**WORSHIPPING THE MOTHER GODDESS: THE ĐẠO MẪU MOVEMENT IN NORTHERN VIETNAM**

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**Introduction**

There have long been two belief systems in Vietnam: the official ideology, and the folk ideology or folk beliefs (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*). Today, the official ideology exists in government proclamations and plans for development and preservation and it is used by government leaders, academics and by formal organizations and government agencies and schools as a basis for taking action and making political decisions. The folk ideology exists in oral traditions—in myths, legends, folk stories and songs. It is used by the common people to make decisions affecting their personal lives and to serve as a guide for daily living. The folk ideology of Vietnam is generally viewed as a “resistance identity” (Castells 1996: 8). It is a resistance or response to Chinese influences; one which serves to preserve Vietnamese national identity. The co-existence of these ideologies, often contradictory and conflicting, reflects a basic characteristic of Vietnam in accepting the influences of a foreign country or ideology and at the same time resisting that influence by preserving its folk identity.

Đạo Mẫu, the worship of Mẫu the Mother Goddesses (also called Holy Mothers), constitutes an important component of folk ideology and identity in Vietnam. Although the historical origins of Đạo Mẫu are not clearly documented, it is believed to have its roots in prehistory when the Vietnamese worshipped the spirits of nature. It is possible that the concept of the Mother Goddess came to encompass the many different spirits of nature becoming one spirit manifesting itself in many different forms or deities. In time, the concept of the Mother Goddess was expanded to incorporate folk heroines—real women who emerged in history as protectors or healers. In time, these historical figures were respected and venerated and eventually deified to become other manifestations of the Mother Goddess.

The Đạo Mẫu religious movement is centered on the worship of the Mother Goddess in its many manifestations in a đền— a temple (or a phủ -- a palace\(^1\))—and the observance of a body of rituals. As in many other religions, the

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\(^1\) Palace means phủ refers to a temple complex of various buildings, while one single temple is đền
act of worship is purposeful and intended to gain a benefit—good fortune, good health, and for the temple (or the palace) to become an important gathering place of worshippers. But unlike many other religions, the leaders of the movement—the clergy and lay leaders—are mostly women. The clergy are shamanistic in the sense that they are said to have the power to move from the real world to the spirit world and back to the real world bringing messages to the worshipper from the spirit world. The key figure is the Mẫu (Mother Goddess) whose origins were tied to nature and humans, as well as other personages who were worshipped as supernatural figures or historic characters, or were simply diverse cultural symbols and manifestations of the indigenous native cultures.

This paper provides an ethnographic description of the beliefs, practices and contemporary status of Đạo Mẫu in Northern Vietnam. It is based upon participant observation and interviews with leaders and the followers of Đạo Mẫu, and with Vietnamese scholars in Thai Nguyen, Thai Binh provinces and Hanoi conducted in 2004 and 2005. The paper also draws on accounts by Vietnamese and foreign researchers.

Studies of Đạo Mẫu

The practices and beliefs of Đạo Mẫu have been of interest to many researchers. The earliest studies were undertaken by French scholars or Vietnamese scholars trained in France. Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1944), Durand (1959) and Simon and Simon- Barouh (1973) were among the first scholars to write about Đạo Mẫu. Durand compared the practices of Vietnamese lêndòng (mediumship or spirit possession associated with Đạo Mẫu) with that of Australoid peoples. Simons studied lêndòng among Vietnamese expatriates and immigrants living in France. Nguyễn Văn Huyên described Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh, a well known historical figure who later became an incarnation of the Mother Goddess. She became the most important of the incarnations and was the only woman to be venerated as one of the pantheon of the four immortals of Vietnamese tradition (Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh, 1990). Later, Dror (2002) continues to study Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh in the connection with an elite Vietnamese woman, Doan Thi Diem.

