

THE INFLUENCE OF MOTHER GODDESS WORSHIP BELIEF ON THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S SPIRITUAL-CULTURAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

One of the oldest traditional cultures of the Vietnamese people is to worship women and mothers and consider mothers as patrons of the existence, survival and development of people and nature. As a cultural product of the Vietnamese people in relation to nature and society, Mother Goddess worship has clearly reflected the characteristics of folklore, enhanced the sense of community connection and especially promoting the role of women.... During the process of formation, development and improvement, Mother Goddess worship belief has become an indispensable spiritual form in the life of a part of the masses, especially the people in the Red River Delta. Therefore, the article focuses on clarifying the basic contents of Mother Goddess worship belief and its positive and negative influences on the cultural and spiritual life of Vietnamese people.

Key Words: Vietnam, culture, belief, Mother Goddess worship belief, spiritual-cultural life.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview of Vietnamese people's belief in Mother Goddess worship

Belief is a part of social consciousness and is the product of social relations formed in the historical process. Belief shows people's belief in the divine. Like religion, belief reflects the rich but very specific nature of the traditional cultural activities of each nation, community and individual. And, The Vietnamese people's belief in Mother Goddess worship has full of these elements.

Vietnam is one of the countries where many different religions exist at the same time. Those beliefs have a strong influence on our country's politics, culture and society which is clearly shown in the past and continues to be affirmed in the contemporary society; including Mother Goddess worship belief. Through the research process, we found that there are many different opinions about Mother Goddess worship belief: *Firstly*, Mother Goddess worship belief has been becoming an early form of religion of the Vietnamese people. According to author Hoang Luong, "During the process of birth, movement and transformation, Mother Goddess worship belief has been transforming from the original belief to a primitive religion" [4, p.88]. For that reason, Mother Goddess worship belief "has already been a religion, not a belief, following the style of ancestor worship in the family or national hero worship at a number of individual temples. Mother Goddess worship had activities with religious characteristics" [3, p. 502]. *Secondly*, Mother Goddess worship belief only stops at a type of folk belief. The reason is that "In terms of spirituality, as well as the size of followers, it has full of elements of a religion, but it lacks philosophy to be able to become a complete religion" [1, p.276]. According to author

Nguyen Huu Thong “The image of Mẫu (Mother) is completely the product of folk beliefs, not an orthodox religion. The current trend of turning Mẫu (Mother) into an orthodox religion of some individuals is illegal and not in line with the development process” [6, pp.53-54]. *Thirdly*, considering Mother Goddess worship belief as a custom, a traditional belief of the Vietnamese people. According to the author Truong Si Hung, “the case of the Mother Goddess worship custom in Vietnam is very evident and developing so strong that it almost becomes the Kinh’s religion” [2, p.8]. *Fourthly*, the view that Mother Goddess worship belief is a Đạo (religion). According to Ngo Duc Thinh, “we use the term Đạo (religion) in Mother Goddess worship, Ancestor worship... The concept of “Đạo”, here in the sense, means the way to lead people to believe in the sacred and supernatural” [5, p.17].

Thus, there are many different interpretations about Mother Goddess worship belief. However, the most correct understanding of Mother Goddess worship belief is that it is a type of folk belief that started with the belief of worshiping goddesses, respecting and worshiping women who are thought to have divine supernatural powers. During the process of formation, development and improvement, Mother Goddess worship belief has been heavily influenced by foreign religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam...), endogenous religions (Caodaism, Hoahaoism...) and the folk beliefs existing around it. Despite the influence of many different factors, Mother Goddess worship belief still retains the essence of fertility worship that its source is nature where humans and creatures are born and develop. The concept that the heaven is father and the earth is mother also comes from that. Over the head is the vast sky with many mysteries of weather and climate; below the foot is the ground with a variety of plants and animals that help to create life, the earth is also the mother. When people are born, mature, and then die, they return to the earth, which is both an awareness and a way of man's dealings with nature.

