

# THE MOTHER GODDESS RELIGION OF THE VIỆT PEOPLE AS RECONCILIATION

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The Mother Goddess religion is regarded by many as an indigenous religion of the Việt that is composed of local beliefs as well as imported institutional religions including Indian Buddhism, Chinese Taoism, and Confucianism. It is a syncretic religion including about 70 spirits in its pantheon. This paper explores a very special aspect of this religion, that is the reconciliation of overseas Vietnamese spirit mediums in Silicon Valley, California, USA and mediums in Bắc Ninh province, North of Vietnam and the author, a researcher of the religion. A number of people of the old Saigon regime left South Vietnam and immigrated to California from 1954 to the 1980s. Some of them turned to the religion partly because it is truly Vietnamese. In this religion and in its temples, they see themselves as Vietnamese even though they are living in the United States. Their religious practice motivates them to travel to the North of Vietnam where the religion originated. The religion helps the northern people, including the author and overseas southern Vietnamese to understand each other, discover a common language and culture, and build friendly relationships. Such ritual activities help to ease tension in their interactions and relations. The Mother Goddess religion thus serves as a means of reconciliation bringing Vietnamese people together regardless of their political, cultural, and behavioral differences.

This paper explains how, from a religious point of view, the resentment, hostility, mistrust and suspicion are dissolved into a common faith and belief in the Mother Goddess Religion which allows people of different political views, language, cultures, and life perspectives the opportunity to discover their ethnic identities as the Việt people. Reconciliation is the dialogue that leads to the formation of a new mutually enriching relationships.

## **Mother Goddess Religion and Its practice**

The Mother Goddess religion is composed of indigenous beliefs and imported institutional religions. Mother Goddess religion is embedded in the local and historical context, but it also allows for the adoption of foreign elements and is reshaped in the process. The number of spirits is not fixed in the Mother Goddess religion. Generally, however, there are nine hierarchical ranks of spirits containing four imported spirits, four Mother Goddesses, one Saint Father with his three royal Damsels and a Young Boy, ten Mandarins, twelve Dames, ten Princes, twelve Damsels, ten or twelve Boy-Attendants, and two animal spirits. There is, thus, a possible total of seventy or seventy-two spirits, including the Jade Emperor and two Star Spirits, the Buddha, or *Quan Âm* (the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, known in Chinese as Guanyin

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and in Japanese as Kannon). The Việt can and do adopt new gods over time that are either a legendary hero or a historical figure as in the case of Trần Hưng Đạo. And, despite the atheistic ideology of a communist country, the Việt have never stopped believing in the existence of spirits. The newest spirit that has come into the Mother Goddess religion is the figure of Ho Chi Minh, whose statue is present in a number of temples today. Though Mother Goddess religion is primarily a religion of the Việt majority, many spirits have been borrowed from local ethnic groups in the north such as the Tay, the Muong, the Yao, the Man, and the Nung. The religion also reflects the Việt cosmology of four realms including heaven, earth, water, and mountains and forests, each of which is governed by a Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess religion is very inclusive, gathering in itself national, regional, local spirits and spirits of majority and minority peoples.

People who have a spiritual calling are initiated to be spirit mediums (*bà đồng, ông đồng*) and have their spirit possession rituals at least one or two times a year. The religion is not restricted to those practitioners, but is open to all lay people who come to pray to its pantheon for their individual's and their family's requests.

In Vietnam, the negative official attitude toward spirit mediumship and other folk practices and rituals has been concretized by a series of legal documents on these practices. From 1946, when the first constitution affirmed 'freedom of belief until renovation (*Đổi mới*) in 1986, there was official opposition to religion, including a policy of atheism

and an anti-superstition campaign (Malarney 2000, Norton, 2002). All rituals and practices that involved supernatural forces to '[deal] with human agonies and anxieties' were abandoned (Endres 2006, 77). However, these measures did not destroy religion or religious devotion among the Việt, and these beliefs have survived in various forms.