Interest in Đạo Mẫu and other elements of folk belief has increased substantially since the Đổi Mới reforms in 1986, which brought about changes in the role of the government in reexamining and promoting the study of traditional

2 The four immortals are Saint Tấn Viên, Saint Gióng, Chùa Động Túc and Princess Liễu Hạnh.
3 Đổi Mới – meaning renewal or revitalization refers to the economic reforms which were adopted in 1986 during the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The reforms came about as the result of a reexamination of some of the basic ideas of Marxism-Leninism and following Ho Chi Minh’s ideology which provided a theoretical foundation for actions taken by the Vietnam government. In one sense these changes were triggered by the growing impact of globalization and also by the fact that the adoption of the classical principles of development were not working.
cultural and ritual activities (Malarney, 2002). Consequently, the practices of Đạo Mẫu have been studied by European, American, Australian and Vietnamese researchers. Most studies have been have focused especially on the shamanism of Đạo Mẫu and the rites of len dong (mediumship) which involves spiritual possession with sacred dances and the typical music, such as the works of Norton (2000, 2004), Proschan (2001), Tô Ngọc Thanh (2004), Vargyas (2004), Lê Hồng Lý (2004). Some researchers focused on the medically and spiritually therapeutic aspects of the shamanism of Đạo Mẫu such as Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002, 2004), Chinkarev (2004), and Nguyễn Kim Hiền (2004). Vietnamese researchers have also contributed descriptions of Đạo Mẫu and worship of various types of Mother Goddesses in different areas of Vietnam by different ethnic groups—the Việt people (or Kinh, the ethnic majority in Vietnam) and minority groups such as Tày, Chăm, Bru, H’mông and Mường such as the works by Đặng Văn Lượng (1991), Nguyễn Thị Yến (2003, 2004), Phan Quyển Phượng (2001), Nguyễn Chí Bền, Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn and Nguyễn Duy Hinh (2001) Nguyễn Hữu Thông (2001), and the Friends of Vietnam Heritage (2004). Some of the researchers contributed an analysis of Đạo Mẫu within the context of the Vietnamese folklore tradition and Vietnamese culture such as Vũ Ngọc Khánh (1990, 1991), and Nguyễn Minh San (1992), Trần Quốc Vương (2004). Some other researchers start to do comparative research related to Đạo Mẫu such as Kendall (2004). Taylor described the practices of the worship of Mother Goddess as the metaphor of the “feminine spirit” in the pilgrimage with worshippers in southern Vietnam (Taylor, 2001, 2004). Fjelstad (1995) studied the practice of this belief within the Vietnamese community in the San Francisco Bay Area, United States. Among these scholars, Ngô Đức Thịnh (1992, 1996, 2001, 2004), has been one of the most prominent in his studies of Đạo Mẫu from both practical and theoretic perspectives.

Đạo Mẫu Beliefs and Practices

Vietnam is a country of many religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Christianity, as well as folk beliefs (tin ngưỡng dân gian) as mentioned earlier. These folk beliefs include ancestor worship (tin ngưỡng thờ tổ tiên), worship of the village tutelary god (tin ngưỡng thờ Thành Hoàng), and Đạo Mẫu, or the worship of the maternal divinity (tin ngưỡng thờ Mẫu) (Nguyễn Duy Quý, 2004:17). Vietnamese scholars hold that Đạo Mẫu is different from other folk beliefs because it was a universally held belief of all Vietnamese and not a belief held only by people in one province or only by one ethnic group in Vietnam. The spirits of Đạo Mẫu were viewed as existing everywhere, from the lowlands to the highland regions, from the country to urban areas, and among every ethnic group from majority to minorities. This came about because of its roots in the worship of...

Author’s translation from the Vietnamese

4 Author’s translation from the Vietnamese
of nature and the spirits and forces of nature. Đạo Mẫu took on variations in different parts of the country and thus reflected the importance of differing forces and aspects of nature in the different regions. Đạo Mẫu was thus the cultural product of the Vietnamese people in relating to themselves and to the forces of nature within geographical regions. The Mẫu took the forms of the Mountain, the Ocean, the Valleys, the bogs and wetlands, and the tropical forests.

