

OBSERVATION TO PARTICIPATION: THE MAKING OF A NON-TRADITIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUM

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I was able to walk through the front doors of Stanford Hospital's Women's Cancer Center but after taking the elevator up to the second floor, I found I could not enter the Infusion Treatment Center. I paused, then stopped, to look out the window while trying to collect myself, control my tears, and gather strength to enter the waiting room where I would join other bald - and some masked - women and men. There I would wait for another dose of chemotherapy to treat my Stage III high-grade ovarian cancer, waiting for tubes to be inserted into my chest and abdomen to deliver high-doses of medication that would poison the cancer. Although I had accomplished it many times without tears, this day was different – I could not stop crying. As I sat in the hospital bed I sobbed. I could not do this again, I thought, but I also felt I must do my part in conquering the beast of cancer. I was embarrassed at the tears and felt sorry for my husband and the nurses but I could not stop crying. Then, looking around the white room, I thought of Cô Bơ, the female spirit that serves the water realm of Vietnam's Mother Goddess Religion (Đạo Mẫu). I imagined her rowing the boat that carries distressed humans across the waters of despair and at that moment I visualized the water as comprised of the

tears of all the men, women, and children who have suffered in all times. My own saline droplets added to the immense sea upon which Cô Bơ was rowing. I was one of millions of humans who had suffered in life, and one of the thousands who turned to Cô Bơ. Comforted by the image, I allowed my own tears to flow freely.

I studied Vietnam's Mother Goddess Religion for more than 25 years as an ethnographer and a scholar. I attended spirit possession ceremonies in several different regions of Vietnam, but my research focused on Vietnamese mediums in the U.S. Over the years I explored gender and mediumship, therapeutic aspects of mediumship, social relations within and between temples, the life stories of mediums, and the relations between U.S. and Vietnam-based mediums. Much of my work has been collaborative as I worked closely on projects with Dr. Nguyễn Thị Hiền of Vietnam's Institute for Culture and Arts Studies. Together we conducted participant observation and interviewed dozens of mediums about their spiritual and secular lives, resulting in two books and several articles (e.g. Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; 2011). Although we used participant - observation as our primary

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method I never thought of myself as a true participant. I was a scholar who maintained objectivity and an atheist-agnostic who wanted to learn about the social and cultural lives of mediums, not become one.

Participant - observation has been the main method of ethnographic research since the first decades of the last century when early pioneers asserted that the best way to learn another culture is through immersion. By doing what “natives” do and asking why they do it one way but not another, anthropologists learn an insider’s (emic) view of culture and have greater insight than if they simply gleaned information through interview or observation alone. The goals of participant-observation are to understand a particular culture, translate it for outsiders, and collect data that is useful to cross-cultural research, hopefully addressing larger questions about the nature of humanity. Importantly, participant-observation allows ethnographers opportunities to understand the socio-cultural, historical, and environmental context of specific events. Fieldwork has defined the field of cultural anthropology, but it has not been without problems. Over the past decades anthropologists have addressed numerous concerns with the method particularly with respect to meaningful representations, ethics, and whether or not it is even possible to understand a culture different from one’s own (Lassiter 2005). Other questions focus on the level of participation the fieldworker can or should engage in. Under what circumstances should

we become full participants, and when should we maintain distance? The question is deceptively simple but there are no clear answers: most anthropologists decide on a case-by-case basis where they stand in the borderlands between observation and participation. This essay explores my own experiences as an anthropologist who, after years of research, finally became a spirit medium. It will compare the knowledge gained through partial and full participation. As we shall see, the process of becoming a medium validated information I had gained through ethnographic research, but I was finally able to *experience* what I had previously only heard about or observed.

