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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Preserving and Promoting Good Values of Mother Goddess Worship in Viet Nam Today

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**ABSTRACT**

This article aims to find out good values of Mother Goddess worship as well as some shortcomings and limitations arisen from the practice of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam. At the same time, it proposes solutions to preserve and promote the good values of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam in the coming time. Good values of Mother Goddess worship and shortcomings and limitations arisen from the practice of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam have been identified. Then, solutions to preserve and promote the good values of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam in the coming time are given.

**KEYWORDS**

Mother Goddess worship, good values, Vietnam

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### 1. Introduction

On December 01, 2016, at the 11<sup>th</sup> session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Addis Ababa, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the heritage "Practice of the Vietnamese Mother Goddess Worship" was officially inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The Vietnamese Mother Goddess worshipping belief is quite popular and has deep historical and social roots. It is a long-standing indigenous belief, taking the worship of the Mother Goddess as an idol with the powers of reproduction, protection and care for people. The belief that has been gendered takes the form of the Mother, where Vietnamese women have entrusted their aspirations for liberation from the prejudices and constraints of feudal Confucian society.

The connotation of Mother Goddess worship is used to express the honor of a certain character, or can be identified with the worship of the goddesses who appear, are honored as Mothers, such as National Mother, Queen Mother, or Holy Mother. Mother Goddess worship is also understood in a narrower sense, which is just a form of belief with the name of Mother of Three Palaces, Four Palaces, a form of worship of Mothers who govern a field in the universe.

The Mother Goddess worship has become a very familiar belief to all social classes, worshiped by people in many places, from rural to urban areas, from mountainous to lowland areas, from the South to the North of Vietnam. Through the process of formation and development, the Mother Goddess worship has made an important contribution to diversifying the forms of religious activities of the Vietnamese people, giving them strength, faith and attracting all social classes. It has also contributed to protecting and promoting the cultural values of the Vietnamese people throughout the history of building and defending the country.

There have been many research works on the Mother Goddess worship from many different aspects, such as the origin, formation and development process of Mother Goddess, the current status of Mother Goddess worship practice in specific

localities in Vietnam. However, no work has delved into clarifying good values as well as shortcomings and limitations in the practice of Mother Goddess worship. This article aims at summarizing the characteristics of Mother Goddess worship, and clarifying good values and shortcomings and limitations arisen from the practice of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam, and makes some proposals to contribute to overcoming those shortcomings and limitations and at preserving and promoting the good values of Mother Goddess worship.

## **2. Research Methods**

The research employs dialectical materialism and historical materialism to find out the good values of Mother Goddess worship as well as some shortcomings and limitations arisen from the practice of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam. Additionally, document synthesis, policy analysis, and historical method and logical method are applied to objectively assess the current situation and propose appropriate solutions. The historical method is used to study the process of formation and development of Mother Goddesses worship. Logical method is applied to identify good values and contributions of Mother Goddesses worship to the country's construction and defense as well as some of its shortcomings and limitations. Document synthesis and policy analysis are used as a basis to propose solutions to preserve and promote the good values of Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam in the new era - the era of national rise.

## **3. Literature review**

Mother Goddess worship has been one of the topics that many scholars have been interested in studying from many different aspects. In *The Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion*, Ngo (1966) presents general issues about Mother Goddess religion and first research work on Goddesses and Mother Goddesses in Vietnam conducted by a French scholar in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This book also provides the picture of Mother Goddesses of the Three Palaces and Four Palaces in the North, Central and South of Vietnam and the status of Vietnamese women in traditional commerce as well as their social environment, and introduces some typical textual documents on Mother Goddess religion and spirit mediumship.