**Evolution of Đạo Mẫu**

The origins of Đạo Mẫu are not clear. According to Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004) Đạo Mẫu does not have a consistent form of religious belief. This author theorizes that it involves a system of religious beliefs that has evolved over three phases: 1) the worship of individual goddesses (spirits) of nature; then 2) the worship of Mother Goddesses; and finally, 3) the worship of the Mother Goddess of the three-four palaces (or three-four palaces religion) where the Mother Goddess is viewed as having power over the elements of nature and the heavens, and human beings. Thus, initially, there was the phase of worshipping Goddesses such as the Sun-Goddess and the Rice-Goddess. These goddesses had no maternal virtue or human characteristics. The second stage was the worship of Mother Goddesses such as Mother Âu Cơ, the mother of the Việt nation, the Royal Mothers, the Mother Goddesses of Heaven, of Forest, and of Water. This stage was based on the worship of the Goddesses of nature but the difference is that these Goddesses acquired maternal attributes and became Mothers. I believe that at this stage the more important goddesses or spirits were viewed as divinities with some anthropomorphic and maternal qualities, though they were limited to one domain or another. The third stage saw the worship of the Mother Goddess of the three-four palaces. “Three-four palaces” – Tam Phú - Tứ Phú does not refer literally to the number of palaces or temples (as in Day Palace, or Phú Đây\(^5\)) but rather, refers to the three or four elements of the Universe: Heaven (Thiên Phú), Earth (Địa Phú), Water (Thủy Phú) and Mountains and Forest (Nhạc Phú). Thus, at this stage the concept of a Mother Goddess emerges, with influence over all of nature, meaning the physical environment in its totality not just single elements such as water or earth, and over human life. The first and second stages of the evolution of Đạo Mẫu worship are common to any agricultural society. These stages bear an indigenous and endogenous character while the stage of the three-four palace religion came about as a result of Chinese Daoist influences. However, eventually, the three-four palace religion began to incorporate features of the ceremonial worshipping of the Goddesses of Nature. With the appearance of

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\(^5\) The word phú in “phủ Đây” means “palace,” refers to a temple complex of various buildings. The word phú means “palace” in the phrase “Tam Phú - Tứ Phú” refers to specific spiritual domains for specific Mother Goddess.
Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh, a real life Vietnamese princess, the three-four palace religion became a truly Vietnamese belief.

In Đạo Mẫu, as in all religions, there is a view of how the world came to be. The central idea of Đạo Mẫu is that nature is nurturing and beneficent. Not unlike the concept of a "Mother Earth," this entity is seen as the life force which supports and sustains life in nature. Mẫu (Mother Goddess) plays this same role in creating and maintaining a human family, and by extension, a nation and human society. Mẫu is viewed and worshiped as “the Creator and maintainer of the Universe and Human Beings” (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2004: 789).

**Contemporary Belief and Practices of Đạo Mẫu**

Today, believers see an explanation in Đạo Mẫu for how life came to be and how life is to be lived. Đạo Mẫu developed a conception of human life based on the worship of real-life "mothers" of the living people and for the benefit of living people. Thus, every deity in Đạo Mẫu reflects the qualities of a kind-hearted Vietnamese Mother who is both a divinity and a normal woman at the same time. Đạo Mẫu does not focus on the afterlife, or death. It cares about the present life and the question how people can gain a happy and fulfilling life during their time on Earth. This focus on life is manifested in their chants and prayers. These chants sing of the many things people wish for in their daily life-- good weather for good harvests, good health for everyone, happy life for a prosperous country, and the like. The content of the chants are very clear and simple. This is different from the content of Buddhist chants which sing the praises of abstract concepts, ambiguous ideas and distant things.

Đạo Mẫu has standardized rituals with a formal calendar of ceremonies and a large body of regular worshippers who attend the ceremonies. There is no formal training for performance of the ritual and people learned from each other in oral forms. The sacred dances with the music and songs (Chầu văn) in the ritual of Đạo Mẫu have been studied by a lot of scholars such as Norton 2000, Tô Ngọc Thanh 2004. The music and dances were immensely popular, and during the Nguyen dynasty there were regular performance competitions within the country.

The pantheistic system includes a hierarchy of divinities. There is one Supreme Deity which is the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng) in the formal ideology of Đạo Mẫu and which is the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh in the ideology of Đạo Mẫu which is practiced. Because the central figure of worship can manifest itself in many forms, the pantheon of deities has evolved. These represent not only the spirits of nature but also historic personages who have contributed to the country

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6 I use two terms: “worshippers” refers to the active believers who come to the temples to worship and attend the ritual regularly, while “believers” refers to the passive believers who believe in Mother Goddess, who agree with The Maternal Principle in Vietnamese culture (Trần Quốc Vương) but who do not go to temples or attend rituals.
and the culture or who have possessed a substantive spiritual power. Most of these deities are women and embody feminine qualities.

**Thánh Mẫu Liễu Hạnh: The Supreme Mother Goddess**

Besides the abstracted or anthropomorphic Goddesses in the Vietnamese folk consciousness, there are “heroic” divinities who actual human beings and historical personages. Among them, Princess Liễu Hạnh or Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh or Văn Cát Thần Nữ (the supreme deity in the pantheon of Đạo Mẫu) is one of the four immortals of Vietnamese mythology (Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh 1990).

Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh was said to have been the daughter of the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng). Because she broke a treasured cup belonging to her father she was reborn as a mortal, a daughter in the Lê family (in present day Nam Định province) in 1557. She had a short life, marrying and having a child at 18, then dying at age 21. Because of her love for life as a mortal, the Emperor allowed her to be reincarnated one more time. During this life she wandered through the country, enjoying the beauties of nature, and meeting many people. She created many miracles and helped her people drive away the Chinese invaders. She became a champion of the people, even fighting with the King in a dispute she could not win. Because of her virtuous behavior the King people rallied to her support and made a place for her in the Đền Sông in Thanh Hóa province. In time she was deified and became the most important of the Mother Goddesses and she became a role model for all Vietnamese women.

No matter how her life may be interpreted, Liễu Hạnh became a symbol of feminine power. She broke from the Confucianism that underscored female subjugation to male authority. She emphasized happiness, freedom of movement and independent of thought. Feared and loved at the same time, her principles of punishing the bad and rewarding the good also sent a message of protection and hope for social justice to the population then troubled by the upheavals of the 17th-19th centuries. A divine figure (immortal, fairy) as well as a historical person (daughter, spouse, mother), Liễu Hạnh, though she lived in the 16th century in Vietnam, is still revered by all of the Vietnamese people. Having shared the same joys and pains as mortal beings, she is perceived as the most understanding and benevolent goddess (Friends of Vietnam Heritage: 37).

For many, Liễu Hạnh thus became the symbol of the ideal Vietnamese woman, compassionate, and an independent and free spirited woman. Liễu Hạnh symbolized the beauty of the Vietnamese spirit and its ability to overcome outside influences which Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism represented. She became a popular figure in Vietnamese culture and would become an important figure in Đạo Mẫu. She became part of the pantheon of goddesses in Đạo Mẫu, becoming Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh - the Holy Mother of Heaven and was quickly elevated to the position of being the most popular and most important within the pantheon of Đạo Mẫu. The fact that Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh is both “divine”
and human adds tremendously to her popularity, and makes her an achievable model of behavior. She ultimately becomes the Supreme Divinity, ruling over all of the other lesser divinities and over human beings as well.

**The Divinities of Đạo Mẫu**

Because of the way Đạo Mẫu evolved and the inclusiveness of the religious movement, a confusing array of divine spirits and goddesses and deified women make up the Đạo Mẫu pantheon. These heroic figures are the personification of the virtues of women and actual women--leaders in wars against the many foreign invaders Vietnam has experienced, or leaders in life--especially virtuous women venerated for their ability to handle difficult situations, as well as from myths and legends from the different ethnic groups of Vietnam. Thus, the Mường people have Bà Sì, Bà Sô (Lady Sì, Lady So); the Thái people have Mẹ Bầu (Mother Bau); the Tay people have Mẹ Hoà (Mother Hoa); the Kinh people have Mười Hai Bà Mụ (Twelve Lady Mu). In their folk legends, the Kinh people have Mẹ Âu Cơ (Mother Au Co), Mẹ Nàng (Mothers Nang- daughters of King Hùng), Mẹ Thánh Gióng (Mother Giong Saint), the Tay people have Mẹ Già Cái (Mother Gia Cai), the Thái people have Mẹ Yke (Mother Yke), the Chăm people have Mẹ Thiện Ya Na (Mother Thien Ya Na), the Mường people have Mẹ Già Đìn (Mother Gia Din).

Within the folkloric traditions of Vietnam there are seventy-five Goddesses (Đỗ Thị Hao and Mai Thị Ngọc Chúc 1984). The evolution of these goddesses and the veneration of women and the feminine qualities and virtues over time was not the product of an attempt to promote gender equity or “woman power.” It was an acknowledgement of the real life role played by women and the valuing of this role elevated to supernatural or transcendental levels. Thus the concept of a goddess of agriculture or rice came about “because the notion of fertility, held dear by a wet rice agricultural population, was unconsciously connected with that of human procreation by women” (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 29). This notion of fecundity also probably gave rise to the conception of a Mother Earth or Mother Nature in the Vietnamese folkloric tradition, and in the myths of many other countries as well.