The first time I attended a spirit possession ceremony (lên đồng) held in California in 1987, several people asked if I believed in the spirits. That question has continued throughout my years of study. My stock answer has always been that I was not a follower, but I wanted to learn about the religion so that I could explain why it was practiced and what it meant to those who did believe in it. At that time, people in Vietnam and the U.S. were criticized for their ritual beliefs and often hid their practices. I had hoped to advance the cause of religious freedom by explaining Đạo Mẫu in terms others would understand. But my spirit medium friends and colleagues had a different view. They often pondered why I was so interested in the religion. Many people, researchers included, attend a few ceremonies, but I had studied the

religion for years. My enjoyment of the ceremonies and songs for the spirits, and my persistence in continued studies of the religion were, in their eyes, sure signs that my fate was entwined with the religion. One master medium encouraged me to write secular studies because she felt they would eventually help the religion to become more accepted, and many gods and spirits acknowledged my work over the years. But secretly, my spirit medium friends began talking about my calling as a medium. They began to joke with me. “When is your ceremony? I can’t wait for your ceremony!” they exclaimed. After a while, I began to wonder. More importantly, I gradually began viewing the world in similar ways.

Like Old Friends

My level of participation in *lên đồng* ceremonies was minimal but it had strong effects that surfaced during the past few years. I typically sat through ceremonies from beginning to end, helped to arrange flowers and blessed gifts (*lộc*), fetched and folded spirit clothes, and clapped along with the music. I talked to the spirits and made offerings to them, and always left with bags of blessed gifts I cherished and hoped would bring me good luck. But through this participation I began to learn about the spirits and they eventually became familiar to me, much like old but very special friends.

The shift in my ways of thinking happened over a period of several years. The first transition came when I asked my

husband, a Vietnam veteran, if he would like to accompany me on a research trip to Vietnam. This was not a new question, I had asked and he responded negatively several times. He did not want to return to the country where he had seen so much death and been severely wounded and traumatized. But this time he was really angry that I even thought of asking again. Later that same day I attended a ceremony where I made offerings to Ông Hoàng Chín, a spirit of healing and an ethnic minority from the highlands of central Vietnam, the area where Chuck was last wounded and from which he was rescued by helicopter. I asked the spirit to care for Chuck, help him to recover from the wounds of war, and have a more peaceful experience with Vietnam. Then, as soon as I returned home that night he called out “Okay, let’s buy the ticket!” A huge grin was plastered on his face. We had a fabulous trip, even returning to the same spot of his trauma, and he fell in love with Vietnam. It was the first time, he said, that he could truly enjoy the beauty of that countryside. Since then, we have made regular offerings to Ông Chín.

A few years later we returned to Vietnam with Kiana and Thien, two married mediums from the U.S. We traveled to Sa Pa, a town high in the mountains, where we rode motorbikes, visited temples, and gorged on scrumptious local foods. But on the way home I felt extremely tired, and a few days later my skin turned a sickly yellow-orange, a sign of liver failure. My doctors assured

me it was nothing I had consumed or contracted in Vietnam, it was autoimmune hepatitis. My body had decided that my liver was a foreign object that had to be eliminated, and it was working very hard to kill my liver and myself. When, after several weeks in the hospital, I asked Kiana what she thought about the cause of the illness, she had a different view. A spirit in Sa Pa had been neglected or offended and although she did not know who that spirit was she went into trance to ask a powerful healing goddess, Bà Chúa Mối, to ask the spirit to leave me alone. When I recovered I felt that both secular and sacred explanations and treatments were relevant to my case. Mostly, I was just glad to be alive.

But ovarian cancer, the “silent killer” of women came three years later. “Really?” I thought to myself, “now this?” After receiving the diagnosis, Chuck and I went into crisis mode preparing for surgery and the chemotherapy that would follow soon after. We managed multiple physicians appointments, educated ourselves about the cancer, and made certain that my health insurance would be adequate, for which I had to retire early. I slowly began to reflect on my experiences and to view my health problems as a pattern, perhaps even a sign. It didn’t seem normal to have so many life-threatening illnesses. I began to have snippets of thought about having an initiation ceremony and, after turning to Cô Bơ in the midst of chemotherapy, I began listening to the songs of the spirits (chầu văn) to lift my

mood. When I returned to the temple I thanked the people and the spirits for their support and had a glorious time enjoying the songs and dances of the spirits. Then day-to-day life took over. I returned to my usual daily activities, including part-time work and scholarship, and put thoughts of initiation on the back burner. Then the cancer returned.

