

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AND ECONOMY
(Research on the Vietnamese's Mother Goddesses worship in the
Red River Delta of Vietnam)

***Abstract:** The Mother Goddess worship of the Vietnamese in the Red River Delta is a folk belief that was born early in history. By the time, the worship of Mother Goddesses has changed to reflect the change of Vietnamese society in different historical periods. Before the sixteenth century, the worship had attached to the agricultural economy. After the 16th century, it gradually reflected the commodity economy with the emerging of traders' roles (through the image of Princess Lieu Hanh and Three Realms). So far, the worship of Mother Goddesses has been developed in close relationship with commercial activities. A series of Mother Goddesses temples were built along the North-South trade road with the participation of businessmen, traders. Believers found their spiritual support to be able to confidently participate in economic activities when participating in the worship activities, the communities who lived around the temples were also influenced (in terms of economic life).*

***Keywords:** Red River Delta; belief; Mother Goddesses worship; economy; Vietnam.*

1. Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multi-faith country with the presence of many major religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam as well as indigenous religions and beliefs of Vietnamese people like Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, the Mother Goddesses worship, Patron God of the village, ancestral worship. The diversity

* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University.

of religious life has led to its own characteristics, as L. Cadière was very subtle and profound when pointing out the most prominent feature of the Vietnamese's religious life as 'dense', and 'endless' like trees in the Trường Sơn¹ forest.

Besides the diversity and richness, it can be said that the pragmatism in behavior and religious beliefs of Vietnamese people is more prominent. For them, when believing or practicing a religion or belief, first of all, the belief and religion must make their life, the life of their family, their lineages, and their community is better. Obviously, according to their own perception, the gods they believe must partly meet their requirements and demands that arise in daily life such as health, children, happiness, career, fame, wealth.

According to the viewpoint of the Vietnamese people in the Red River Delta, the Earth (trần gian), where people are living, and the world of the gods do not have complete separation, they always have relationships and interact with each other. Accordingly, all problems of their lives may be caused by a supernatural force. Therefore, they must affect the divine world with certain religious rituals in order to reduce the unlucky, difficulties, and helplessness of 'daily life'. In other words, their lives depend on their attitude and devotion to the gods. It is clearly shown in some types of folk beliefs such as the Mother Goddesses worship, Patron God of the village, ancestral worship.

2. The Mother Goddesses worship is a type of folk belief integrated by three classes of worship like the goddess, the Three Realm and Four Palaces, with the faith in the power of the Mother-the creator, Patron God of the birth, existence, and development of nature, society and human beings. Stemming from the tradition of respecting women as well as the role of women in historical and present Vietnamese society, those who believe in the Mother Goddesses worship often pray for health, fortune, and children.

When studying the sanctuary of the Mother Goddesses worship, Tran Lam Bien stated that there was a change of the objects and rituals according to the changes of Vietnamese society. Accordingly, before the sixteenth century, the image and function of the Mother Goddesses were closely linked to the rice-growing economy, the role of three Goddesses associated with three spaces related to agriculture such as heaven (sky), land, and water. After the sixteenth century, with the strong development of commerce (the class of merchants who had a lot of money; however, did not really have much political power) and the decline in the role of agriculture so the emergence of the Three Realm with the Mother of Mountains and Forests (Mẫu Thượng Ngàn), the Mother of Heaven (Mẫu Thượng Thiên) and the Mother of Water (Mẫu Thoải) without the Mother of Land (Mẫu Địa). Along with the birth of the Mother Goddess (Thánh Mẫu Liễu Hạnh), it can be said that Liễu Hạnh was a combination of all Mother Goddesses with the legends and monuments at Lạng Sơn, Tây Hồ, Nam Định, Đồi Ngang (Ninh Bình), Đền Sòng (Thanh Hóa), the spiritual representative of the new forces that was rising (the class of Vietnamese merchants in the sixteenth century).²

Referring to the close relationship between the Mother Goddesses worship and commerce, Ngo Duc Thinh commented: “The Mother Goddesses belief was close to commerce (it was the trade in the village market in the Middle Ages). In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there were trade routes from Hanoi to Lang Son. These were long-distance trade routes with the main force being women. Thus, it is not surprising that there were countless Mother Goddesses’ temples along these roads, where the female merchants used to stop to pray to the Holy Mother Goddesses (bless their business with good fortune). These were also the paths where the pilgrims of mediums, disciples of the Mother Goddesses belief who went to worship and to perform the votive dance on the ‘Spring and Fall seasons’. It can be said that

where the commercial path reaches, the Mother Goddesses' temples will reach it.³

It partly explains the outburst of the Mother Goddesses worship of the Vietnamese in urban areas today, especially since the transition from a subsidized economy to a market economy. In this paper, I will examine the relationship between the Mother Goddesses belief and the economy under two aspects: individuals (research the Mother Goddesses belief in terms of personal faith) and the community (research the Mother Goddesses belief in terms of a social phenomenon in the interaction with society).