Within the temples of Đạo Mẫu there is a multitude of deities arranged in a ranked order. First among these is the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng). He is the supreme deity and is provided a place of honor but viewed as a figurehead not much worshipped. He is viewed as being insignificant perhaps because of his masculinity, but more importantly because of his Chinese heritage. The only Supreme Deity of Đạo Mẫu is the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh. Other divinities taking their place in the pantheon- three palace or four palaces (Tam Phủ -- Từ Phủ) of three or four Mother Goddesses in the Mother Goddess altar - the main altar in the temples, Ngũ Vị Vương Quan (Five Great Mandarins), Từ Vị Châu Bà (Four Ladies of Honor), Ngũ Vị Hoàng Tứ (Five Princes), Thập Nhị Cô Nương.
In the pantheon of Đạo Mẫu, there are male deities and female deities. Early Vietnamese society was matrilineal, as scholars such as Đào Duy Anh (1939), Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1986), Whitmore (1984), Vũ Ngọc Khánh (1990), Trần Quốc Vương (1996) and Đặng Văn Lùng (1991) have shown. Yet, women could only become leaders with power when they get married (Ngô Đức Thịnh7). Thus, as men are acknowledged as having an important role in life they could also be worshipped. This is the explanation of having both male and female divinities in the pantheon of Đạo Mẫu, under the direction of the Supreme Deity, who was a female deity, Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh.

The Temples of Đạo Mẫu

As the belief systems of the Đạo Mẫu were formalized, temples and places of worship were built where practitioners could come together to participate in ceremonial activities and to pray for good fortune and recovery from illness. Some of these temples were private, built by individuals, or families or communities usually in gratitude for some good fortune granted. Other temples were built for community members to gather. Some of these were built by individuals who were thought to possess certain shamanistic powers. The earliest temple is Đền Quốc Mẫu – Áo Cơ (for the worship of the National Mother) in Hiện Lương commune (Sông Thao district, Phú Thọ province) in northern Vietnam. This is in an area thought to be the ancient capital- Phong Châu of Văn Lang state which is believed to be the oldest kingdom in Vietnam (more than 4000 years ago according to myths). Other temples are the Đền Đồng xưng Thiên thần Vượng Mẫu (temple for the worship of the Mother of Saint Gióng, a national hero), and the Đền Tây Thiên (temple for the worship of the Royal Mother). Both temples are on Mount Tam Đảo, located in Phúc Yên, Vĩnh Phúc, Sơn Tây provinces, Northern Vietnam. Tam Đảo is the sacred mountain of one of the four immortals, Saint Tấn Viên (Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh 1990).

There are hundreds of other private and community temples and palaces throughout Vietnam. In North Vietnam, far toward the northeast, there are seventeen temples in Lạng Sơn province including the Đền Mẫu Đồng Đăng, Đền Mẫu Tày Hồ, Đền Bắc Lê Linh Tự (for the worship of Mẫu Thường Ngân-- the Mother Goddess of the Forest). In the Red River Delta region there are the biggest temples and palaces: Đền Bà Chúa Kho (for the worship of the Queen of Treasure) in Bắc Ninh province, Phú Dầy (for the worship of Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh) in Nam Định province. Phú Dầy is the biggest central palace of Đạo Mẫu and the “holy land” of the religious believer. In Vụ Bản district in Bắc Ninh province there is a complex of two palaces -- Vân Cát, and Tiên Hương and nine temples (for the worship of Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh) as well as the Imperial

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7 A personal interview, November 11, 2005 in Hanoi, Vietnam

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tomb of Mother Goddess Lý Hành. In Hanoi, the most typical palace is Phủ Tây Hồ - West Lake Palace (for the worship Mother Goddess Lý Hành). In Thanh Hóa province there is Đền Sông (or Đền Sông Son), Đền Phố Cát (for the worship of Mother Goddess Lý Hành). Besides the temples and palaces dedicated to the worship of Mẫu, many other temples and pagodas in Vietnam have an altar for the worship of Mẫu. These altars are usually positioned beside or behind the image of the primary spirit being worshipped in the temple, according to the common saying: “Tiến Thần hậu Mẫu” (Spirit in front, Mother Goddess behind) or “Tiên Phật hậu Mẫu” (Buddha image in front, Mother Goddess behind).