In *The Secret of the Folk World - Mother Goddess Worship Ceremony*, Thuan Phuoc (2011) opens up new understandings about the origin and characteristics of Mother Goddess worship rituals in Vietnamese folk culture, presents in detail the important position and role of women in ancient society, and explains why Mother Goddess worship has become a popular religious custom. He also provides knowledge about unique art forms, such as ritual singing, as well as the practice of worship rituals, and spiritual spaces (communal houses, temples, shrines, and palaces across the country). In addition, the Mother Goddess worship rituals, the spirit mediumship ceremony and the art of worship are also included in the book to help improve the understanding about spirituality and the art typical of Mother Goddess beliefs. Vu (2020) also mentions the origin, formation and development of the Mother Goddess worship, but he comes into a more detail by analyzing the forms of the Mother Goddess worship (worship space, system of gods, organizations and followers, similarities and differences in the Mother Goddess worship in the North, Central and South) and clarifying the Mother Goddess worship in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, such as manifestations of spiritual life, the phenomenon of spirit mediumship, festivals and proposing some solutions to preserve and promote the values of the Mother Goddess worship. Ha (2023) presents clearly and in detail about the Mother Goddess religion from its origin to the rituals and scriptures of the Mother Goddess religion, emphasizing the role of the Mother Goddess religion in the history and cultural heritage of the nation, and explaining why the Mother Goddess religion has a close association with the cultural life of the Vietnamese people, including a valuable general statement that "if the Mother Goddess Au Co gave birth to hundreds of families, then Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh organized hundreds of families into a Holy Council, tightly organized with different functions and tasks, both playing the role of preserving the Mother Goddess worship, helping people face dangers and organizing the development of life".

In 2020, Ngo not only studied the spirit mediumship ritual as a religious phenomenon but also delved into psychology, therapy, and many other aspects, such as homosexual relationships, socio-economic aspects, and so on. In Part 1 of the book, *Journey of the Gods*, he described in detail the spirit mediumship ritual with the characteristics and functions of the system of gods, from Bodhisattva Quan Am to the Five Princes, and compared it with other forms of Shamanism in ethnic groups, such as Then (Tay), Moi (Muong), Mot (Thai), Dua Nhung, Si Ri (Hmong), Pjao (Central Highlands), and so on. In Part 2, *Transformation of Identity in Spirit mediumship*, he looked at the spirit mediumship ritual from many perspectives, such as interdisciplinary cultural studies - individual psychology, gender, integration of written culture - oral tradition, ritual singing, paintings and statues of the Four Palaces Mother Goddess, temple architecture, and the transformation of identity in family and community relationships, in order to convey personal aspirations and dreams through spiritual life.

Besides books, there have been many articles analyzing in depth the value of Mother Goddess worship and the current practice of Mother Goddess worship from different aspects in specific localities in Vietnam, such as Discussion on Mother Goddess worship (2013), Some issues in propagating the cultural values of Mother Goddess worship in our country (2015), The value of Mother Goddess worship in preserving national cultural identity today (2015), Some notes on Mother Goddess worship in Nam

Dinh province (2018), Basic approaches to Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam today (2020), Special characteristics of Mother Goddess worship custom (2021), and The beauty of Mother Goddess in Thanh Hoa Province (2023).

