
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 palace¹)—and the observance of a body of rituals. As in many other religions, the

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 Huyền (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 *lên đồng* (mediumship or spirit possession associated with *Đạo Mẫu*) with that of Australoid peoples. Simons studied *lên đồng* among Vietnamese expatriates and immigrants living in France. Nguyễn Văn Huyền 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 immortals² 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* reforms³ 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 Tản Viên*, *Saint Gióng*, *Chử Đồng Tử* 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 focused especially on the shamanism of *Đạo Mẫu* and the rites of *lên đồng* (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 M'ường such as the works by Đặng Văn Lung (1991), Nguyễn Thị Yên (2003, 2004), Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2001), Nguyễn Chí Bền, Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn and Nguyễn Duy Hình (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 Vượng (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 (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) as mentioned earlier. These folk beliefs include ancestor worship (*tín ngưỡng thờ tổ tiên*), worship of the village tutelary god (*tín ngưỡng thờ Thành Hoàng*), and *Đạo Mẫu*, or the worship of the maternal divinity (*tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu*) (Nguyễn Duy Quý, 2004:17)⁴. 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

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 Phủ - Tứ Phủ* does not refer literally to the number of palaces or temples (as in Day Palace, or *Phủ Dầy*⁵) but rather, refers to the three or four elements of the Universe: Heaven (*Thiên Phủ*), Earth (*Địa Phủ*), Water (*Thoải Phủ*) and Mountains and Forest (*Nhạc Phủ*). 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

⁵ The word *phủ* in “*phủ Dầy*” means “palace,” refers to a temple complex of various buildings. The word *phủ* means “palace” in the phrase “*Tam Phủ - Tứ Phủ*” refers to specific spiritual domains for specific Mother Goddess.

Mother Goddess *Liêu 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 worshippers⁶ 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 *Liêu 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

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 Vượng) 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 *Vân 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 Kinh people rallied to her support and made a place for her in the *Đền Sòng* 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 Si*, *Bà Sỏ* (Lady Si, Lady So); the Thái people have *Mẹ Bầu* (Mother Bau); the Tày people have *Mẹ Hoa* (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 Tày people have *Mẹ Già Cai* (Mother Gia Cai), the Thái people have *Mẹ Yke* (Mother Yke), the Chăm people have *Mẹ Thiên Ya Na* (Mother Thien Ya Na), the Mường people have *Mẹ Già Dìn* (Mother Gia Din).

Within the folkloric traditions of Vietnam there are seventy-five Goddesses (Đỗ Thị Hảo 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 -- Tứ 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), *Tứ Vị Châu Bà* (Four Ladies of Honor), *Ngũ Vị Hoàng Tử* (Five Princes), *Thập Nhị Cô Nương*

(Twelve Royal Damsels), *Thập Vị Vương Cậu* (Ten Boy Attendants (Pages)), *Quan Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers), and *Ông Lót Rắn* (Monsignor Snake).

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 Lung (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 – Âu Cơ* (for the worship of the National Mother) in Hiền 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 xung Thiên thần Vương 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 *Tản 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 Tây Hồ*, *Đền Bắc Lệ Linh Từ* (for the worship of *Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*-- 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, *Phủ Dầy* (for the worship of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*) in Nam Định province. Phủ 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