Since the 1980s when the state launched the reforms to move toward a market economy, Vietnam has witnessed the relaxation of restrictions and the development of a religious consciousness in the form of traditional folk practices, including village festivals, local and family religious rituals, ceremonies and folk musical and performing arts. The tremendous change in folk rituals and practices actually occurred when the veneration of spirits was granted equal rights with the worship of historical figures in the newly issued ordinance on folk beliefs and religion. This document was passed by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly on 18 June 2004 and took effect in mid-November. In the document, Item 1 of Article 3 recognizes folk belief activities, including ancestor worship, the commemoration of historical figures and the veneration of spirits.<sup>(1)</sup>

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<sup>(1)</sup> The decree on Folk Beliefs and Religion, Standing Committee of the National Assembly, No 21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11, 18 June 2004. Item 1 of Article 3 states that 'the activities of folk beliefs are activities representing the veneration of ancestors, commemoration and honoring of those who had great merit towards the country and people; the veneration of spirits, traditional symbols and other activities of folk beliefs which are typical for good values in history, culture and social ethics.'

The main practice of the Mother Goddess religion is *lên đồng* spirit possession ritual that is practiced in every region of Vietnam and among communities of overseas Vietnamese in the U.S.A., Australia, France, Belgium, and Germany. The ritual was first brought to the U.S. with Vietnamese immigrants in the 1960s and then with refugees at the end of the American War in 1975. When Vietnamese first came to the U.S., they could not return to Vietnam, and they had to practice the *lên đồng* ritual in isolation from their counterparts in Vietnam. Since the Renovation in Vietnam was instituted, and the U.S. re-established diplomatic ties with Vietnam more and more Vietnamese Americans have begun to return to Vietnam and sponsor possession ceremonies in Vietnam. Some say they want to have ceremonies in Vietnam because it is the homeland of the religion, some want to practice the ritual in temples that are devoted to specific spirits, and others say they want to have ceremonies with ritual goods, such as votive offerings, that are made in Vietnam (Fjelstad 2006). Going back to Vietnam to sponsor a ceremony or purchase ritual goods has recently become a status marker and is very popular among mediums in the U.S.

#### **Northerners and Southerners**

The relationships between northerners and southerners and communists and refugees are so complex that it is very difficult to separate and understand each component. The attitudes toward each other very depending on their personalities, whether or not they experienced the American Vietnamese war, and the loss and hardship of the war

and its consequences. In this complexity, one of the ways that southerners and northerners come to an understanding and build up their broken ties is when they share the same religion in which they see themselves as sharing Vietnamese culture.

In 1996 the paper author, a graduate student from the North went to the States to study for her Master and Ph.D. degrees. She had heard a number of stories that northern Vietnamese people could be beaten and harassed by extremist anti-communist groups in California. It was not good for her to study at a university where there were a lot of Vietnamese Americans. She was also told that if she met a Vietnamese American she should say she was a boat person (*thuyền nhân*) or came to the States as an immigrant (*di dân*). At a restaurant in the Vietnamese American neighborhood she should speak softly because of her northern accent. It was actually not as bad as the stories went. Some Vietnamese Americans had negative attitudes toward her when she told the truth that she was a northern student from Hanoi. They had stereotypes about the northerners that she must be a daughter of a communist party member with a very important position in the party or government. And she was called as a communist and a cadre (*cán bộ*). However, before coming to do her research among overseas Vietnamese spirit mediums in San Jose in the 2000s, she was warned by parents of her colleague's student at San Jose State University that she would not be received well there. However, when she was in contact with a group of spirit mediums in

San Jose it turned out to be quite different. She and the overseas people in San Jose had found their common language and understanding. On the one hand, she was a folklorist who was trained how to do her fieldwork and how to deal with her informants in the sensitive situation. The most important factor to connect her with the diasporic community in San Jose is their common shared beliefs in the spirits in general, even though she is not a spirit medium.

It was to her surprise that Vietnamese American spirit mediums regarded her as a very close folk who they could talk to about their religion and practice and they could tell her about their difficult time on the boat when they first came to the States. They were so delighted that their life was settled and much better now that their children have grown up to have good jobs and can afford to help their parents. Then, a man who was a colonel during the old Saigon regime said to her: "The war was the past. We have experienced loss and trauma. We are the people who fled from our own country. But you are here. We are all Vietnamese and we worship the same gods." By making this statement, he explained one of the central meanings of the Mother Goddess religion in the relation between the Northerners and the immigrants from the South of Vietnam that is its reconciliation.