Nguyen (2013) generalizes the nature and value of Mother Goddess worship so that people can understand and come to the spiritual places happily and comfortably while still showing respect, and at the same time, stay away from superstition. Le (2015) presents the current status of propaganda work on cultural values of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam as well as points out some shortcomings and limitations. For example, the state management of Mother Goddess worship activities has not been effective, the people's awareness about Mother Goddess worship has still been limited, and some typically psychological characteristics of Mother Goddess worship has caused difficulties for the propaganda. On that basis, the author proposes some solutions to contribute to effective propaganda, preservation and promotion of cultural values of Mother Goddess worship. Nguyen and Le (2015) emphasizes the indigenous value and positive significance of Mother Goddess worship in realizing great national unity and developing humanity in the process of building and defending the country in the period of international integration. Ho (2018) describes the current practice of Mother Goddess worship at 352 historical and cultural relics (220 temples, 16 shrines, 72 pagodas, 44 temples and communal houses worshipping the village's tutelary god) and some specific activities of Mother Goddess worship in localities in Nam Dinh Province. Duong (2020) outlines some basic issues about Mother Goddess worship, such as the name and meaning of Mother Goddess worship, the combination of worship in Mother Goddess religion and major activities in Mother Goddess worship. At the same time, the author makes some proposals to preserve, exploit, and promote the value of Mother Goddess worship through tourism activities. Thu Trang et al. (2021) describes unique cultural activities in the practice of Mother Goddess worship at Dong Cuong Temple in Van Yen District, Yen Bai Province. This is a national historical relic, a famous sacred ancient temple, located on the left bank of the Red River and is considered the main temple to worship Mother Goddess Thuong Ngan, the second Mother Goddess in the Three Palaces of the Vietnamese people. Nguyen (2022) emphasizes that the practice of the Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship not only continues to affirm the role and position in the spiritual life of the people, but also establishes the value and contribution of Vietnamese culture to the common culture of humanity. The author indicates that the preservation of the beauty of Mother Goddess worship in contemporary life has been a regular and continuous task, contributing to promptly preventing distortions and ensuring standards in heritage practices. However, the author also points out that in recent times, there has always been a hidden risk of "deviation" in the practice of Mother Goddess worship, so it is necessary to have measures to repel the negative developments of this phenomenon. Thu Trang (2023) presents a vibrant picture of spirit mediumship activity, demonstrating the beauty of the Mother Goddess worship belief in Thanh Hoa Province and activities and measures of the government and people in preventing distorted activities which affect the beauty of cultural heritage.

It can be seen that previous works have focused on clarifying the origin, the formation process and characteristics of the Mother Goddess worship as well as showed the reality of practicing the Mother Goddess worship in some localities in Vietnam. There has been no research specializing in indicating good values of the Mother Goddess worship and shortcomings and limitations of this kind of belief and proposing solutions to preserve and promote the good values of the Mother Goddess worship in the coming time.

#### **4. The good values of Mother worship**

The Mother Goddess worship belief contains very rich cultural and artistic values. It is a treasure trove of legends, miracles, myths about the gods and is a form of performance with music, singing, dance, costumes, decoration, architecture, and so on. Mother Goddess worship belief performance has been considered as a form of spiritual theater. Regarding the costumes, each attendant has a set of scarves, different accessories with extremely rich decorative motifs, elaborate motifs, high aesthetics, diverse in color, and style corresponding to the saint being served. The Spirit mediumship - Spirit possession ritual of the Mother Goddess worship belief alone has produced a type of music which is one of the two typical folk song types of Vietnamese people, contributing to the world's music treasure. Music and Ritual singing are indispensable elements in the Spirit mediumship - Spirit possession ritual, contributing to the sublimation state and allowing people to merge with the gods. Songs depict the position, personality, background, and praise of the saints with very beautiful, solemn, and elegant lyrics.

From another perspective, the Mother Goddess worship reflects the people's dream of fertility and prosperity for a prosperous life. It also shows the belief of people in the sacredness of the Mother Goddesses and demonstrates the morality of "remembering the source of water when drinking" in the Vietnamese mind, teaching people to share with those in difficult circumstances. This is also the traditional humanistic and ethical value of the Vietnamese people.

The Mother Goddess worship presents some good values of Vietnamese women, such as altruism, kindness, tolerance, generosity. Women in the Mother Goddess worship are depicted as those who are ready to sacrifice to overcome the sophistication in life. They always take care of their family and overcome difficulties and hardships to fulfill their natural role. Through the Mother Goddess worship, it can be seen that women in the past paid much attention to food, clothing, ceremonies, and rituals with a desire to affirm their abilities in the face of social issues.