**The Design of the Temples and Altars**

In its own special places of worship, the Đao Mẫu temple or palace, the holy altar is set at the center of the facility for worshippers. The temple can stand alone, be set within a complex of temples, called a palace, such as in the temples of Phú Đày (Nam Định) or Phú Tây Hồ (Hanoi) or Đền Sông (Thanh Hóa). Sometimes the place of worship is in more humble surroundings, such as in a building attached to a pagoda or within a Buddhist sanctuary, albeit at the back. The design of the holy altar is uniform in most temples, with images of Tam Phú - Tư Phú (three or four symbolic palaces of three or four Mother Goddesses on the holy alter) to Ngự Vị Vương Quan (Five Great Mandarins), Tư Vị Châu Bà (Four Ladies of Honor), Ngự Vị Hoàng Tử (Five Princes), Thập Nhị Cô Nương (Twelve Royal Damsels), Thập Vị Vương Cậu (Ten Boy Attendants [Pages]), Quan Ngự Hổ (Five Tigers), Ông Lốt Rắn (Monsignor Snake). Decorative elements include the nón quai thao (traditional hats of Vietnamese women), hài (ancient shoes) and đèn lồng (decorative multi-colored lanterns), and lòng (parasols or umbrellas) and thuyền (boats) made of paper.

The temples generally have an elaborate “three palaces” (or four palaces sometimes) design with the cung đề nhất (the first palace) on the right side dedicated to Mother Goddess Thọai – the Mother Goddess of Water, clothed in white; the cung đề nhị (the second palace) is usually on the left side and it is dedicated to Mother Goddess Thường Ngân – the Mother Goddess of the Forest, clothed in green; and the cung đề tam (the third palace) is in the center and dedicated to Mother Goddess Lý Hành - the Mother Goddess of Heaven (also considered Mother Goddess of Earth and of Human Beings), the Supreme leader of all the Mother Goddesses, clothed in red. The display is further divided into three levels: tầng trên không (the highest level) has images of Ông Lốt Rắn (Two Monsignor Snakes); tầng ngang (the middle level) has images of the many other manifestations of the Mother Goddesses and other spirits; tầng hạ ban (the low level) has images of Quan Ngự Hổ (Five Tigers). In front of the door of the holy altar there is usually an elaborate arrangement of water sources, stones, flowers, trees, and grasses.
The design of holy altar is a symbol of femininity for the Vietnamese. In front of the highest level dedicated to "Mothers", the worshipper can look up to see scenes of rivers and lakes represented by the snake (water being symbolic of woman) and look down at the low level to see the earth, symbolized by an image of the tiger (the earth being another symbol of woman). Looking ahead, the worshipper can see the Mother Goddess of Forest on the left side, the Mother Goddess of Water on the right side, and at the center - a representation of the Mother Goddess of Heaven, of the Earth and of Human Beings. The decorations are ornate, complex and symbolic with historic meaning, pageantry and a feeling of grandness and are designed to impress and awe the worshipper and inspire a feeling of reverence and awareness.

The Rituals and Ceremonies of Đạo Mẫu

The ideology of Đạo Mẫu does not exist in written form. There is no “bible” or “holy book” since Đạo Mẫu was formed in the oral tradition. Its power to evoke and communicate lies in the power of the ritual and the ceremonies. A thousand chants and hundreds of dances can be remembered, and hundreds of musical compositions can be played from generation to generation by maintenance of this oral tradition. The rite most performed is lên đồ– hâu bống, which is a possession ceremony or mediumship ritual. The rite is the multiple integration of the soul of the divinities of Đạo Mẫu to ông đồ (male mediums) and bà đồ (female mediums) invoked to pray for good fortune and protection from misfortune by the provision of nurturing assistance. The mediums are côt – the empty physical body that the divinities borrow to appear.

The các giá đồng (the sacred dances) were an important part of the rite. There are seventy-two sacred dances and these include giá các quan lớn – the sacred dances of the Great Mandarins, giá các câu– the sacred dance of the Boy Attendants (Pages), giá cháu bà – the sacred dance of the Ladies of Honor, giá các cô– the sacred dance of the Royal Damsels and so on. During the rite, the sacred dances were performed with hát văn (or hát cháu văn) (the Vietnamese traditional type of singing). Hát văn can also be call hát nói, meaning “singing while speaking”. The song had to be performed with a specific rhythm and included 11 sentences with 2-4 verses having 5-7 words each. The last sentence was called the summary sentence with 6 words in six-eight styles. Hát văn was performed during the rituals by đồng – the medium – and by cung văn – a musical ensemble – which played nhạc văn- music accompaniment to hát văn and create nhạc cảnh– “songscapes” (Norton 2004). As Norton states: “châu văn constructs a spiritual presence and music enables mediums to assume new identities and to engage with the people and places beyond their local world” (Norton 2004: 341).