### **The return to the North**

The religion and its practice are the motivation for a number of Vietnamese Americans to come back to their home country and to the North. When the Silicon Valley mediums, all of whom came from

the South, decided to hold their rituals in Vietnam, they were excited about the trip because they felt a strong calling to the spirits and they wanted to have their rituals in an original temple dedicated to a particular group of spirits. Although the Silicon Valley mediums disagreed with northern politics, they were thrilled to have their ceremonies in the north, the birthplace of the religion.

When mediums from San Jose visit Vietnam for the first time, they have to overcome fear and mistrust because many North American and Vietnamese-based mediums fought on opposite sides of the American War, and most individuals lost some family members during those times. Refugees fled Vietnam at the end of the war fearing they would be killed or imprisoned if they dared to stay. The trip from Vietnam to America was thus dangerous and full of trauma, and many people lost their lives. But many of those who remained in Vietnam perceived the refugees as traitors who abandoned the country twice - they fought on the side of the Americans, and then they left Vietnam for America where, in many cases, they were presumed to have grown wealthy. These differences are intensified by regionalism because most refugees came from southern Vietnam and they differ from northerners in language, culture, and political views. There is also a great deal of regional variation in the religious practice of spirit mediums, and residents of one region in Vietnam might not agree with those in another. As one California medium explained, "the south is always arguing that Saigon is better than Hanoi... they still have criticism for each other, south and north."

The Silicon Valley mediums had several concerns as they traveled to Vietnam. Before the trip, they were advised by the paper author that they would perform their rituals in a private temple of the master medium named Nghĩa in Bắc Ninh province. The author had reserved Mr. Nghĩa's rituals and interviewed him. She knew him as the master medium and ceremony master (*thầy cúng*) and he was very open to his practice. The master medium practiced not only the *lên đồng* spirit possession ritual, but also opened up the initiation rituals for the novice spirit mediums at his temple. The most importance for the Silicon Valley mediums was that they would have their initiation ritual for fortune telling and learn how to make the petition ceremony and other ritual paraphernalia, and collect petition praying texts. However, they were not certain they could trust their chosen master medium or his ritual assistants. Before becoming a medium Mr. Nghĩa had served in the army during the war and was a communist party member, but all of the Silicon Valley mediums are refugees who fled the communist state, either as boat people or people who used to serve in the old Saigon government as a soldier, a high army official, a pilot, or a colonel. They are different not only as southerners and northerners but in political perspectives and ideology. The difference could be solved partly in their shared practices of the Mother Goddess religion.

During their stay in Vietnam with the master medium, they performed their rituals at the master's temple and the Silicon Valley mediums said the rituals were fun,

and the ritual themselves helped to break the barriers between them and their master and the people around him. They did not talk about their differences, their traumatic past, or their political concerns. All of these contractions seem to be dissolved into their shared faith and shared concerns about their feelings, lives, family values.

Other problems had to do with issues of honesty and trust. Spirit mediums often question the veracity of other's spiritual motivations and it is not unusual for mediums to accuse each other of fakery. One of the first concerns of California mediums had to do with the honesty of the master medium, and he was carefully watched. How did he handle the money? Every possession ceremony involves the distribution of *lộc* (blessed gifts), which are given to everyone in the temple. These gifts include money, fruit, flowers, chips, cookies, and candy. Was the master generous with spirit gifts, or was he stingy? As it turned out, the mediums were impressed with the master's distribution of money, mostly because he gave to people who stood outside of the temple. As one medium explained "He is a very humanitarian person and he is not into money. He has a very nice heart." Through the ritual acts, the southern immigrants would have more respect and trust to the northern mediums.