Through the process of formation and development, Mother Goddess worship belief of the Vietnamese people has the following specific characteristics:

Firstly, the establishment: Vietnam is a country which has a very early formation and development. Through this development, to some extents we can affirm that the Vietnamese people’s beliefs including Mother Goddess worship belief appeared since a very long time ago in the history of ethnic formations. This is shown in a number of artifacts that have existed until nowadays to help us confirm this, such as the sexual images on the bronze drum in Hung Temple, the image of drumming with a pestle in Hung Temple, No – Nuong (Nõ-Nường) festival in Lam Thao, Phu Tho, Light off (Tắt đèn) festival - Ha Tay...

Secondly, the belief: It is expressed in two aspects. *Firstly, Mother Goddess worship belief has affirmed the belief and supreme power of Mẫu (Mother) in the cultural and spiritual life of the people.* In Mother Goddess worship belief, the image of Mother is considered important with the philosophy that all things are born by the mother, and are also nurtured to be mature by the mother. *Secondly, Mother Goddess worship belief brought out the issue of rescuing people on the earth life.* When the other beliefs and religions promise to bring people a good life after the death, Mother Goddess worship belief brings people things they are lacking in their current life such as health, fortune, fame and children. It is a positive outlook on life that is consistent with the existential concept of people in the modern world. Thereby, it can be shown clearly that the

matter of faith has been done very well by Mother Goddess worship belief which brought the followers and disciples a belief and an absolute respect for Mother Goddess.

Thirdly, the ritual practices: As a type of folk belief, the rituals of Mother Goddess worship belief are themselves influenced by many religions and beliefs such as Buddhism, Ancestor worship, Village's Tutelary god worship (Thành Hoàng làng) ... The rituals of Mother Goddess worship are expressed through national festivals such as the Dong Bang Temple Festival, the Phu Day Festival, the Bac Le Temple Festival, etc., or the rituals such as going in trance (hầu xông đèn), thượng nguyên festival, wearing a bowl of incense ceremony (lễ đội bát nhang, opening the palace ceremony (lễ mở phủ), Caoguan debt repayment (lễ trả nợ Tào Quan), ancestor worshiping ceremony (lễ phả độ gia tiên)... All have different meanings and contain the wishes and aspirations of the Mother Goddess worshiping followers.

From the above studies, in terms of the structure and criteria of a religion, Mother Goddess worship belief is only considered as a folk belief, and it cannot be recognized as a religion for the reason that it itself has not had a complete structure and in fact has not been recognized as a religion by our Government.

1.2. Influence of Mother Goddess worship belief on some aspects of the Vietnamese people's cultural and spiritual life

Mother worship is an indispensable part of Vietnamese religious beliefs. As an element of the superstructure, Mother Goddess worship belief always has the opposite effect on the real basis that produced it; and at the same time has broad and profound impacts, and meet the needs and aspirations of people. Vietnamese people have a tradition of patriotism, respecting for gratitude, remembering the source when drinking water (uống nước nhớ nguồn), and remembering the person who planted the tree when eating fruit (ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây); Therefore, spiritual life, belief and religion are also imbued with that spirit. That tradition is reflected in Mother Goddess worship belief, in ancestor worship belief and is clearly recorded in the system of temples, shrines, palaces, churches...

Talking about the influence of Mother Goddess worship belief on the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, we will analyze its impacts on several aspects such as spiritual culture, lifestyle and religious practice.