3. The relationship between the Mother Goddesses belief and the economy in terms of individual faith.

For any religion or belief, believers' faith towards religion plays an important role. The faith always goes along with religious practices and it has a significant impact on the lives of believers in many different aspects.

For believers of the Mother Goddesses belief, they believe that they are 'descendants of the Mother Goddesses', they will always be 'blessed and persevered' in their life especially in economic life and their family, relatives will also be 'blessed and persevered'. Most of the mediums said that if you believe in the Mother Goddesses and sincerely worship them, your life will be prosperous, and your business will have favorable. The interviews of the author with disciples and observation of the votive dance rituals showed that the greatest concern is Wealth, Money, and Jewelry. In recent research, Ngo Duc Thinh has stated that people who worship the Mother Goddesses in Vietnamese society are business people, traders.⁴ For example, a medium named T in Hanoi explained that the mother is the symbol of fertility, so if you come to the Mother Goddesses to pray for a business, your money will flourish more - that's why so many traders believe in the Mother Goddesses belief.

A case study in the Temple of Chúa Kho Lady at Cồ Mễ commune, Từ Sơn district, Bắc Ninh province showed that believers' faith can be seen through their prayers for success in business. Generally, believers usually come to the Lady Temple at the beginning of the year as a borrower and at the end of the year as a person to repay what they have borrowed. For some people, they just come to the Lady Temple with the desire to 'ask for a little bit of wealth', to hope to change the hard economic lives that they are facing. The author Nguyen Kim Hien stated that people who come to the Temple of Chúa Kho Lady as borrowers are mostly people with average living conditions and even the poor.⁵ They come to the Lady Temple with the belief that an economic change will come true.

Their beliefs were so strong that they turned a food custodian of the Court into a banker with modern financial standards. Believers who come to the Lady as a borrower will have to prepare a letter (lá sớ) with the clear content of the amount of money they want to borrow, how many years of the loan, even some believers specify the purpose (invest for what business) and what is the 'interest rate' with the hope that the Lady will help their business success. In order to confirm whether or not their loan has the consent of the Goddess, the borrower will use coins for Yin and Yang ritual (xin âm dương) before the Four Palaces Council (Tứ Phủ Công Đồng). Mr. L. -an owner of a real estate business in Hanoi said that "At the beginning of every year, my whole family comes to the Temple of Chúa Kho Lady to pray, to ask the Lady to lend money. If we have good fortune, we will come back to thank the Goddess at the end of the year. Borrowing her Yin money (tiền âm), but we receive Yang money (tiền dương)- real money of the secular life- at the end of the year we repay her Yin money (tiền âm). After doing business, we pay 3 times, 5 or 10 times as much as the original loan"⁶.

Some magic men at the Temple of Chúa Kho Lady explained that the 'borrowing', 'repaying' depends on each person, it is not

obligatory the rate of payment. However, if you have a loan, you must repay it whether your business has success or do not. Borrowers must keep their credit if they do not want to suffer terrible punishment of the Lady (such as losing money, imprisonment, family discord).

Believers think that if you borrow money, you must have an offering ceremony and the bigger ceremony, the Chúa Kho Lady more bless you to prosper, so besides money, votive paper, the borrower must prepare a tray of offerings (it corresponds to the amount of money they would like to borrow). After the ceremony ends, believers will burn the votive paper and bring home a little of offerings with the money, the votive paper borrowed from the Lady, they will put it on the altar, in the closet, or in the rice box. When the time to pay arrive, believers will the votive paper. A votive- paper seller at the Chúa Kho Lady temple said that “You will know if you look at the tray of offerings. If a person borrowed 1 billion Đồng last year, she/he would have to repay the Lady 1 billion Đồng this year. A votive-paper bar is equivalent to 10 ounces, a bill of the dollar (fake) is equivalent to 100 USD. A tray of offerings can be calculated as tens of billion Đồng”⁷.

According to the perception of most Vietnamese, the votive paper⁸ is used by the dead in the afterlife, however, believers of the Mother Goddesses belief think that it is an important factor to be able to transmit the power of the gods from the supernatural world into the Earth to bring them the life as they want. Obviously, they think that without these sacred objects (vật thiêng), their business will face many obstacles, difficulties. With the belief in the power of the gods, believers use their money to buy ‘fake money’, in turn, the ‘fake money’ supports their belief that they can get a lot of money. When votive- paper money is brought home, it is considered as a ‘transitional objects’ for a symbolic relationship. This belief is also expressed in some rituals of the Mother Goddesses worship, in which the votive dance ritual is important.

