped movements and gestures that allow us easily to know who is a boy and who a girl. The physical postures and movements associated with each gender vary from one culture to another, and so *lên đồng* again offers us a Vietnamese “folk ethnography” of gender roles and behaviours - how Vietnamese

themselves see the typical behaviour and comportment of males and females.

Throughout the *lên đồng* ceremony, the medium is selecting elements and details from history and tradition and combining them artistically to present an image of a given personage. This process is a selective one of creating a stereotype that may or may not be historically accurate, true, or complete. It is a form of conventional, symbolic behaviour that does not display reality but instead presents an artistic vision of reality. For a folklorist or ethnographer, then, the “cultural performance” of *lên đồng* constitutes a primary document revealing how Vietnamese people themselves imagine their own history, cultural heritage, gender roles, and ethnic identities. Rather than a dry dusty book, a photograph, or a statue, the *lên đồng* performance is a living museum, Vietnamese people exhibiting Vietnamese culture to Vietnamese and others. Its participants are the curators and guardians of Vietnamese culture, ensuring that future generations will continue to have the opportunity to see aspects of Vietnam’s cultural heritage that have vanished from daily life, outside the temples of the Mother Goddesses. They should be appreciated for their generations of effort to preserve this valued tradition, and encouraged to perpetuate it for many generations to come.

References

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