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

tomb of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*. In Hanoi, the most typical palace is *Phủ Tây Hồ* - West Lake Palace (for the worship Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*). In Thanh Hóa province there is *Đền Sòng* (or *Đền Sòng Sơn*), *Đền Phó Cát* (for the worship of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*). 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: “*Tiền Thần hậu Mẫu*” (Spirit in front, Mother Goddess behind) or “*Tiền 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 *Đạo 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 *Phủ Dầy* (Nam Định) or *Phủ Tây Hồ* (Hanoi) or *Đền Sòng* (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 Phủ - Tứ Phủ* (three or four symbolic palaces of three or four Mother Goddesses on the holy altar) to *Ngũ Vị Vương Quan* (Five Great Mandarins), *Tứ Vị Châu Bà* (Four Ladies of Honor), *Ngũ Vị Hoàng Tử* (Five Princes), *Thập Nhị Cô Nương* (Twelve Royal Damsels), *Thập Vị Vương Cậu* (Ten Boy Attendants [Pages]), *Quan Ngũ Hồ* (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 *lọng* (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 đệ nhất* (the first palace) on the right side dedicated to Mother Goddess *Thoải* – the Mother Goddess of Water, clothed in white; the *cung đệ nhị* (the second palace) is usually on the left side and it is dedicated to Mother Goddess *Thượng Ngàn* – the Mother Goddess of the Forest, clothed in green; and the *cung đệ tam* (the third palace) is in the center and dedicated to Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* - 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 Ngũ Hồ* (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 đồng- hầu bóng*, 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 đồng* (male mediums⁸) and *bà đồng* (female mediums) invoked to pray for good fortune and protection from misfortune by the provision of nurturing assistance. The mediums are *cốt* – 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 cậu*– the sacred dance of the Boy Attendants (Pages), *giá châu 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 vắn* (or *hát châu vắn*) (the Vietnamese traditional type of singing). *Hát vắn* can also be call *hát nói*, meaning "singing while speaking". The song had to be performed with a specific rhythm and 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 vắn* was performed during the rituals by *đồng* – the medium – and by *cung vắn* – a musical ensemble – which played *nhạc vắn*- music accompaniment to *hát vắn* and create *nhạc cảnh*-- "songscapes" (Norton 2004). As Norton states: "*châu vắn* 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 đồng* (male mediums) sometimes perform the rite, they are usually dressed in female attire.

Đạo Mẫu 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 đồng- hầu bóng* (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 Đạo Mẫu

The leaders of most *Đạo Mẫu* 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 *nhập vai* (take the part of spirits) in a special rite called *lên đồng* (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 *Đạo Mẫu* are also folk virtuosos (masters of the folk stage) and the virtuosos or masters of the ordinary life of women in “*sân khấu 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

⁹This festival is held in the 8th month of the lunar calendar mainly in Thái Bình (his native place) and Kiếp 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 King *Hùng* fight his enemies at sea (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 45)

¹⁰ This festival is held in the 3rd month of the lunar calendar and celebrated most spectacularly in *Phủ Dầy* (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 sớ* - 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 Mẫu* – 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 Mẫu* (the group of people in the temple) is like a family. The female leader also keeps the money and the goods of *nhà Mẫu* to bestow good fortune for the worshippers. The leader of temple has both the visible and manifest power to rule over affairs in *nhà Mẫu* 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 Mẫu*, 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, đệ tử* – the group of persons selected by Mother Goddesses to be Mother Goddesses’ offspring and help with the performance of the shamanistic rites *lên đồng* – mediumship. In addition, this group consists of the people such as *cung vãn* – who play music and sing during the ceremonies, *thủ đền* – caretakers of the temple, *thủ nhang* – those who oversee the services and *viết sớ* – 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 đội bát nhang*¹¹). 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 đồng* (mediumship) rites, they are just observers and beneficiaries.

The believers of *Đạo Mẫu* 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 Mẫu*, so anyone and everyone is invited to participate in these ceremonies.

¹¹ *Lễ đội bát 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 đồng* (mediumship). They are attendants.

Conclusion

Đạo Mẫu 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, *Đạo Mẫu* is the collective deification of each worshipper's own mother, and plays the many roles of a mother on a personal and societal level.

Đạo Mẫu 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. *Đạo Mẫu* 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. *Đạo Mẫu* 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 *Đạo Mẫu* temples in Thái Nguyên province – *Đông Vọng* – 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, *Đạo Mẫu* represents the institutionalization of the Vietnamese ideal of womanhood, epitomized by her role as a mother. In a way, *Đạo Mẫu* 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.

Đạo Mẫu 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 *Đạo Mẫu* 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 *Đạo Mẫu* and in

Vietnamese society has not been well studied. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2002: 14; 2004: 26, 27), Trần Quốc Vượng (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.

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