

## ROLES OF MASTER MEDIUMS AND THEIR CONGREGATION IN PRESERVING AND PROMOTING OF THE WORSHIP OF MOTHER GODDESSES' PRACTICES

***Abstract:** Based on field material at the congregation in Hanoi, this article analyzes the roles of the community (the mediums and their congregation in particular) in practices of the worship of Goddesses. The author identifies the concepts of medium, congregation and practices of the worship of Goddesses, especially their roles in the context of changes in economy, culture and social life and religious freedom of the Vietnamese society; the worship of Goddesses was recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of mankind. Finally, the article shows proposals with the desire to enhance the roles of the mediums and their congregation in the protection and promotion of the practices of the worship of Goddesses.*

***Keywords:** Master mediums; ritual communities; communities; Mother Goddesses worship.*

### **Introduction**

The Mother Goddesses Worship is a type of folk belief that worships the mother who incarnated in heaven and earth in all regions. Along with other types of beliefs, this belief has existed for a long time and has been a source of the spiritual life of the Vietnamese. Through many vicissitudes, Mother Goddesses Worship is being restored and “enthroned” strongly in accordance with Philip Taylor’s words “Goddess in the rise”. Currently, Mother Goddesses Worship has been openly practiced. Many

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studies have successfully described the vibrant revival and analyzed values of this worship in the current context such as Philip Taylor<sup>1</sup>, Oscar Selamink<sup>2</sup>, Ngô Đức Thịnh<sup>3</sup>, Nguyễn Thị Hiền<sup>4</sup>, Nguyễn Ngọc Mai<sup>5</sup>, Vũ Tú Anh<sup>6</sup>. Through these studies, the Mother Goddesses Worship has been revealed from the perspective of culture, anthropology, psychology, philosophy. This article will not describe the practices of this belief or its values. It mainly analyzes the role of the community in their own religious practices and makes some suggestions with a desire to enhance the roles of the community (the mediums and their congregation) in preserving and promoting the worship of Goddesses.

## **1. Some concepts**

### ***1.1. Master mediums***

A master medium is a concept commonly used by believers to call the head of a community to worship the Mother Goddesses. Believers think that someone who becomes a master medium must have the vocation to be a medium (căn đồng) and undergo the obligatory rituals such as cutting hair to be a child of the Holy (ông Thánh), the 100-day thanksgiving, 3-year thanksgiving, performing a ceremony for the first votive dance (or the spirit mediumship ritual) and opening a new palace (mở phủ) for believers and becoming a master medium<sup>7</sup>.

Believers of the Mother Goddesses Worship often use the phrase “to be a soldier with merit, to be a mediumship with principles” to express the rules that one needs to go through to become a master medium. However, these rules are not kept in the classics, in the canonical doctrine like the other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc,... they are passed down orally from generation to generation. Accordingly, the beginning of the journey to becoming a master medium is a person must have the vocation to be a medium (căn đồng), it means that the person has the destiny to serve the Holy and ‘give birth’ new mediums (đẻ đồng<sup>8</sup>) and to be a

‘master’, ‘teacher’ or ‘father’, ‘mother’. Data from the author’s interviews and observations over the years shows that in the past, becoming a master medium is a long process with constant self-cultivation and the test of the divine.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền stated that “The main difference between a master medium and others mediums is the spiritual capacity, it means that their ability to open a new palace (mở phủ) for a follower, to perform healing rituals and other rituals”<sup>9</sup>. “In other words, ‘a highly qualified’ medium who has some special spiritual abilities such as divination and healing, can become a master medium”<sup>10</sup>. According to the view point of Charles Keyes<sup>11</sup>, with these special abilities, a master medium possesses magic power. And this magic power creates a great attraction that makes a master medium like a magnet that attracts, gathers others. Therefore, a congregation is formed.

### ***1.2. A congregation of the Mother Goddesses Worship***

As mentioned above, a congregation formed in association with a master medium is considered to have special powers and spiritual activities. The congregation is a community who worships the Mother Goddesses under the leadership of a leader, sharing the same “ancestral place” (chốn tổ)<sup>12</sup>; has mutual understanding and the same belief in the blessing of the gods in the palaces of the Mother Goddess. In other words, a congregation must have many people gathered under the leadership of a leader<sup>13</sup>. Besides the leader, there are other disciples including mediums (thanh đồng)<sup>14</sup>, nhang tử<sup>15</sup>, bán tử<sup>16</sup>, hầu dâng<sup>17</sup>, cung văn<sup>18</sup>, chấp tác<sup>19</sup> and believers who have faith in the sacredness of the gods.

Although having different jobs, living in different places, the members of a congregation have a similarity in belief, feelings, and problems that they are encountering in secular life. This similarity makes them sympathize with each other. They often gather around a master medium in the space of an ancestral place such as a

temple, a palace. In fact, there are many types of congregations<sup>20</sup>, however, a congregation headed by a master medium with the most typical characteristic of a Mother Goddesses Worship congregation. Whether having a big or small scale, each congregation has an organization to operate its activities, usually led by a master medium, a co-leader with the role of a 'housekeeper' under the direct direction of the master medium; finally, the believers (divided into groups such as mediums (thanh đồng), associates for the votive dancers (hầu dâng). As a spiritual community, the activities of a congregation must involve divine worship. However, compared to other religious communities in Vietnam, the deity worship of a congregation do not only take place at the ancestral place but it also occurs in different temples distributed throughout the country through traveling for rituals, going to places marked by the birth, death or deeds of the gods. The master medium is the owner of a palace and the general director" of all activities of the congregation, so the center of the congregation's activities must be the master medium's activities. In addition to leading believers to worship the gods or to travel for rituals, a master medium also has his/her spiritual activities based on special abilities. According to the conception of the Mother Goddesses worshipers, the special abilities of a master medium are very diverse: "one hundred of mediums have one hundred of spellings, one thousand of mediums have one thousand of power". And the different 'spellings', 'power' of the master mediums lead to specific characteristics of the congregation's activities.