Ovarian cancer is a beast. It overtakes one rapidly, with a barely a moment to breathe. It sneaks and hides in corners of the body and in the dark recesses of the mind.

It leaves wakes of devastation then returns with a vengeance, wreaking havoc in body and mind. Cancer, especially recurrent cancer, throws one into a constant state of flux, removing all certainty. Preparing for life then death; hair then no hair; funeral plans, summer plans then death plans; greeting mornings full of vigorous growth and those weighted with grief and demise. It’s riding waves of uncertainty that crash into fits of despair then peak in crescendos of unfathomable joy. It’s exhausting. It wears one down. It’s a lesson in endurance and a lesson in uncertainty. The ups and downs of cancer are partnered with the chemotherapy that causes so much pain and agony that one can only focus on getting through the present moment. Destroying every fast-growing cell, including those in the entire alimentary canal, life with chemo is a life of festering sores, gastrointestinal unpredictability, black finger and toenails, shooting pains and numbness, and the slow

drain of energy as red and white blood cell counts drop to dangerous lows. I survived six rounds of chemo and for that I was glad I had my oncologist, Dr. T., who at some point started to remind me of Trần Hưng Đạo.

Trần Hưng Đạo was a Vietnamese general who successfully fought Mongol invaders in the 12th century. His altar is placed in the upper right side of Đạo Mẫu altars, and his family members are incarnated in ceremonies. He is known for healing women with “female problems” because he once fought and conquered a man that caused such troubles for women. At some point I began praying to Trần Hưng Đạo, prostrating myself before his commanding, elegant, and somewhat intimidating statue, asking for help with my treatment. And then it occurred to me: both Trần Hưng Đạo and Dr. T. were healers, powerfully combining the spiritual and sacred, the East and the West. I felt I was in pretty good hands. I saw also that I was turning to the spirits more and more frequently and they had become part of my daily life. I was beginning to think like a medium.

Narratives of Mediums

Much has been written about the conversion narratives of Đạo Mẫu mediums (Endres 2011; Nguyen Thi Hien 2002, 2008). Typically, spirit mediums have unusual dreams or experiences, and if they have a heavy calling they face many difficulties in life. Although people may not want to become a medium because it is a costly and time-consuming endeavor that carries a lot of

responsibility, most mediums are compelled to have their initiation ceremonies. I decided to become a medium when and if my cancer returned.

My friend Nhung had her initiation ceremony a few days after I learned that I had a small spot on my liver, and I had to go in for a PET scan later that week to determine whether or not the cancer had returned. Experiencing tremendous waves of emotion (fear, anger, grief, and even more fear), I felt that going to Nhung’s ceremony would help me to feel grounded and prepare me for the news. Nhung, a young and kind woman, had a beautiful ceremony rich with feeling and it seemed that many of her spirits focused their compassionate, tear-filled eyes on me. Shy and normally reserved, Nhung had been worried about her initiation and whether she would be able to perform the ritual correctly. Still, she took a giant leap of faith and decided to have the ceremony. Her bravery inspired me. I had entered the temple riding a tumultuous emotional roller coaster that day, but I left with a mission. I would face the upcoming diagnosis with the bravery Nhung had modeled, and I had a plan. I would have my own ceremony for the gods and spirits of Đạo Mẫu. If the cancer did not return I could schedule the ceremony soon but if it did return, I would wait until completion of the second line of chemo.

Having an initiation ceremony quickly became number one on my bucket list. Two spots were found in the PET scan and I had

to have seven more rounds of chemotherapy, but I would finish in time to have a spring ceremony. I wanted to thank the spirits for everything they had done for me. They were my introduction to the country and people of Vietnam, my entire career had been focused on their study, and it was through Đạo Mẫu that I had developed life-long friendships. My life had already been blessed. I had a great love and a wonderful family and friends and I had achieved all my career goals, but I had never properly thanked the spirits. I wanted to do that before it was too late.