1.2.1. Spiritual culture aspects

With the spirit of bringing belief about a better life to the disciples right in the present life, Mother Goddess worship belief has easily attracted a large number of people to participate in religious activities. When participating in religious activities of Mother Goddess worship belief, people have to carry out worshiping procedures and rituals in order to ask for riches and honours and wealth. Everyone who comes to cửa Mẫu (the place of worshiping the Mother) always pays respect and single-minded will toward the Mother and the local Saints to pray for safeness for themselves and their families. The typical rituals of Mother Goddess worshiping belief are the mediums, on the special days, the male mediums (ông đồng) and female mediums (bà đồng) often hold a Hầu đồng ceremony (go into a trance) to connect the spirits between the two

worlds: the deities and the humans. The contents of daily rules and regulations are often integrated into the Hầu đồng ceremonies (go into a trance) with the purpose of teaching the people to comfort to the right and the fine customs of the nation.

The belief in Mother Goddess worship partly meets the needs and desires of the believers. Elderly people follow Mother Goddess worship belief to find a pure space, to pray for themselves, their families, their children and grandchildren to be healthy and peaceful; young people go to the pagoda (đi lễ) with the desire for fame, career and personal development. They all come to the cửa Mẫu (the place of worshiping the Mother) for expecting a help from the Saints that is to bless them and their families with more health, luck, and development in their career path. This also shows that going to the pagoda (đi lễ) here has become a habit, a spiritual and cultural work of the people and also indispensable in their lives. Going to the places of worship or going to the pagoda of all classes of people is on the trend of rejuvenation and expanding in scale. Most of the people who are directly practicing beliefs and participating in beliefs have made the majority of people here form a variety of rules of spiritual life such as: going to the pagoda, following the advice of the Saints....

In life, many people believe that if they have a disease, they had better pay homage to the four directions (vái bốn phương), and for the disciples of the Mother Goddess worship belief, besides modern medical treatment, which is going to the hospital to see a doctor for treatment, they also pray to the Gods and Saints to help them get out of danger. Therefore, many families have seriously ill people, besides taking them to the hospital for treatment, the family members still come to the pagodas, temples, palaces, and shrines to pray to the Holy Mother (Thánh Mẫu) for help and for a speedy recovery. Some families with children who are always sick will hold the ceremony to “sell their children” to the temple and palace to ask the Holy Mother and local Saints to take care of and nurture the “vía”, after being healthy and getting eighteen or twenty years old they will be redeemed... In such circumstances, Mother Goddess worship belief has helped to strengthen the people's belief to overcome difficulties and obstacles in life with peace of mind.

The customs and practices of the Vietnamese people are also deeply influenced by Mother Goddess worship belief such as when getting sick or even getting married, building a new house... people often invite “thầy” (sorcerer or shaman) to come to help them pray for peace; on important occasions such as worshipping, anniversaries, bốc mộ (exhume, wash and arrange the bones of the deceased in a smaller casket for a final burial in another location)... Thanh đồng (priest) is also invited to hold the ceremony to pray for luck and peace. The festival days of temples, palaces, etc., places to worship Mothers and the local Saints have become cultural festivals that attract a large number of disciples and the masses to participate. This is the glue that binds those who believe in the Mother Goddess worship belief in order to raise compassion for fellow human beings, nurture altruism and educate filial piety towards grandparents and parents; thereby helping them become more attached to the community, homeland and nation.

Besides the positive impacts, Mother Goddess worship belief with its mystical idealism has made the believers, the disciples, and the people who follow Mother Goddess worship belief solve the problems based on their thinking and self-interest rather than the reality. The belief in

Mother Goddess worship almost absolutizes the supernatural power of the Mẫu (Mother) and the council of worshiped Saints. Many mediums (thầy đồng) take advantage of the ignorance and over-belief of their disciples and followers to build up their reputation and make profit for themselves. There are also many sick people who do not go to the hospital for treatment or for taking medicine, only go to the pagoda or take part in hầu đồng (go into a trance) to pray for recovery. There are also some people go to the pagoda and hold the hầu đồng ceremony (go into a trance) to pray for promotion in their career even though their talents are limited. Some people who do not concentrate on studying also go to the pagoda to pray for passing the exams and entering universities.