One of the features of the congregation compared to other religious communities is: its formation and cohesion are not only based on the belief among co-religionists in the blessing of the Holy Mothers, having a feeling of "belonging to the Holy Mothers' family", but they also have spiritual experiences and the secular life of the master medium has many similarities with the followers that lead them gather and have a sense of belonging to the

congregation<sup>21</sup>. It explains why an individual always has the choice of a master medium and a congregation for a long-term commitment.

A master medium- 'a spiritual leader' of a community is extremely important in the cohesion of different people who have the same belief in the gods in a congregation. Therefore, if a master medium of a congregation died, another person takes over the leadership (a disciple of the master medium for example), many old followers may leave and the congregation disintegrates. This is a difference of the congregation community compared to some religions with a strict organizational structure. It can be said that the master medium is the founder of the congregation, decides the operation and survival of the congregation. It has given the master medium a strong power, the power that followers believe that "one person speaks one hundred people have to listen". Therefore, the master medium really has a great role in the practices of the Mother Goddesses worship.

### ***1.3. The practices of the Mother Goddesses worship.***

The Mother Goddesses worship is the human beings' belief in the power of the divine, supernatural power of the Holy Mothers. And 'practices of worshiping the Mother Goddesses' is the believer's activities to express their faith, respect, and admiration for the Holy Mother. These practices include activities such as cultivating morality, worshiping, traveling for rituals, performing the votive dance, organizing rituals (a ceremony for the first votive dance performing and opening a new palace, changing destiny for believers), singing the sacred songs to service the divine, organizing festivals to commemorate the birth, death or great merits of the gods. In general, the religious practices of the Mother Goddesses worship are extremely diverse. These practices are even richer and more diverse in contemporary society in order to meet the existential needs of human beings such as wealth, career, and health.

## **2. The roles of the master medium and the congregation in the preservation and promotion of the Mother Goddesses worship's practices**

The master medium and members of a congregation are practitioners of the Mother Goddesses worship. However, their roles are not entirely the same in this practice. The master medium is considered as an owner of the congregation, spiritual guides for believers, so the master medium has the role of a 'spiritual leader'. And the members of a congregation play the role of community practicing belief. I will separately present the role of the master medium and the congregation in the practices of Mother Goddesses worship although they have an inseparable attachment.

### ***2.1. The roles of the master medium***

The master medium is the creator and 'owner' of a congregation. Therefore, their roles for the practices of Mother Goddesses worship are firstly expressed in their own congregation. The author's interviews and observations over the years show that the master medium has a role in leading and educating disciples, preserving and handing down the practices, propagating the religion, developing spaces for the religious practices.

#### ***2.1.1. The master medium- a "spiritual leader" guides the practices of Mother Goddesses worship and educates "believers"***

Practitioners of the Mother Goddesses worship do not have any book or text to guide the ritual practices. Accordingly, they follow the instructions of their master medium. Therefore, the master medium has an important role, is a real spiritual leader. He/she is considered to have a special ability to communicate with the gods, to heal, to exorcise the ghost/ evil spirits, to invoke spirits, to seek graves, etc. Spiritual life experiences have given the master medium divine power (the power of the commanders) and the members of the congregation as 'subjects' have to obey.

Based on the data of surveys conducted some congregations in Hanoi and northern provinces, I realized that believers, especially the ‘thanh đồng’- those whose second life (spiritual life) associated with deities of the Mother Goddesses worship- adhere to the teachings of the master medium, they even fear that if they do not follow the teachings (they make some mistakes) and they will suffer from the deities’ punishment. As for the master mediums, they are always aware of their responsibility and duty as ‘the leader’ so they have to ‘lead the followers’. For example, after guiding a disciple to perform the first votive dance ceremony and opening a palace, the master medium will guide them to practice the Mothers Goddesses worship, 100-day thanksgiving ceremony, go to the temples to perform the votive dance in order to introduce themselves to the gods (fathers) and goddesses (mothers). The master mediums also teach them some abstinence before serving the deities, such as knowing how to purify the body, not having sex, not eating shrimp sauce, the meat of a dog. According to worshipers, the most important thing is the ‘mind’ and ‘goodness’. In addition to leading the practices, the master mediums also educate the followers, teach them to cultivate the morality the ‘firstly respect Buddha, deities, secondly respect the master medium’. Members of the congregation have to help and love each other because they are children of the Mothers Goddesses.

The role of a spiritual guide can be a direct or indirect form. The direct leading takes place through personal meetings or even collective meetings. Generally, each congregation has 4 festivals such as New Year Ceremony, Summer Ceremony, End Summer Ceremony, and Year-End Ceremony. On these occasions, the master medium transmits his/her ‘message’. A large congregation in Hanoi has a tradition that the master medium always gives a speech before solemn ceremonies. Firstly, the master medium asks permission from the Kings and the Mothers to serve them, and then he/she teaches believers and the path of cultivation.

Spiritual leadership in an indirect form is taking advantage of digital technology, the master medium communicates with believers via the Internet (Facebook). A master medium in Hanoi often posts poems composed by himself on Facebook to advise the disciples of the congregation to love and help each other and ‘to respect the Holy, the master medium’. However, it can be said that there is no better way to teach and guide the disciple through a good example of the master medium. If a master medium is devoted and kind, the followers will follow and the words of the master medium will be highly appreciated. That is the reason why followers cannot follow any congregation nor any master medium without choice and consideration. Many believers were interviewed said that they wanted to give their spiritual life to a mindful, unselfish, and non-self-interested master medium.