As it turned out, my personal narrative was similar to those of the many mediums I had interviewed over the years. I had two serious illnesses that seemingly came out of nowhere. Each time I received excellent medical care, but the explanations for illness did not address the cause or answer the questions: “Why me? Why now?” My shift toward the spirits came slowly and gradually as I found myself turning to them for support during the most difficult of times.

“Welcome to the Village”

I wanted to have an initiation ceremony to thank the spirits, but I also wanted to thank the mediums I had grown so close to. They had been a source of friendship, collegiality, and support for many years, but were particularly supportive during chemotherapy. During an especially dark time, when I had lost my way to hope, my husband secretly sent out an email asking for extra help. Friends of all kinds responded

with notes of encouragement, but the temple mediums organized a surprise Christmas party. They arrived at our house on a sunny afternoon with trays of warm food, cases of beer, bottles of wine, and Christmas presents. We sat on the back porch eating, laughing, and playing games. I perked up as they rolled on the ground with boisterous laughter and we took silly photos around the Christmas tree. They nourished the seeds of life and hope and made my husband and me smile, laugh and enjoy.

I hoped my initiation ceremony would be a celebration of life. I wanted to acknowledge and express my deep love for the spirits as well as the people who honor them. I wanted to thank all the earthly and spiritual beings I had met for their help throughout my life and career, and for carrying me through my trials with cancer. And because my husband and I wanted to be full participants, we wanted to do as much for the ceremony as we could. To that end, we purchased all the fans, mirrors, alcohol, cigarettes, and blessed gifts for the initiation. We shopped for most of the food, made thirty-six pairs of votive shoes, and made color photocopies of other necessary votives. But no matter how much we tried, we realized that we needed help from other temple members. We found that it takes a village to hold a ceremony, train a novice, and nudge one gently through the gates of Đạo Mẫu.

Ethnographic interview and observation taught me that mediums spend a great deal

of time and effort executing a ceremony. Doing so is particularly difficult in the U.S. because master mediums do not have a large pool of helpers to draw upon. Most mediums have long commutes to jobs where they work full time, and some also have young children. They prepare for ceremonies during the evenings and nights and some stayed up the entire night before my ceremony. I had witnessed communities of mediums preparing for ceremonies hundreds of times, but had never been the recipient of their efforts. As it turned out, executing the ceremony correctly require a tremendous effort on everyone's part. The master medium provided spiritual guidance, another ordered spirit clothes from Vietnam and took me shopping for *lộc* (gifts the spirits will bless and distribute), my colleague Hiền arranged deliveries of spirit clothing, and Nhung sent emails with detailed instructions for the ritual. She and her husband also arranged for the purchase and preparation of the pig, duck, chickens and seafood. Yet another medium wrote the petitions and helped to call the spirits at the ceremony. And just before the ritual I learned that everyone had pitched in to buy me a full set of spirit clothes. I was overwhelmed with their generosity, but I had also known that when they said "we've got your back", the simple phrase held worlds of meaning.

On the day of the ritual, they sat by my side all day long. I was amazed at how quickly their speech and body gestures

changed when interacting with the spirits. They transformed from exhausted but highly efficient workers to eloquent ritual specialists using highly respectful modes of verbal and nonverbal communication. I had observed their interactions with spirits from the sidelines, but experiencing it as a medium was something altogether different. They were talking to the gods.

After the ceremony the temple mediums were curious to know what I experienced and how it compared with what I had learned during research, and they sent a video of the ceremony. I responded by writing short vignettes about my experiences becoming a medium, some of which are in this essay. Among the responses was a text message: "Welcome to the village." I had become fully incorporated into the community of Đạo Mẫu mediums, a village in which human and non-human spirits joyously commune with and support one another.