8 Although ông đồ (male mediums) sometimes perform the rite, they are usually dressed in female attire.
Dao Mau celebrates two main festivals: “Tháng Tám giỗ Cha, Tháng Ba giỗ Mẹ” (The month-long death anniversary of the Father [General Trần Hưng Đạo] in August9 and the death anniversary of the Mother [Princess Liễu Hạnh] in March10). The worshippers usually come to the temple on the first and fifteenth of the lunar calendar month to offer their thanks or to make requests. The lên dòng- hâu bong (mediumship) rites are performed on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month or on special festival days. In all of these elaborate ceremonies and performances, women played the dominant role.

The Organization of Dao Mau

The leaders of most Dao Mau temples are females although there is no rule that they must be women. Most of them are said to have a “special ability” to communicate with the divinity and spirits. Some are people who can be possessed by the spirits, called nháp vai (take the part of spirits) in a special rite called lên dòng (mediumship). These people “are not considered to be powerful by essence, but solely empowered by spirits. They are referred to as ‘a mount for spirits’ like horses are mounts for people, and used by spirits of the cult (Đạo Mẫu) merely to heal souls and treat ailments” (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 38). Thus, these female leaders or priestesses are considered shamans who can bring themselves into the possession and receive supernatural power to help heal souls or bodies, cure ailments, bestow wealth and prosperity, or see future events.

These female leaders of Dao Mau are also folk virtuosos (masters of the folk stage) and the virtuosos or masters of the ordinary life of women in “săn khẩu tâm linh,” meaning the spiritual stage or realm (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 1996). Thus, they create their own world by performing ritual dances, songs and music which bring the women more opportunities to show and share their beauty and desires. As a result through the design of the holy altar, these women leaders create an atmosphere, an environment of women and for women. Describing the practices of four palace religions among Vietnamese communities in San Francisco, Fjelstad also points out that “the social nature of spirit possession

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9This festival is held in the 8th month of the lunar calendar mainly in Thái Bình (his native place) and Kiêp Bạc (Hải Dương). The Father, a subsequent branch of the cult, is believed to have been re-incarnated in General Trần Hưng Đạo (13th century), one of the great national heroes who defeated Mongol invaders and is now worshipped on an almost equal footing with Mother Liễu Hạnh. The festival is characterized by a boat procession and race, a commemorative rite re-enacting the glorious past (the victorious battles of Trần Hưng Đạo, and the legend of the holy snake, Bát Hải đại vương- a descendant from the Dragon Lord – who helped Kinh Hùng fight his enemies at sea (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 45)

10This festival is held in the 3rd month of the lunar calendar and celebrated most spectacularly in Phố Đày (Nam Định) where Liễu Hạnh was born. The focus of the event is a procession from Mother Goddess’ temple to the pagoda to honor the intervention of Buddha when Princess Liễu Hạnh was at the lowest point in her life (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 45).
ceremonies helps foster the formation of social support groups that have far reaching consequences” (Fjelstad, 1995: 141).

The leaders are not mere caretakers of their temples—thủ đền—a person who looked after the temple or thủ nhang—a person looked after the worshipping or viết sờ—a person or scribe who writes the petition to the spirits, which usually are men. They are the chief of groups of mediums or shamans selected by Mother Goddesses to be con cái nhà Mâu—the Mother Goddess’s offspring. If the design of the holy altar is as an imperial “palace” or a home, these female mediums play the role of the leader of a family. Thus, nhà Mâu (the group of people in the temple) is like a family. The female leader also keeps the money and the goods of nhà Mâu to bestow good fortune for the worshippers. The leader of temple has both the visible and manifest power to rule over affairs in nhà Mâu and she has the invisible, spiritual power to help society. Many believers feel that the possession of these dual powers shows that Vietnamese women, although seemingly compliant and sometimes apparently victimized, have never given up their power.