*2.1.2. The master medium- ‘a folk artisan’ who preserves and transmits the practices of Mother Goddesses worship*

Although there is currently disagreement that a master medium is not a folk craftsman, and some people have opposed giving the title of folk craftsmen to them, I believe that, in terms of preservation and handing down folk cultural values to future generations, a master medium is a true folk craftsman. Similar to the artists who sing ‘hát xoan’, ‘quan họ’ or ‘ví dặm’, the master mediums transmit knowledge and practices of belief to their believers (although the content of transmission and the method of the master mediums is different from the aforementioned artisans).

The surveys’ data of some congregations in Hanoi and northern provinces showed that the previous members are responsible to lead and help the new member. It is clear that (in a congregation) the master medium is the one who becomes a believer of the Mothers Goddesses worship first and who has many spiritual experiences, know how to practice the Mothers Goddesses’ rituals more than any other believer. Therefore, the master medium ‘leads

the followers', brings them to the Holy Mother, and hands them down the practices of the Mothers Goddesses.

However, what does the master medium preserve and transmit in the practices of the Mothers Goddesses, how to transmit it, and what is the meaning of transmission?

*To practice the Mothers Goddesses worship, believers must have understanding and knowledge of spiritual life.*

The master medium is the person who hands down knowledge to his/her disciples. In fact, many Vietnamese, including believers of the Mothers Goddesses are often interested in practices, they lack the theoretical understanding of religions, beliefs. They go to the temple to worship Buddha but they do not know much about the Buddha's stories, do not understand the teachings and precepts of Buddhism. They also have little understanding of the meaning of the symbols in the temple. They worship their ancestors at home but they do not understand why the offerings on the altar must have a white cup of water, an oil lamp.

The Mothers Goddesses' worshipers are similar, they initially ignorant or ambiguous about the sanctuary system, the legend of gods, the rituals, and the functions of the rituals. Then, after joining a congregation and becoming a follower, the master medium will help them to have knowledge. Many followers told us the stories of deities in detail such as Mr. Hoang Muoi, Mr. Hoang Bay, Lord Thac Bo, etc. They enthusiastically told us the difference between each votive dance session (giá đồng) through the action of the master medium and costumes. They also explained the incarnation of several deities during one session through costumes, flag, and sword, etc,.. They also admitted to us that, when they entered the congregation, they did not fully understand the meaning of the symbols in the ceremony, their master medium explained to them. Accordingly, the master medium does not only convey knowledge about the gods, sacred spaces, he/she also helps believers interpret

dreams with many fears because many worshipers have a special psychological and physiological life. Many people suffer from illnesses, diseases like crazy, they can't be cured forever, or their disease cannot be diagnosed, the disease that the author Nguyen Thi Hien called 'yin disease' (bệnh âm). They often dream about snakes, leeches, or they are in heaven or in hell, these dreams lead them to confuse. (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2012; Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2004; Nguyễn Ngọc Mai, 2010;...). The master medium (with his/her experiences) interpreted the meaning of those dreams and reassured them with spiritual therapies.

*Not only transmitting the knowledge of the Mothers Goddesses worship in particular and spiritual life in general, but the master medium also hands down the ritual practices.* As mentioned above, the rituals of the Mothers Goddesses worship are very rich and diverse. Serving for rituals requires many stages such as performing a votive dance, singing, making offerings, praying, preparing offerings, etc... The master medium spends time to instruct disciples. For example, the master medium has to teach new mediums to perform the votive dance serving (they do not know how to dance, act a holy sign).

We have observed the instruction of the master mediums to their followers. The preparation of the offerings is also not easy. In an interview with a middle-aged man of a congregation in Hanoi with 14 years working as an assistant, he said that before joining this congregation, he had worked as a handler, a motorbike driver so he did not understand the Mothers Goddesses worship in general and offerings for the Mothers Goddesses worship in particular. After entering the congregation and to become an assistant, he was taught by the master medium how to prepare offerings for each kind of ceremony. The artisans of 'quan họ' or 'hát xoan' impart cultural practices through classes and training courses. Religions such as Catholicism and Buddhism both have schools that train priests and nuns to practice their rituals, to lead the believers to practice their

faith. It is not similar to become a medium (thanh đồng) or a follower the Mothers Goddesses worship. They are not gathered in a class to learn about the gods, the merits of the gods, the practices of the rite. The master medium directly teaches believers through specific practices. Observing the master medium performing the votive dance sessions, preparing the offerings also helps followers learn in a vivid and intuitive way. Likewise, the master medium leads new mediums to perform the first votive dance to introduce the new medium to the Father God, Mother God, or take disciples on a pilgrimage to temples around the country, also help them to take advantage of lessons on the trips. Moreover, the development of digital technology has enabled the master medium to have a channel of information to quickly impart the Mothers Goddesses practices. Most of the master mediums have their own Facebook where they update the congregation's affairs, timetable of festivals, traveling for rituals. The master medium also writes about the meaning of rituals, introducing the votive dance sessions, temples, palaces, etc... Followers can learn and comment to exchange information. The master medium directly explain and answer questions on Facebook.

It can be said that the role of transmitting the Mothers Goddesses practices of master mediums to believers is extremely important in preserving the folk cultural values as well as the Vietnamese identity. Because the ways and meanings of the ritual practices are not recorded in the scriptures like the religions and beliefs in Vietnam, they are purely the oral transmission. If there are no master mediums who are knowledgeable about the spiritual life, enthusiastic in the practice of Holy Mothers' worship and wish to transmit it to their followers, those values will be lost by time. With the role of preserving and transmitting their religious practices to generations of believers (who may become master mediums in the future), the master mediums have made an important contribution to the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship over the years and

this religion was recognized by UNESCO as the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

*2.1.3. The master medium with a leading role in 'propagating' the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship.*

In fact, according to the views of the followers, each master medium has a certain role and task. There are the master mediums who have a lifetime associated with the ancestral place, serving the Three and the Four Palaces and leading the 'children' in their congregation to perform the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship. Moreover, there are also master mediums who expand their activities beyond that 'campus'. They integrate into society and perform other roles. In addition to preserving and transmitting practices to members of their congregation, some master mediums also participate in 'propagating', introducing the beauty of the Mothers Goddesses beliefs<sup>22</sup>.