"The Spirits will Teach You"

During ethnographic interviews with mediums I often heard that "things are different" during the ceremony. First, spirits impart special strengths on their mediums. That is why, for example, they can have long ceremonies without tiring or having to use the bathroom. Spirits also have their own agenda, so they sometimes behave in unpredictable ways. Many mediums are nervous before their ceremonies. Initiates worry the spirits will not enter them, and more experienced mediums are concerned with the unpredictability of the spirits. "I

don't know what they will do, or how they will act" is a common refrain heard just before a ceremony begins. During my initiation ceremony, I experienced all these things.

Before the ceremony I was worried that I would not be able to relax enough to experience the spirits. I thought I might be too self-conscious and that my awareness would focus on humans rather than on the spirits. I prepared by visualizing relaxation, which helped tremendously. When the red veil was placed on my head I was simultaneously thrilled, grateful, overwhelmed with emotion, and trying to control the constant chatter in the back of my mind. "Relax, enjoy, I hope I can get off the floor, remember to bow, invite the gods to teach you, ask them to forgive you, relax, just go with it..." my human voice would not stop. Yet, at the same time, I could feel the Mother Goddesses gently and lightly breeze through my mind and body. Afterwards I recalled one medium's description of possession: she said it's as if the gods are in the front and she is in the back. The chatter, which was in the back of my mind, continued through the entire ceremony, but I was mostly able to let that take back stage in order to experience the spirits. When the veil came off for Chúa Bà she was joyous and light, wanting to dance, wanting to be there at that time, wanting to experience this occasion that had been so long in the making.

I was fairly weak because I had just finished the second line of chemotherapy,

and mediums accommodated my limitations by holding the ceremony earlier in the day and simplifying the construction of hats for female spirits so I would not have long periods in between incarnations. I had to practice getting up and down off the floor, and I worried that my strength would not last the entire ceremony. But I found I did not tire, I never had to take a bathroom break, and several spirits danced with lively enthusiasm. It was true - things were different during a ceremony.

I had been told that the spirits would teach me. I knew beforehand which spirits I wanted to incarnate, but some did not arrive and others came as a surprise. I incarnated some spirits I knew very little about, but the experience felt smooth and seamless as if the spirits themselves were teaching me how to behave. And many of the spirits I thought would lean heavily on me were actually light, and vice-versa. I learned that I was unable to predict what the spirits would do during a ceremony.

During the ceremony the mediums wanted to know what the gods had to say, and asked the spirits if had any messages for me, their medium. The mediums were acutely interested in the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the spirits, and wanted to learn more about the spirits through their incarnation in me. Although I had intellectually known that mediums learn through the embodiment of spirits, I never experienced it myself. Now it seems ironic that I spent so many

years studying Đạo Mẫu without experiencing the basic crux of the religion and ritual – it is experiential.

Conclusions

Doing participant observation as an anthropologist leads one to a certain kind of knowledge but does cause a person to become the other. As a researcher I could learn how people became mediums, what they said about the spirits, and how they interpreted or experienced the spirit world, but I did not have similar experiences and I could not learn directly from the spirits.

Although I may have wanted to participate in a deeper way, I did not want to simply imitate mediums or be untrue to my own (lack of) religious beliefs. I certainly did not want to have a disingenuous ritual or be less than honest with my spirit medium friends and colleagues. But as it turned out, my life path caused me to turn to the people and spirits of Đạo Mẫu and I developed my own spirit medium narrative. I began to think like a medium and then became a medium myself.

Kiana, the master of my temple, told me to think of initiation as “going home”. After studying Đạo Mẫu for so many decades, it became part of my life. I realize now that I learned a great deal through participant-observation, and my experiences as an initiate and a medium enhanced what I had already learned. The major difference was that I *felt* what it is like to become a medium and I *felt* the spirits. And during the midst

of my ceremony I had an intense feeling of having come full circle. I returned to the culture and religion I had studied for decades, including the rich material culture of Vietnam, and I was with humans and spirits I had known for years and with whom I had shared many important life events. I felt that much of my life was culminating in the ritual as multiple strands of work, friendship, knowledge, health and illness were interwoven. Indeed, it was like going home.

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