1.2.2. Lifestyle aspects

One of the great influences of Mother Goddess worship belief on people's lifestyle is not only the openness, which reflects the wishes and aspirations for freedom and happiness of people in relation to the society, but also expressing the community cohesion through the patriotic tradition, and the ethnic spirit. It can be seen that the main purpose and content of a belief is to maintain the national tradition, but in terms of lifestyle, the practice of belief and the maintenance of beliefs of disciples is a way to preserve, strengthen, and develop the good traditional values. This has been clearly demonstrated in Mother Goddess worship belief. For followers of the Mother Goddess worship belief, when looking to the Saints, besides praying for peace, prosperity, happiness, success and prosperity for them, for their families and for the community, they also receive contact with ideas that uphold the spirit of patriotism, the spirit of fighting against foreign invaders of the Saints. It has an especially important meaning in strengthening and constantly consolidating the patriotic tradition of fighting against the foreign invaders of each believer and of the Vietnamese community.

The cultural and spiritual life of the people has been enhanced and closely linked through religious activities, specifically here is Mother Goddess worship belief. The disciples gathered at the cửa Mẫu (the place of worshiping the Mother), with one heart towards the Mother with all their beliefs; they carry the national spirit, the patriotism, the gratitude and respect for the gods, saints, historical heroes when coming to the cửa Mẫu (the place of worshiping the Mother). The cohesion of the community, and the preservation and development of traditional national values of Mother Goddess worship belief has brought the vitality and the spirit to the future generations. This cohesion is enhanced by the sacredness of the Mothers and deities in Mother Goddess worship belief.

Considering the positive and negative aspects that Mother Goddess worship belief directly affects people's lives, we can see that on the one hand, it helps people to satisfy their desires for earthly life; but on the other hand, it also has limitations not only in life, spiritual beliefs but also in morality and lifestyle in real life. In the face of quite complicated changes in the current socio-economic life, the moral values and lifestyle of a part of the disciples and the priests of the Mother are degraded that make people wonder and have suspicions about this long-standing indigenous folk belief. Some priests bring other people's private life stories to the social networking sites for discussing and commenting. As a result, it leads to the quarrels, even swearing at each other with vulgar words, even sometimes being offensive to the Saints. The

negative manifestations such as a self-indulgent lifestyle, not respecting the rules and ethics, only chasing after the glamour and chasing after the wealth in today's society has partly made the environment in Mother Goddess worship belief to be cloudy.

1.2.3. Religious practice aspects

The practice of rituals is the source and backbone of the belief in Mother Goddess worship belief and is also the way to bring the disciples with religious beliefs to the Mother and the saints in this belief. Rituals are the closest way for them to approach the Mother and enjoy the privileges bestowed by the Mother with the highest faith that is the most common wishes for the health, the career, the peaceful life and the happiness of the families and the community around them. Most people who look to the *cửa Mẫu* (place of worshiping the Mother) often encounter big events in their life, these event causes them to suffer a nervous breakdown (sometimes even materially) and then they come to the *cửa Mẫu* (place of worshiping the Mother) with the belief that they will escape from the dark days and be led towards a better life ahead. Mother Goddess worship belief has brought them such beliefs through its special and unique rituals. It has shown from the way of integration and joining the religion that the disciples are accepted quite easily because they think that the reason for their encountering events and misfortune in life that is they have not looked to the *cửa Cha*, *cửa Mẹ* (the place of worshiping the Holy) to let the Holy know who they are yet. When they come to the *cửa mẫu* (the place of worshiping the Mother), they are called in, known their position and who they really are in the spiritual life that they had never been able to discover for a long time. The system of rituals, decoration and arrangement of the Mother Goddess religion makes people feel close because its hierarchy and rules are the same with the rules in their daily life. In that way, the belief in Mother Goddess worship has gradually ingrained in the subconscious of the disciples, who are traditionally chosen by deities at birth or called “*có căn, có số*” to work for the Holy and serve them.