*Contribute to spread the true value of the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship.*

The propagation of the Mothers Goddesses religion firstly needs to overcome the prejudice against the Mothers Goddesses belief, especially the prejudice against the practices, practitioners. In the past, the Mothers Goddesses worship in general and the votive dance in particular, were considered to be superstitious and these practices were forbidden. The current socio-economic context and policies on religion and belief have created a 'chance' for the strongly restored the Mothers Goddesses belief. The mediums freely organize the Holy services, the temples have been embellished, the private palaces have grown like mushrooms. Many people who have the vocation to be a medium (căn đồng) can freely open a palace.

However, the Mothers Goddesses belief and the votive dance have not removed the prejudice to be "superstition", the person who practices the ritual is considered to be 'homosexuals', 'crazy'.

This negative view of a part of society has led to resolving the prejudices of many master mediums. How to solve prejudice?

First, many master mediums have spent their efforts to collect and find the true values of the Mothers Goddesses belief and spread those values to the society, to their own congregation in particular. They think that being a child of the Mothers Goddesses without understanding about the Mothers and the practices the ritual will lead to incorrect practices, transformations so cause unfriendly viewpoint of society to the Mothers Goddesses worship and the community of practitioners. A well-known master medium in Hanoi said that he always spread the values of the belief to members of his congregation such as the Mothers Goddesses worship is a folk belief imbued with Vietnamese national identity, a spiritualized patriotism because many gods are worshiped had the merits with the people, the country, they have become the spiritual fulcrum of the people; this worship is a ‘historical book’ written in adoration, costumes, dances, and performances. This master medium often uses Facebook to spread the values of the Mothers Goddesses religion to the community outside of his congregation because “Facebook is so powerful, it can transmit three hundred and sixty-five days a year, it over years to years, from generations to generations without prevention of any border belt”<sup>23</sup>.

In addition, in order to propagate the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship, many master mediums in Hanoi and other provinces have participated in the Club of Vietnam Mothers Goddesses religion (Câu lạc bộ Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam), the Vietnam Center for Conservation of Culture and Belief (Trung tâm bảo tồn văn hóa tín ngưỡng Việt Nam), and Thang Long Cultural Heritage Association (Hội di sản văn hóa Thăng Long).

Many provinces and cities have also established the local Clubs of Mothers Goddesses religion. These centers and clubs are the gathering places for managers of culture, researchers, mediums, and believers; regularly organize seminars and workshops in order

to disseminate knowledge about the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship. The information about the seminars and the articles as well as the published publications are really meaningful, impact on awareness of the votive dance rituals in particular and practices of Mothers Goddesses belief in general.

*Contribute to introduce the value of the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship to abroad.*

Actually, through articles, dissertations, essays, and books of Vietnamese as well as foreign researchers, people over the world have known the Mothers Goddesses belief and the votive dance. However, the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship can be truly felt by all senses when the Vietnam Center for Conservation of Culture and Belief and some master mediums have organized and performed the votive dance rituals at overseas cultural exchanges. Some master mediums of Hanoi, as well as other provinces, participated in performing this ritual in the cultural exchanges in European and Asian countries, such as France, Italy, Switzerland, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, etc.

These trips were opportunities for researchers and master mediums to introduce the most quintessential and condensed aspects of the Mothers Goddesses practices through performing the votive dance rituals. A famous master medium in Hanoi named L said that “I was one of the master mediums to have the opportunity to go abroad to introduce the Vietnamese culture. I was aware of my responsibility. I am a child of the Three, Four Palaces, the Mothers Goddesses so I must be devoted to promoting the national religion. When I step onto the stage to perform the votive dance, I am a child of Father and Mother under the Holy Mother’s shadow, I perform it for the honor of the nation”<sup>24</sup>.

The master mediums’ performances of the Vietnam Center for Conservation of Culture and Belief at foreign cultural exchanges have left a good impression about the traditional cultural identity of

Vietnam. Friends over the World knew and was really fascinated, amazed by a meaningful national belief, a belief that its practice fulfills the existential life such as Happiness - Fortune – Longevity, those who have made merits to the nation have been sanctified and worshiped, it demonstrates the Vietnamese tradition of ‘when drinking water, remember its source’; a belief in which gods derived from different ethnicities, it shows coexistence and tolerance among ethnicities; a belief that is not only human significance, it is also beautiful, attractive with dances, lyrics, costumes. Through these activities, a number of master mediums in Hanoi and other provinces have become ‘cultural ambassadors’.

*2.1.4. The master medium with the role of preserving and restoring temples, palaces - space for the Mothers Goddesses practices*

As a country with a deep spiritual life, Vietnam has a system of communal houses, temples, and pagodas which are densely distributed throughout the country, in which, the temples, palaces, and pagodas for the Mothers Goddesses worship account for a significant proportion. Those temples are sacred spaces where religious practices take place, where Vietnamese people in general and the Mothers Goddesses worshipers in particular often gather. Without these temples, the Mothers Goddesses worshipers will not have sacred spaces to show their devotion and practice rituals.

However, during the war, many temples across the country were destroyed or severely degraded. In addition, a long time before Doi Moi, religions and beliefs were considered to be superstitious and they were eliminated causing many establishments of worship were ruined. Many sacred spaces were turned into depots. The Mothers Goddesses temples were the same. When the temples were damaged, degraded, or destroyed, the Mothers Goddesses practices especially the votive dance performances were also absent, so people who have the vocation to be a medium had to perform the votive dance in secret without music (“hầu chui” or “hầu vo”).