The strength and meaning of the Mother Goddess worship is to meet the needs and aspirations of people's daily lives, such as praying for health, peace, prosperous business, and a peaceful country. The Mother Goddess worship also bears the identity

and good values of Vietnamese cultural traditions, reflecting the attitude of behavior between people and people, between people and nature. The belief respects the creative and reproductive power of the Mother, using the image of the Mother to honor, convey good wishes, tolerance, and protection in life. It shows gratitude to those who have contributed to the people and the country, which is a good and precious tradition of our nation. It also educates good personality for people, encourages and praises patriotism and national pride, especially for the young generation.

With its openness, everyone can participate in the Mother Goddess worship belief, regardless of political orientation, religion, age, gender, or occupation. It also demonstrates the ability to absorb, integrate, and localize many other religious and belief elements, such as Ancestor worship, Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the cultures of ethnic minorities of Muong, Dao, Tay, Nung, and so on. This is a sign of cultural exchange, harmony, tolerance, and equal relationships and close ties between ethnic groups in Vietnam. The Mother Goddess worship belief is a condition for integrating and preserving many types of traditional folk culture, such as music, costumes, traditional crafts, performances, and cuisine as well as a way to preserve the history, heritage, and cultural identity of the Vietnamese people.

### **5. Superstitious phenomena and distortions in the practice of the Mother Goddess worship belief**

Reality shows that at some Mother Goddess worshiping establishments, some people have taken advantage of the permission to restore and develop traditional folk festivals to carry out superstitious activities. Other people have opened new Mother Goddess worshiping temples to conduct activities of saints appearing or spirit possession to get rich illegally. One of the common phenomena in some Mother Goddess worshiping places is to pray on behalf of other people. Many groups of people have been formed to provide full package services, such as buying offerings or writing petitions for worshippers.

Some fake teams of Spirit mediumship - Spirit possession have reduced the sacredness of its unique spiritual stage form and polluted the cultural environment. These teams are in arbitrary colors of costumes that do not follow any rules. Moreover, when they perform the ritual of worship, their voices sound like those of a Cheo or Tuong actor/actress, making the Spirit mediumship ceremony of the Mother Goddess worship lose its solemnity and be far from traditional beliefs. From a spiritual perspective, superstition damages the belief in the Mother Goddess and the gods and can also lead to the disappearance of indigenous beliefs, a manifestation of national cultural identity. In addition, some people in the society have been enslaved by superstition, which leads to the phenomenon of spiritual degradation and corruption.

The phenomenon of superstition in the Mother Goddess worship and other forms of distortion originate from the poor awareness of people towards natural phenomena, as well as social phenomena happening around. In addition, the Mother Goddess worship is also influenced by the mystical aspect of Taoism. Because the polytheistic beliefs of the Vietnamese, including the Mother Goddess worship, inherently contain many mysterious shadows, a bridge for the phenomena of magic, witchcraft, divination, spirit possession, bone possession of Taoism to penetrate. Besides, it also comes from the direct cause, that is, in the previous centuries, the majority of followers of the Mother Goddess worship were poor people who had little education and low awareness of the society and nature. In particular, they could be farmers with muddy hands and feet, working all day long with a desire to escape from hardship and poverty; they could be businesspersons who had a lot of luck in their business. However, whoever they were, they all believed in mystical phenomena, prophecies, and acts of giving fortune from the gods to achieve the purpose of their prayers. Every month, every year, they often went to the palace, the temple to offer offerings, pray in many forms. Sometimes their wishes became true, making them to have more belief in the protection of the gods. Another example is that a person in a family was sick and could not be cured although his/her relatives had taken him/her to many places of treatment. Then, they went to the Mother Goddess shrine to pray for a magical cure, and as a result, the sick person recovered, making people to believe that there had been a divine hand.