### **Reshaping Identities**

The interactions between Silicon Valley mediums and their Vietnamese master and his disciples have made changes in their lives and statuses. The master medium has benefited from his relationship with the Vietnamese Americans. The economic status

of the master medium changed after he met the Silicon Valley mediums. Although there was some concern that he profited from the California mediums, ethnographic interviews revealed that the mediums played active roles in these opportunities but not in the way that the mediums and his villagers saw it. The money that the mediums sent to him was enough for the rituals. He received a big sum of money all at once (some thousand US. dollars) and he used that money to build up his house and the temple. About 6 months later the California mediums came to stay there and have their initiation ceremonies. The master paid for those rituals with money he earned from other spiritual activities such as fortune telling, performing initiation rituals, or helping the wealthy business people set up their office seating space and their ancestors' altars. The California mediums actually helped him by providing him with an alibi for his wealth - he could tell villagers and local authorities that he earned his money from overseas Vietnamese and not other residents of Vietnam.

Besides gaining wealth, the master medium also has increased his reputation as a "powerful" master medium in the eyes of lay people and his disciples (*con nhang đệ tử*). He is "so good that Vietnamese Americans come to him" as one of his clients said. His neighbors see that more and more clients come to him to have rituals and to consult with him on the other rituals such as fortune-telling, or how to overcome a hard situation in their life such as how to reduce the risk of their business, to avoid illegal business, or how to settle down family matters.

The Silicon Valley mediums have also benefited from the relationship.

They are able to learn ritual knowledge from the master medium, they gain status by having their ceremonies in Vietnam, and they are able to purchase ritual goods in Vietnam. In San Jose, there are about ten temples dedicated to Mother Goddess Religion today. When I was there in 2003, there was one made of most of objects from Vietnam, including statues, altars, incense bowls, small shrines, and a lintel in front of the temple saying "Almighty Mother Goddess" in Sino-Vietnamese. It was a luxurious temple, and its owner transported all the materials in a container from Vietnam. In opposition to this magnificent temple, there were simple ones that were made of and decorated by local goods and objects with not statues.

In Vietnam the Silicon Valley mediums purchased ritual goods, performing clothes, statues, and so on, so they can furnish their temples as close as possible to those in Vietnam. They also bought music of possession songs and the petition and prayer rites back for their ritual performances.

Interaction and communication enrich the relationship between Silicon Valley spirit mediums and the northern master medium. The mediums felt a strong tie with the North of Vietnam, which they described as the origin of Mother Goddess religion and *lên đồng* ritual. One day, while I interviewed the master medium, he said the Silicon mediums frequently called him and one of them said: "my body is in California, but my feeling is still in Vietnam." He also said "I miss Vietnam so much that I am

trying to save money by working extra hours to come to have the rituals.”

The master medium in Vietnam and the Vietnamese Americans become friends in their daily life but master and disciples in their spiritual life. The master today is a spiritual guide of the Vietnamese Americans. They call him whenever they need to do something faraway where they do not have all authentic Vietnamese goods or other practitioners such as master ceremonies (*thầy cúng*), *cung văn* singers for spirit possession rituals.

Being the adherents of the same religion, the practitioners do not mention their hostility in the past, their differences, or their political contradictions. When they are together, they pay attention to ritual details and religious harmony between their southern and northern ritual performances. When living far from each other, the Silicon Valley spirit mediums take care of their master by providing him some things he needs such as DVD player, refrigerators, and some money to maintain his temple. The master records his petitions to spirits and consults with the Silicon Valley mediums on a host of spiritual issues.

### **Conclusion mark**

People in north of Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans who come from former Saigon government vary in language, culture, and politics. However, these differences can be eased and their misunderstanding can be cleared up by joining together in pursuit of their common spirituality. The spirituality, their practice and belief of Mother Goddess religion has helped to reduce suspicion and difference and facilitate reconciliation between the Silicon Valley and Bắc Ninh mediums.

One of the reasons is because the northern people and San Jose spirit mediums are all Vietnamese and they are adherents to the Mother Goddess religion. Under the religion, Silicon Valley spirit mediums can find themselves as Vietnamese in their country of residence and they can integrate and merge with the people who used to be on the other side of the war. The religion has helped them to leave the past behind and share their common human concerns about rituals, practices, and ethics. When they overcome their mistrust and suspicion, they enrich their relationships.

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