In this context, the master mediums, believers silently maintain the worship, especially the public temples which inherit through generations of the master mediums. After the Doi Moi, along with the growth in economic life, the openness in the policy of religion, beliefs of the State, the spiritual life was revived in Vietnam, including the development of the votive dance performance to serve the Holy Mothers which is considered as an ‘outburst’ development (according to Philip Taylor terminology).

A movement to restore and repair worshiping facilities became vibrant from rural to urban region, from plain to the mountainous region. The master mediums- whose whole life was associated with the temples became one of the leading and most active forces in temple restoration. First, they repaired or built new temples and ‘revived’ their temples. Next, they also provided assistance to restore other temples across the country. There were some master mediums who completely spent their own labor and material to rebuild the temple. Besides their efforts, they also mobilized the strength of the congregation, the contribution of the followers’ community. There were some master mediums in Hanoi with many contributions, such as the master medium named T in An Tho temple, the master medium named H at Hàng Bạc temple, the master medium named D at Lảnh Giang Vọng Từ Temple, etc.

According to narrative of the master medium named D that the present temple was a spacious shrine, built in 1904 to worship the Quan lớn Đệ Tam (a mandarin). Because of the war and many other reasons, the worship items, the bells, the stone stele were lost, there were some statues made of clay, such as the Mothers Goddesses, the Quan Tam phủ, the Quan lớn Tuần Tranh, the Đức Thánh Trần. Then, the temple collapsed, the master medium D and his relatives restored the temple. After many repairs, in recent years, the temple has been rebuilt and moved to the 8th floor.

Besides preserving, repairing, and building the temples, the master medium Đ and believers traveled every year to other temples (Tam Đảo, Bảo Hà, Đông Công, Cồn, Sòng) to worship, to do charity work, to visit Trường Sơn martyrs cemetery. For the master medium named T, besides preserving and repairing An Thọ temple, since the 1980s, he built Hàn Sơn temple in Hàng Bột street, then he and an old medium assisted in building Sòng temple. Besides the master mediums in Hanoi, the master mediums in other provinces were also enthusiastic to preservation and restoration the spiritual spaces such as the master medium named V in Phủ Nấp, Nam Định, the master medium named in Nam Định. The master medium named Th has visited many places across the country, donated to restore, to construct temples, to make the horizontal lacquered board and the antithetical couplet (hoành phi, câu đối)<sup>25</sup>.

It can be said that the master mediums have played an important role in the restoration and construction of temples, they have actually contributed to the revitalization of sacred spaces; to favor the Mothers Goddesses practices in particular and religious and belief practices in Vietnam in general in order to meet the spiritual needs of people in the contemporary society.

### ***2.2. The roles of the congregation***

According to the classification of Phạm Hồng Tung<sup>26</sup>, the congregation is a type of religious and belief community. As mentioned above, this community is united by having the same faith in the blessing of the deities, the Mothers Goddesses, and the master mediums with a special ability. Theoretical analysis of the relationship between the community and cultural heritage has shown the role of the subject in the creation, practice, protection, and transmission of the community's heritage. Without the community, there would be no heritage. The analysis of the congregation of the Mothers Goddesses practices' role can be based on the theory of the relationship between the community and the heritage.

*First, the congregation is the subject created the Mothers Goddesses practices*

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions confirmed that without the people and the community there is no culture. For example, if people do not believe in God or in Buddha, there will be no Catholicism or Buddhism. Likewise, if there is no faith of the congregation members in the sacred existence of the Holy Mothers, if there is no desire to express their respect and admiration for the deities with merits with people, with the nation and without earnestly asking for existential aspirations of Fortune, Fame, and Health, there will be no the Mothers Goddesses practices. However, the word 'to create' in this case has more meaning as to enrich and to diversify. There are many different congregation communities headed by different master mediums whose 'style' of ritual practice is not entirely the same. The congregations in the North, Centre, and the South also have different practices of Mothers Goddesses worship. It has created the diversity of the Mothers Goddesses practices in Vietnam. Moreover, in each congregation, although the master medium is the one who leads the followers to practice their beliefs, the members are not photocopies of the master medium. Each of them is an individual with their own creations in the way of serving the Holy, singing, costumes, and offerings. Besides, the congregations are not independent 'oases', they always have relationships with each other, so the master mediums and the followers also learn from another. This also creates a variety of the Mothers Goddesses practices. Recently, some researchers as well as the master mediums have expressed aspirations about building a common standard in the votive dance ritual and the Mothers Goddesses practices. However, in my opinion, if a common standard is applied, the votive dance ritual and the Mothers Goddesses practices will become a model and it will undermine the diversity of culture, contrary to the principle of

respect for diversity that UNESCO has appreciated in preserving and developing cultural heritage. Recognizing the importance of the principle, a medium in Hanoi said that “We have no right to lose the diversity, no one can deny that differences. We must preserve the uniqueness of the spiritual culture of each area. For example, the Hmong, Dao, and Nung have ‘bamboo flutes’ (khèn), but the sound of ‘khèn’ is different in each ethnic groups, it is impossible to make it the same”<sup>27</sup>.

*The congregation is also the community that directly practices and preserves the Mothers Goddesses worship.* For every cultural heritage, the community has the role of practicing and preserving heritage. The role of the Mothers Goddesses worship is a little different. For Quan họ singing in Bắc Ninh, ví dặm singing in Nghệ Tĩnh or traditional handicrafts, all people can practice, it means that if people are trained they can sing the correct rhyme and do the right product by hand. However, the practices of Mothers Goddesses rite, especially the votive dance ritual cannot be performed by everyone, only people with special abilities can do it. It is not possible to train any person to become a master medium, a medium who can perform a ritual of service.