### **6. Solutions to preserve and promote good values of the Mother Goddess worship**

*First*, conduct forms of propaganda and education on the Party's policies and the State's laws on respecting freedom of belief and freedom of non-belief. Belief is an essential spiritual need of a part of the population, so it will exist with the Vietnamese people in the process of building a democratic, civilized, modern, rich and beautiful country. Freedom of belief has been determined since the early years of the nation's foundation and expressed in the 1946 Constitution. The content of freedom of belief has increasingly been recognized and expanded in the following Constitutions. Many legal documents have been issued to concretize the Constitution on beliefs and religions, such as Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW dated March 12, 2003 of the Party Central Committee; the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion of the National Assembly Standing Committee, the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion. It is necessary to have plans and measures to disseminate legal documents to the people so that they understand the Party's policies and the State's laws on belief and religion. This will help people understand and perceive the boundary between religious activities and superstitious activities. At the same time, resolutely and severely handle those who take advantage of freedom of belief and religion to disrupt political and social stability, and public order, and divide the great national unity bloc.

*Second*, gradually improve the material and spiritual life of the people. The purpose of this measure is to raise awareness of culture, science, technology for the people so that they can distinguish between the right and the wrong, the good and the bad and then voluntarily eliminate negative phenomena and promote positive elements in the Mother Goddess worship. To limit the negative aspects of Mother Goddess worship, it is necessary to gradually improve the material life of the people, especially their needs for food, clothing, housing, employment, and so on. For example, fully exploit the strengths of the Northern Delta, such as traditional craft villages, fertile land and fields, a large workforce with both experience and knowledge, so the people have the conditions to improve their culture, scientific understanding, and escape from backward customs and superstitious thoughts. It is also necessary to preserve and promote good traditional spiritual values, basing on the principle of selectively absorbing the cultural quintessence of humanity, integration without assimilation.

Restore traditional festivals to promote the positive values of Mother Goddess worship, such as human goodness, love of people for people, sincerity, altruism, and so on. When incense burners and disciples go to temples and pagodas, they are all sincere and this sincerity is the sincere heart of people paying respect to the saints and gods. Raise the cultural level and understanding of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought as well as the correct awareness of the consistent guidelines and policies of our Party and State on the freedom of belief of all people. Educate the sense of patriotism and the respect of national cultural identity for the people.

*Third*, build a healthy cultural and social environment at Mother Goddess worshiping places. This is a difficult and complicated issue, so there needs to be the close coordination between relevant sectors from the central to local levels. It is necessary to combine three factors, that is religiousness, culturalness and national character. Rituals are the first element forming festivals. Therefore, festivals will not exist for a long time if the traditional elements and the sacredness of the rituals are not guaranteed.

Foster scientific knowledge and atheism to direct religious activities towards building new people and the advanced culture imbued with national identity, contributing to the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country. Authorities at all levels need to plan, arrange, guide and manage places of Mother Goddess worship, such as temples and shrines to build a healthy cultural and social environment. In folk festivals, superstitious elements are always interwoven, so in order to have the correct perception of beliefs and distinguish them from superstitions, it is required to be vigilant and fight against the plots and tricks of "peaceful evolution" of hostile forces.

*Fourth*, strengthen training and scientific research on Mother Goddess worship. Continue to research and invest both knowledge and material into the theoretical issues of Mother Goddess worship today, then present clear and unified viewpoints on some phenomena of Mother Goddess worship. It is necessary to open more short-term classes to update information and provide knowledge about beliefs for those working in beliefs and religions. It is possible to build more centers, academies, training and research institutes on beliefs and religions as well as write reference documents on Mother Goddess worship. Beliefs and religions will exist for a long time with the nation, so it is necessary to have a plan to train and develop the staff working in the field of beliefs and religions.

## 7. Conclusion

Mother Goddess worship, an endogenous belief of the Vietnamese people, has possessed many good values and accompanied our country for thousands of years and has made certain contributions to shaping the national cultural identity, helping our people overcome many difficulties and challenges in the process of building and defending the Fatherland. However, the practice of Mother Goddess worship has also revealed many shortcomings and limitations, negatively impacting the good nature of this folk belief. This requires solutions to continue to preserve and promote the good values of Mother Goddess worship, focusing on propagating the policies and laws of the Party and State, improving the material and spiritual life of the people and creating a healthy environment at Mother Goddess worship sites in Vietnam.

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