In nhà Mậu, the worshippers divided themselves into two groups—those who assist the priestesses in carrying out the rituals and ceremonies, much like the lay leaders of a congregation in a Western church, and those who come to the temple simply to wish for guidance or good fortune. The first group is called con công, đế tổ—the group of persons selected by Mother Goddesses to be Mother Goddesses’ offspring and help with the performance of the shamanistic rites lên đồ—mediumship. In addition, this group consists of the people such as cung văn—who play music and sing during the ceremonies, thủ đền—caretakers of the temple, thủ nhang—those who oversee the services and viết sờ—the scribe who writes out the petition of believers. Most of the members of this important group are women, except for the scribe. The second group is larger and is given the name con nhang (people who come to the temple through an initial ritual lễ đồi bất nhang11). These people go to the temple to pray for good fortune and advice. They also want to be the Mother Goddesses’ offspring as the first group but they don’t perform the lên đồ (mediumship) rites, they are just observers and beneficiaries.

The believers of Đạo Mậu are expressive and exuberant as they get caught up in the spirit of the ceremony and the ceremonies are festive and very crowded and not somber. There are no strict rules of membership, no limitations or requirements, nor elaborate rites of passage such as a baptism to become a worshipper of Đạo Mậu, so anyone and everyone is invited to participate in these ceremonies.

11 Lễ đồi bất nhang, the ritual of “carrying incense on the head,” is for initiates who want to go to the temple with the belief and desire of changing their fate. They also want to be the Mother Goddesses’ offspring, but they don’t practice the rite lên đồ (mediumship). They are attendants.
Conclusion

Dao Mau plays an important role in the lives of followers and other Vietnamese. It is a source of solace when an individual or family suffers illness or tragedy. It is also a potential source of good fortune in its priestesses’ ability to help individuals see what lies ahead. The belief system is familiar and simple to understand because of its roots in tradition. It is a source of social interaction with its ceremonies and festivals. It is a gathering place of like minded individuals and it offers each person the comfort and support of each other. Most important, Dao Mau is the collective deification of each worshipper’s own mother, and plays the many roles of a mother on a personal and societal level.

Dao Mau is primarily a woman’s religion. The object of worship and the source of religious succor is woman, or rather the power of women – to give life and sustain life. Dao Mau is a celebration of womanhood and motherhood and women play an important role within the movement. The clergy and leaders are mostly women; the shamanistic priestesses who bring the past and the future and the present together are women; the worshippers and practitioners are mostly women. Dao Mau is an important social force in present day Vietnam. It has created a “sisterhood” – one of the few places in a male dominant society where women can exercise leadership, demonstrate ability, gain respect and find fulfillment as a person and a member of society. One of the female leaders of Dao Mau temples in Thai Nguyen province – Dong Vong – stated in an interview to me that since she became the leader of the temple, her husband and her children behave more respectfully to her. Also, she had chances to help her people who were worshipers in her temple by knowing them, sharing with them and giving advice to them on how to solve the problems of daily life. She thought the temple is the place the worshippers have a chance to get together for special rituals, participate in social activities which make their life more fun and meaningful. She thought being a woman helps her to do a better job in her leading role of the temple because naturally people feel more free and comfortable to talk with a woman about their problems. Thus, I believe, most important, Dao Mau represents the institutionalization of the Vietnamese ideal of womanhood, epitomized by her role as a mother. In a way, Dao Mau starts with recognition of the importance of woman as mother, universalizes and deifies her qualities as a mother then offers this vision as an ideal for real life women and mothers to follow as a guide for living in today’s society.

Dao Mau is important as a religious movement for the solace it provides worshippers and practitioners and the ability to deal with the stresses of everyday living. But, I believe it is also important as a vehicle for recognizing and promoting the abilities and powers of women, first within a small social group, and then perhaps within a traditional society which Vietnam is. This then is the gift that Dao Mau brings to Vietnamese society, its recognition of the power of woman as mother and the potential for using this power to transform the broader society. The relationship between the role of women in Dao Mau and in
Vietnamese society has not been well studied. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2002: 14; 2004: 26, 27), Trần Quốc Vương (2004: 144), and Vũ Ngọc Khánh (2004: 687) make reference to the potential importance of this aspect of Đạo Mẫu, but none of them has made it the subject of a major study. I agree with these scholars and hope that future research will explore how Đạo Mẫu has influenced the role of women in Vietnamese society. I do believe this will be a fruitful area of study.

References


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