In order to practice the Mothers Goddesses worship, the members of the congregation have to help and support each other. The Mothers Goddesses ritual, especially the votive dance service are complicated rituals. Because to organize a votive dance ceremony, in addition to the shrines as well as the votive dancers, there are many other factors such as costumes, music, offerings, associates of the votive dancers (hầu dâng) as well as the attendees. Therefore, only a master medium or any member of the congregation cannot do it. It needs the support of all congregation members to organize the ceremony.

Moreover, the members also help each other with material goods. Many members of the congregation have difficulties, have no money to serve the gods, or traveling to worship. Thus, every

time when these members perform ritual other members come to support it, it is a way of sharing among members of the congregation. In addition, in order to take place the Mothers Goddesses worship, the members have contributed their labor effort and money to repair and build their own temple as well as temples they have visited.

*The congregation also plays the role of imparting the Mothers Goddesses practices.* As mentioned above, I have indicated the role of the master medium as the spiritual leader of the congregation. I would like to add that, the master mediums do not only impart religious practices to believers, they also impart among master mediums. The congregation is a community consisting of many members, these members are divided into many different groups, such as singing (hát châu văn), associates of the votive dancers (hầu dâng), ‘thanh đồng’ group, communication group. Members of these groups learn from each other, regularly exchange experiences in the profession. It is extremely important in the preservation and development of the Mothers Goddesses practices because there are practices that are not part of the master mediums, so they cannot impart to other members of the congregation. For example, the singing ‘châu văn’ praises the merits of the gods in the votive dance ritual, it belongs to the specialization of the singers (cung văn), the master medium cannot sing, play ‘đàn nguyệt’, or ‘gỗ phách’ (folk instruments).

Therefore, a certain member of a congregation wants to learn ‘châu văn’ singing, he/she needs the hand down of a singer (cung văn). For example, in some interviews with the singers (cung văn) of some congregation, I realized that they used to gather in groups to practice together. Currently, their job is becoming a profession, the teaching of singing for members of the congregation needs to develop.

### **3. Promotion of the roles of master mediums and congregations in preserving the Mother Goddesses worship’s practices at present**

Protection of intangible cultural heritage is one of the important programs of each nation. It is a common task, the current model of heritage protection that UNESCO encourages is a combination of the role of the subject/community, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the State. In which, the community-the subject of heritage has a decisive role. For the Mothers Goddesses practices, the role of master mediums and congregations is extremely important, that role even needs to be promoted and enhanced in the new current context. What is the new context? Why is it necessary to promote the role of master mediums and congregations in the new context in protecting the heritage of the Mothers Goddesses practices? What are the measures to promote the role?

### ***3.1. The new context and the need to promote the role of master mediums, congregations in protecting and preserving the Mothers Goddesses practices***

#### *3.1.1. Restoration of the Mothers Goddesses practices? and metamorphosis needs to be eliminated*

In recent years, discussions on the development of religion and beliefs have mentioned the revival of religious practices in Vietnam. Oscar Selamink wrote that “After a quiet stage of religion and belief, a sharp, wide-ranging revival of religious practices and rituals are taking place in the contemporary Vietnamese society”<sup>28</sup>. Discussions of Oscar Selamink and others authors showed that the sudden rise of rituals in Vietnam is not only compensation for economic insecurity, or a manifestation of cultural freedoms or wealth newly established, it is in a form of a commercial transaction between gods or deities in another world (or the Yin world) and believers in the secular world (or the Yang world)<sup>29</sup>.

In general, the state’s renovation policy since 1986 has led to the development of the economy, openness policy on religions and beliefs. The uncontrolled insecurity of economic life, health, and mental security are the three important reasons leading to a strong

recovery of religion and beliefs in Vietnam. In general, the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship can be seen as the most powerful restoration. Like being 'removed from the cage', the votive dance performance has been held freely and publicly; a large number of believers have performed the first votive dance ritual (or the spirit mediumship ritual) and opening a new palace, the number of congregations has quickly increased and their scale has expanded.

The revival of the Mothers Goddesses practices in general and the votive dance rituals in particular really met the spiritual needs of human existential life in contemporary society. However, this practice of *thí* belief, especially the votive dance, is having the metamorphosis causing negative social opinion. Rituals such as the votive dance, offering stars at the beginning of the year, and traveling for worship are gradually becoming a commercial service. Commerce is also expressed in the form of giving/distributing fortune, in the exchange between humans and gods. In the past, the offerings for a votive dance ritual depended on the economic possibility of the votive dancers, the costumes were simple, however, some votive dancers have recently put fashion elements into their costumes. The music of 'chầu vãn' has been mixed with new and modern songs make it different from the old 'chầu vãn'. The morality of some master mediums and followers has deteriorated. Some master mediums in the name of gods have practiced superstitions, intimidated followers to buy expensive offerings, spreading a lot of money when performing the votive dance. In the context of the market economy, some singers (*cung vãn*) have been also unavoidable material temptations so they learn to sing songs in a sloppy, unsubstantial manner. They even have only sung for the rich votive dancers. This metamorphosis has posed an urgent requirement for measures to return the true worth of the Mothers Goddesses worship and honor of the votive dancers.