“Performing the votive dance ritual to pray for wealth. Thus, each ritual costs ounces of gold, every year the merchants perform this ritual to serve the gods. At present, praying for fortune is often the first goal”⁹. The most common prayer of mediums is ‘having money, jewelry, fortune, fame’. Some ‘Châu văn’ songs mention the fortune bestowal of Four Palaces gods to believers.

In order to have *the Holy’s fortune bestowal (lộc Thánh)*, the believers of the Mother Goddesses worship do not regret their money to go on pilgrimage, to spend money on the votive dance rituals, because they believe that they will be blessed by the Holy Mother Goddesses. According to the data of interviews, the question why believers spend much money for the Holy Mother Goddesses’ rituals, most believers responded that “Spending money to make the ceremony, they feel peaceful, less worrying of punishment of divine, gods, Buddha. How much money we spend, the gods will bestow twice or three times”. *The Holy’s fortune* includes many things such as cigarettes, betel leaves, areca fruit, cakes, fruits, mirrors, handkerchiefs, hairpins, money.

These are sacred gifts of the Holy Gods given to mediums, disciples to attend the Holy services. In particular, for those who do business, these services are spiritual supports to help them to have a successful business. Many of them use the money (sacred gifts) to receive from the Holy to do business and believe that this money will bring them luck¹⁰. Many of them also offer this money to the altar, keep it in the closet, or in their wallet with the expectation that they will earn more money from that holy money.

In the votive dance ceremony, people use a lot of money and votive paper. The gods incarnate in the mediums, use real money to bestow *the Holy’s fortune* (tossing or handing) to the disciples and the participants, on the contrary, the disciples also use real money to offer to the Holy gods to pray for what they need. In addition to the concept of ‘things in the secular world resemble in the afterlife’, the pragmatic belief of believers has led to the close relationship

between the Mother Goddesses worship and Sales and trading and business activities.

Thus, for believers of the Mother Goddesses worship, their belief in the Four Palaces gods plays a very important role to help them feel secure and confident to carry out their economic activities in real life. In reality, the achievement depends on their own actions, while *the Holy fortune* (blessings, sacred objects ...) is just spiritual support, the 'original capital'¹¹ bestowed by gods.

4. The relationship between the Mother Goddesses belief and the economy in terms of community.

The Mother Goddesses belief is not only a form of social consciousness but it is also a social phenomenon with religious activities, such as worshipping rites, worship facilities, the community of believers in interaction with other social phenomena.

Along with the revival and strong development of the Mother Goddesses belief in the Red River delta present, the religious activities have had a strong impact on society, it needs to mention the economic benefits that the residents who live around the Mother Goddesses worship facilities, such as Cổ Mễ village, Từ Sơn, Bắc Ninh; Phủ Giầy temple in Nam Định; Sòng Sơn temple in Thanh Hóa; Hoàng Mười temple in Hà Tĩnh; Hoàng Bảy temple in Lào Cai; Phủ Tây Hồ in Hà Nội; Mẫu Thượng Ngàn temple in Yên Bái; Chúa Thác Bờ temple in Hòa Bình, etc,...

According to statistics, the number of pilgrims to Phủ Giầy temple, Nam Định is about 1,5 million passengers a year¹² with over 1,000 votive dance rituals in Phu Giay¹³; thousands of believers come to worship the Mother Goddesses every day during the new year festival in Phủ Tây Hồ, Hà Nội¹⁴. According to the statistics of the Department of Culture and Information of Bac Ninh province, the number of people who go to worship at Ba Chua Kho temple is about 200,000 people a day on some occasions. The community who live near these facilities has the opportunity to find

jobs and increase income. Services are established to meet the needs of the pilgrims who go to the ceremony, such as producing and selling incense, flowers, votive paper, food and motel room, car parking, management, and restoration of the worship facilities. In some temples, the management board has to allocate 'quota' (positions for commercial service of each family in the space of the temple, around the temple in order to avoid mutual disputes.

In addition to the benefits of the local resident community, the religious establishments also continuously increase their income from money offerings, donations offered by the worshippers. Some mediums said that in the past, the pilgrimage to the temples of the Mother Goddesses belief usually did not have to register and the money offerings donated to the temple was not much (about 50,000 VND- VND 100,000), at present, in order to be able to perform the votive dance ritual in these famous temples, the mediums often have to register with the temple's management board and spend about 300,000 VND or 500,000 VND for a votive dance ritual¹⁵, they have to pay other service charges such as votive paper, food, motel room. Besides, the amount of donation offered by the mediums and believers to the shrine after the ceremony depends on the scale of the ceremony and their ability of economy.