Maybe the people come to the *cửa Mẫu* (place of worshiping the Mother) with many different reasons, but they all have one thing in common that is their "predestined" relationship with the *cửa Mẫu*. Whether by many forms and ways or even events in life, their destination is the *cửa Mẫu* with the desire to be protected, to live with their spiritual life. For them, it is not easy to have a spiritual life that understands the essence and rituals of the Holy. There are many different ways to study, however, they can understand little, understand a lot and even misunderstand the content of rituals and beliefs of Mother Goddess worship. That makes beliefs diverse and multi-modal, but also contributes to creating contradictions in understanding and practice of beliefs. However, the rules and rituals of the Holy are very strict and not everyone can follow them. It is not a coincidence that there are people having “*căn cơ*” (are chosen to serve the Holy by deities), are taught about etiquette at a very early age through the dreams or are taught by the ancestors through religious rituals by word of mouth.

Doing research and conducting survey on how to practice beliefs through worship rites and other procedures shows that: with centuries of existence and development, indigenous beliefs have also collided with many religions and different beliefs. However, in essence, the rituals are still preserved and almost intact. The innovations of the ritual are just unique cultural features collected from other religions and beliefs to diversify and enrich the indigenous beliefs. This has

proved the continuity of the history in worshipping rituals of Mother Goddess worshipping belief. For instance, when an ordinary person has faith and believes in Mother Goddess worship belief, they need to find a “đồng thầy” (a sorcerer or a shaman) who is predestined with them and has enough virtue to be able to lead them and show them the rituals and the rule when serving the Holy. Once that person is imbued with the belief in Mother Goddess worship as well as understands the role and position of himself in the religion and the need to follow as a true disciple of the Holy house, the đồng thầy will conduct the “tôn nhang” ceremony (the ceremony to officially recognize a person to become a disciple of the Mother Goddess worship belief) for that person. After the tôn nhang ceremony is performed, that person will continue to be taught and learn more about his or her beliefs, and when the time is ripe, the đồng thầy will let them conduct “mở phủ trình đồng” ceremony (the ceremony to present a person to the Holy). After the ceremony, they are officially the people of the Holy house with a given name and start serving the Holy and helping the people and disciples of the belief; at the same time, they still have to cultivate the ethics, rituals and rules of the Holy house and develop the place of worship as well as the manners of a medium.

However, with the influence of the market economy, there has been negative impacts on Mother Goddess worship belief. The current rituals are being somewhat changed in comparison with their original ones. Some spiritual lands now tend to become centers of culture rather than spiritual lands. Hầu đồng (medium) becomes a “performer”, and does not keep the sacredness. Accordingly, the increase in the number of priests and the disciples who conduct “mở phủ” ceremony also made the “hầu mở phủ” become an “earning job” for the mediums. Currently, the economic issues are also shown evidently in the purchase of many ceremonial items, especially the purchase of foreign goods. A large amount of votive paper which is worth millions to tens of millions but only is used to burn, that causes the waste of money, environment pollution, and the risk of fire. The widespread of mở phủ has caused an influence in Mother Goddess worship belief. Other rituals of Mother Goddess worship belief were also thoroughly exploited such as the trình giàu ceremony, the tôn nhang ceremony, etc., and for the thanh đồng (priests), serving the Holy is the way to improve their economic life.

2. CONCLUSION

With precious spiritual values, Mother Goddess worship belief has helped to nurture the patriotism, build up people’s soul and affirm the eternal vitality in the national culture. Nowadays, although there are many values that have been faded, the eternal vitality of those values is always being developed and is better nourished. Thereby, this in-depth study and research will help us to properly understand the role of Mother Goddess worship belief and its direct impacts on many different aspects of spiritual and cultural life of Vietnamese people. It has also brought deep theoretical meaning, enriching cultural activities, beliefs and lead people to the traditional moral values, and preserved the beauties and limiting the negative impacts of Mother Goddess belief.

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