*3.1.2. The recognition of Mothers Goddesses worship as an intangible cultural heritage of humankind by UNESCO and anxiety after the accolades*

On December 1, 2016, during the plenary session of the 11th Meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission of the United Nations on Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially recognized the “The practice of the Mothers Goddesses worship of the Three Realms” as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

This honor is an affirmation of the value, characteristics, and status of Vietnamese culture in the world and it is a pride of the Vietnamese people. However, the anxiety has come after the honor. Researchers, cultural managers, and the community practices the Mothers Goddesses worship have concerned that many people will take advantage of heritage honors to ‘insure’ their ‘trade’, ‘commercialized the votive dance ritual. This showed the metamorphosis of the votive dance ritual in particular and the practice of the Mothers Goddesses in general, posed the need to protect the practice of the Mothers Goddesses of the Three Realms as the representative intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

In order to eliminate the metamorphosis in the practice of rituals and the Mothers Goddesses worship, to be worthy of representing the Vietnamese identity, of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, it needs to promote the role of many forces in society. In which, the master mediums and the congregations must be the most important forces because they are the ones who directly practice the Mothers Goddesses belief, they can make their belief become Sincerity, Goodness, Beauty.

***3.2. Some proposals to enhance the role of master mediums and congregations in the protection and promotion of the Mothers Goddesses practices.***

The protection of the heritage of the Mothers Goddesses practices must be a combination of many different measures, with

the participation of many parties, in which promoting the role of the community, the master mediums, and the congregations, in particular, is one of the most important measures. A number of measures with the desire to enhance the role of the master mediums and the congregations in protecting and promoting the heritage of the Mothers Goddesses practices as follows:

*Firstly*, it needs to raise awareness for the master mediums and the congregations about the value and nature of the Mothers Goddesses practices. It can be considered as one of the most important measures because everything is derived from awareness. Incorrect awareness of the value of the practices of Mothers Goddesses worship will lead to wrong actions, the metamorphosis of the belief. In particular, it focuses on raising awareness for the master mediums, then, they will teach their followers of the congregations. The master mediums are the spiritual leaders, the owner of the congregations, so if the master mediums are correctly aware of the value of the practice of Mothers Goddesses worship, the whole congregation will properly understand. Some mediums of a congregation will become master mediums and they continue to hand down that knowledge to their followers. The misconceptions will lead to errors in the congregation and the next generations. To raise the awareness of the master mediums and the congregations, the necessary things such as the organization of seminars, conferences related to the Mothers Goddesses worship with the participation of the master mediums and the congregations' community. In addition, it is necessary to increase communication by radio and the internet about the value and nature of the Mothers Goddesses practices and the need to protect this religious practice to preserve national identity and to be worthy of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. At the same time, there is an increase of propagation about the need of the master mediums and the congregations to join in defending those practices. In fact, the Mothers Goddesses belief and its values were rarely mentioned in the mainstream media, on State's television because in the past it was

considered to be superstitious and the messages about the beauty of this tradition were not spread widely in society.

The media has not really understood and appreciated the role of the master mediums and the congregations in defending the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship, even the media has a prejudiced view of mediumship. It can be said that the media and society's appreciation of the role of the master mediums and the congregations in protecting the Mothers Goddesses practices will make them feel proud and responsible for the heritage. It needs further research on the Mothers Goddesses religion, publishing publications to propagate the true value of this belief to the community who practice it, particularly for the master mediums and the congregations.

*Secondly*, each locality should establish a club, an association, or an organization of master mediums. These associations, organizations will strengthen their role in 'leading' the congregation and in protecting and promoting the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship. Through these associations, professional training classes will be organized to help them have knowledge of Law on Religion and Beliefs, Law of Heritage; Convention on World Cultural Heritage Protection in 2003. It can be said that most of the master mediums do not understand or fully understand these Laws. Therefore, to have knowledge about laws will help the master mediums have the freedom to practice their belief in accordance with the legal framework and along with the members of the congregation to realize their responsibility for protecting the national cultural heritage. It should establish a group of master mediums who at the forefront in defending the Mothers Goddesses worship and it will become a good example.

*Thirdly*, it needs to strengthen the connection between the master mediums, the congregations, and researchers as well as managers, NGOs in researching, collecting materials on the practices of the Mothers Goddesses worship.

*Fourthly*, it needs to encourage the teaching of the Mothers Goddesses practices of the master mediums, members of the congregations. However, it is necessary to realize that teaching religious practices is different from teaching the traditional crafts or performing arts (singing quan họ, ví dặm for example). For traditional crafts or performing arts, someone who has passion and interest can learn and be taught a profession. However, the Mothers Goddesses practice is not a profession that anyone can learn and it is not possible to pass it on to anyone. It must be someone who has a vocation and even have special powers to become one of the disciples, to be taught by a master medium. Therefore, the transmission of the Mothers Goddesses practices should be strongly exploited in terms of transmitting knowledge about the origins, history of characters to be worshiped, the value of beliefs; how to practice belief, and awareness about protecting that belief. Of course, some practices can be commonly taught, for example, singing ‘chầu văn’. Therefore, it should form ‘chầu văn’ clubs with the participation of ‘cung văn’ group to transmit or learn each other and preserve ancient lyrics and melodies.

In general, the master mediums, members of the congregations play a great role in the practice of the Mothers Goddesses worship. As the creator of the congregation, the owner of the congregation, the master medium acts as a ‘leader’ who guides the disciples to practice the ritual, transmits the practices to them as well as takes the lead in propagating the Mothers Goddesses worship. The congregation plays a role as a community that practices, preserves, nurtures, and transmits those practices. The aforementioned roles of the master mediums and congregations give us theoretical lessons in the protection of the Mothers Goddesses worship in particular and intangible cultural heritage in general: it needs to respect the role of the community - the subject of the heritage and to consider them as a core force in protecting the heritage./.