It can be said that it is the reason why many temples of the Mother Goddesses worship in the Red River Delta have been restored and have had professional spiritual services system to attract more pilgrims. Accordingly, the temple has magic men, the votive paper, the offerings, the ceremonial costumes, associates of the mediums (hầu dâng), singers (cung vãn) as well as other items used in the rituals. Some temples even provide currency exchange, food, and motel room services. It is clear that the increase of the Mother Goddesses practices has created many jobs and income for the residents where the worship facilities are located. Tran Dinh Luyen affirmed his research on the Chúa Kho Lady temple that the pilgrimage of many people to the Chúa Kho Lady temple has

helped local residents' services thrive with the participation of thousand people in Cỏ Mễ village, Vũ Ninh commune. The temple has been protected, restored, embellished, and expanded space. The village has been renovated, residents' lives have been improved rapidly¹⁶.

Religious activities do not only bring economic benefits to local communities, they also create an economic network of believers in the same congregation (bản hội). A congregation is a group of people who share the same faith in the Mother Goddesses worships under the leader by a master medium. The master medium seeks a way to expand as much as possible the number of disciples to make the congregation grow. The growth of the congregation does not only bring many economic benefits for the master medium, the disciples also have benefits. Nguyen Ngoc Mai in her research has shown that many people who participate in a congregation of a master medium, satisfy their spiritual needs, they also benefit from many connections between them and their master medium, among disciples in term of economy¹⁷. According to the viewpoint of Nguyen Kim Hien, in addition to seeking faith in gods of individuals, the congregation can be considered a reliable business alliance¹⁸.

To prepare for a votive dance ceremony, the mediums must take care of decorating the altar, such as flower, fruit, cake, candy, wine, beer, cigarettes, water, votive paper offer to the gods; costumes for the ritual; invite singers (cung vãn), magic men (thầy cúng), associates to the votive dance (hầu dâng). Generally, the mediums have a number of reputable supplies. However, according to the author's observations, most of those suppliers are disciples of the master medium. That is a priority of the master medium to believers in his/her congregation.

For the singers (cung vãn), the magic men (thầy cúng), the associates to the votive dance (hầu dâng), they can accept any offer to attend the ceremony of any master medium as long as they have

income. In fact, they always give priority to a master medium or a congregation that they think they can get fortune (*ăn lộc*), or that maybe the place where they performed the first votive dance ritual.

The economic benefits of the disciples do not only income from supply offerings and goods for the master medium, they also expand their economic and social relationship with people in the same congregation. It can be said that the faith in the Four Palaces gods and belief in the power of their master medium has helped them have a trust, including economic transactions and business. However, most of the believers who benefited from the participation in the congregation explained that their economic stability and development was not accidental, it was the gods' blessing, the master medium helped them to get this blessing. It was motivation to actively participate in the activities of the congregation when requested by the master medium.

5. In the current period, with the strong changes of Vietnamese society in terms of economy, culture, society in particular, the world situation in general, the Mother Goddesses belief of Vietnamese in the Red River Delta and its religious activities is not only not lost it has also developed strongly. Its effects on the individuals and community have brought positive values, and negative effects, such as the increase of superstition, waste of time and money. The rapid recovery of the Mother Goddesses belief has partly led to confusion and inadequacies of the State management of religious activities in general and the Mother Goddesses belief in particular. Besides the law on religion, the State also has to improve other legal systems, such as economy, land, the bank in order to encourage the positive activities of the Mother Goddesses belief. /.

Notes:

- 1 Đỗ Trinh Huệ (2000), *Văn hóa - Tín ngưỡng gia đình Việt Nam qua nhãn quan học giả L. CARDIERE (Culture - Beliefs of Vietnamese family through the perspective of scholar L. CARDIERE)*, Pub: Thuận Hóa, Huế, pp. 79-81.
- 2 Hương Nguyên (2004), “Quanh tục thờ Thánh Mẫu” (Research on the worship of Mother Goddesses), *Di sản văn hóa* (7), pp. 74-77.
- 3 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (the Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, Pub: Tôn giáo, Hà Nội, p. 387.
- 4 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (the Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, Pub: Tôn giáo, Hà Nội, p. 388.
- 5 Nhiều tác giả (2008), *Sự biến đổi của tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở Việt Nam hiện nay (The transformation of religions and beliefs in Vietnam today)*, Pub: Thế giới, Hà Nội, p. 300.
- 6 <https://news.zing.vn/co-nen-vay-von-den-ba-chua-kho-de-lam-giau>
- 7 <http://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/di-tra-no-ba-chua-kho-1138217489.htm>
- 8 According to Toan Ánh, “The practice of burning votive paper originally used to white jade make offerings. Later, white jade was expensive and rare, it is replaced by money, this money was wasted after worshipping. Therefore, Emperor Huyen Ton of the Tang dynasty ordered the use of paper money instead of real money, paper gold and silver, the diamond was replaced with real gold and silver. During the reign of The Ton of the Tang dynasty, Vương Du, the mandarin who took care of Worship affairs, allowed to use paper money in ritual, then burned it. Later, the custom of offering hats and paper utensils has been started since the Five Dynasties period”. Toan Ánh (1992), *Tín ngưỡng Việt Nam (quyển thượng - quyển hạ) (The Vietnamese beliefs)*, Pub: Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, pp. 416-417.
- 9 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004), *Đạo Mẫu và các hình thức Shaman trong các tộc người ở Việt Nam và Châu Á (The Mother Goddesses worship and forms of Shamanism among ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia)*, Pub: Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội, p. 52.
- 10 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (the Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, Tome 2, ibid, p. 95.
- 11 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (the Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, Tome 2, ibid, p. 95.
- 12 Báo Điện tử Giadinh.net, *Hội Phủ Dầy “hút” hàng nghìn du khách.*
- 13 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2013), *Nghi lễ lên đồng - Lịch sử và giá trị (The spirit mediumship ritual- History and values)*, Pub: Văn hóa Thông tin, Hà Nội, tr. 190.
- 14 Báo Điện tử VTC, *Đi lễ Phủ Tây Hồ phải dâng lễ... từ xa.*

- 15 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2013), *Nghi lễ lên đồng - Lịch sử và giá trị (The spirit mediumship ritual- History and values)*, Pub: Văn hóa Thông tin, Hà Nội, p. 127.
- 16 Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004), *Đạo Mẫu và các hình thức Shaman trong các tộc người ở Việt Nam và Châu Á (The Mother Goddesses worship and forms of Shamanism among ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia)*, Pub: Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội, p. 159.
- 17 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2013), *Nghi lễ lên đồng - Lịch sử và giá trị (The spirit mediumship ritual- History and values)*, Pub: Văn hoá Thông tin, Hà Nội, p. 306.
- 18 Nhiều tác giả (2008), *Sự biến đổi của tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở Việt Nam hiện nay (The transformation of religions and beliefs in Vietnam today)*, Pub: Thế giới, Hà Nội, p. 301.

References

1. Toan Ánh (1992), *Tín ngưỡng Việt Nam (quyển thượng - quyển hạ) (The Vietnamese beliefs)*, Pub: Tp. Hồ Chí Minh.
2. Đỗ Trinh Huệ (2000), *Văn hóa-Tín ngưỡng gia đình Việt Nam qua nhãn quan học giả L.CARDIERE (Culture - Beliefs of Vietnamese family through the perspective of scholar L. CARDIERE)*, Pub: Thuận Hóa, Huế.
3. Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2013), *Nghi lễ lên đồng lịch sử và giá trị (The spirit mediumship ritual- History and values)*, Pub: Văn hoá Thông tin, Hà Nội
4. Hương Nguyên (2004), “Quanh tục thờ Thánh Mẫu” (Research on the worship of Mother Goddesses), *Di sản văn hóa* (7), pp. 74-77.
5. Nhiều tác giả (2008), *Sự biến đổi của tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở Việt Nam hiện nay (The transformation of religions and beliefs in Vietnam today)*, Pub: Thế giới, Hà Nội.
6. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004), *Đạo Mẫu và các hình thức Shaman trong các tộc người ở Việt Nam và Châu Á (The Mother Goddesses worship and forms of Shamanism among ethnic groups in Vietnam and Asia)*, Pub: Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội.
7. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (The Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, Pub: Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
8. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Lên đồng, hành trình của thần linh và thân phận (The votive dance ritual, the journey of deities and status)*, Pub: Thế giới, Hà Nội.
9. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2010), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (the Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam)*, tập 2, Pub: Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
10. Báo Điện tử Giadinh.net, *Hội Phủ Dầy “hút” hàng nghìn du khách*
11. Báo Điện tử VTC, *Đi lễ Phủ Tây Hồ phải dâng lễ... từ xa*
12. <https://news.zing.vn/co-nen-vay-von-den-ba-chua-kho-de-lam-giau>
13. <http://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/di-tra-no-ba-chua-kho-1138217489.htm>