**Notes:**

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- 3 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2012), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (Mother Goddesses Worship in Vietnam)*, Nxb. Thế giới, Hà Nội.
- 4 Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002), *The Religion of the Four Palaces: Mediumship and Therapy in Viet culture* (Đạo Tứ phủ: Việc lên đồng và phương pháp chữa bệnh trong văn hóa Việt), Indiana University; Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2004), Ông đồng, bà đồng: họ là ai?, trong *Đạo Mẫu và các hình thức Shaman trong các tộc người ở Việt Nam và Châu Á (Mother Goddesses Worship and Shamanism of ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia)*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội, pp.295-309; Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2010), Bệnh âm: chẩn đoán và chữa bệnh trong lên đồng của người Việt, trong *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học (Modernity and attitudes, actions of traditions in Vietnam: Anthropological approaches)*, quyển 2, Nxb. Đại học Quốc gia Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, p.37-51.
- 5 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2010), *Hiện tượng lên đồng trong bối cảnh mới - Nghiên cứu trường hợp ở Đồng bằng Bắc Bộ (The spirit mediumship ritual in a New Context - A Case Study in the Red River Delta)*, Luận án tiến sĩ Văn hóa học, Thư viện Quốc gia Việt Nam.
- 6 Vũ Thị Tú Anh (2016), *Quyền lực mềm của người phụ nữ trong văn hóa Đạo Mẫu (The soft power of women in Mother Goddesses Worship's culture)*, Nxb. Giáo dục Việt Nam, Hà Nội.
- 7 Mai Thị Hạnh (2015), Đồng thầy: Từ năng lực đặc biệt đến quyền lực trong bản hội Đạo Mẫu (Master mediums: from special capacity to power in the congregation of Mother Goddesses), *Văn hóa dân gian*, số 3, p. 50-64.
- 8 Performing the first votive dance ritual and opening a temple for believers.
- 9 Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2004), Ông đồng, bà đồng: họ là ai?, trong *Đạo Mẫu và các hình thức Shaman trong các tộc người ở Việt Nam và Châu Á (Mother Goddesses Worship and Shamanism of ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia)*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội.
- 10 Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2010), Bệnh âm: Chẩn đoán và chữa trị trong lên đồng của người Việt, trong: *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở*

*Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học (Modernity and attitudes, actions of traditions in Vietnam: Anthropological approaches)*, Quyển 2, Nxb. Đại học Quốc gia Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, p. 42.

- 11 Charles Keyes (translator: Đoàn Thị Tuyên, Đức Hạnh hiệu đính năm 2006), *Ma lực: Từ đời sống xã hội đến tiểu sử linh thiêng*, trong *Những vấn đề nhân học tôn giáo (Anthropology of Religion)*, Tạp chí Xưa và Nay & Nxb. Đà Nẵng, p. 390- 413.
- 12 Mai Thị Hạnh (2015), *Bản hội Đạo Mẫu: quan niệm và loại hình (The congregation of Mother Goddesses: concepts and forms)*, *Văn hóa nghệ thuật*, số 377, p. 80-85.
- 13 The congregation owner mentioned in this article is the founder and head of the congregation, directing the activities of the congregation. The congregation owner can be a master medium, also can be a believer or the person who has a Mother Goddesses' shrine in the house. Among them, a master medium is the most popular.
- 14 A medium (thanh đồng) has the vocation to be a medium to serve gods (căn hầu thánh), opening a new palace, to be a child of a master medium. Mediums are the people who are most attached to the master medium and to the the congregation.
- 15 nhang tử, according to folk beliefs, are the ones who have a bowl of incense for the gods of fate can help them get rid of disasters (the master medium has done this work).
- 16 According to folk beliefs, bán tử are small children with illness to be sold by their parents to Mother Goddesses' temple, after 12 years old, the children will be redeemed.
- 17 Hầu dâng are the ones who help the mediums when they are performing the votive dance to serve gods. Their work includes changes clothes, offers incense, and wine. A team consists of 2 or 4 people (four pillars), depending on the nature of each ceremony.
- 18 Cung văn are the men who sing to praise the merits of the gods of the Mother Goddesses religion when mediums are performing the votive dance to serve gods.
- 19 Chấp tác are the people who serve the congregation such as cooking, preparing offerings for ceremonies.
- 20 Mai Thị Hạnh (2015), *Bản hội Đạo Mẫu: quan niệm và loại hình (The congregation of Mother Goddesses: concepts and forms)*, *ibid*, p. 80-85
- 21 Mai Thị Hạnh (2018), *Bản hội trong Đạo Mẫu: tạo lập vốn xã hội trong bối cảnh chuyển đổi (The congregation of Mother Goddesses: creation of social capital in the context of transformation)*, Nxb. Văn hóa dân tộc, Hà Nội.

- 22 Mai Thị Hạnh (2017), *Những người con của Mẫu: Nghệ nhân dân gian Nguyễn Thị Kim Loan (Mother Goddesses' children: folk artist Nguyen Thi Kim Loan)*, Nxb. Thế giới, Hà Nội.
- 23 Mai Thị Hạnh (2017), *ibid*, p. 50.
- 24 Mai Thị Hạnh (2017), *ibid*, p. 55.
- 25 According to the master mediums who perform the votive ritual (hầu bóng) in Vietnam.
- 26 Phạm Hồng Tung (2009), Cộng đồng: Khái niệm, cách tiếp cận và phân loại trong nghiên cứu, *Thông tin khoa học xã hội (Community: concepts, approaches and classifications in research)*, No.12, pp. 21-29.
- 27 Mai Thị Hạnh (2017), *Những người con của Mẫu: Nghệ nhân dân gian Nguyễn Thị Kim Loan (Mother Goddesses' children: folk artist Nguyen Thi Kim Loan)*, *ibid*, p. 55.
- 28 Oscar Salemink (2010), Tìm kiếm an toàn tinh thần trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại, (Seeking spiritual security in contemporary society of Vietnam), trong *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học (Modernity and attitudes, actions of traditions in Vietnam: Anthropological approaches)* (Quyển 2), *ibid*, p.1.
- 29 Oscar Salemink (2010), *ibid*, p.10.

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