



The Modernization of Đạo Mẫu: The Impact of Political Ideology and Commercialism On the Worship of the Mother Goddess in Vietnam

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Abstract

The worship of the Mother Goddess was an important part of the culture of the indigenous people of Vietnam. It originated with the worship of the spirits of nature and ancestors by the early inhabitants of the area, and it evolved to become a ceremonial ritual honoring the maternal spirit in its abstract form and connecting ordinary people to the spirit world. Observance of these rituals has persisted to the present day, and it is still an important part of the everyday life of the Vietnamese people. The worship of the Mother Goddess thus remains a cornerstone of the popular culture. This article focuses on how this traditional belief system transformed itself over time to survive political ideology and technological change, and remain an important part of the life of ordinary people in Vietnam.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE ĐẠO MẪU

The folk religion evolved from the worship of the spirits of nature to the worship of anthropomorphized spirits, historic heroes and heroines, and ancestors. Over time, a shamanistic dimension developed, and a spiritual medium—a *Đông*, emerged in the role of the priestess of a group. The important role played by the *Đông* was to preside over a ritual ceremony—the *lên đồng* ceremony, invoking the spirits, and putting the worshipper in touch with the spirits.

The primary belief of the *Đạo Mẫu* was that there was a real world and a world of spirits and when in need of assistance or a boon, a worshipper could ask for help from the spirits—through the performance of a *lên đồng* ritual ceremony. Thus, pleasing the spirits—ancestors, and a host of different deities, was a key element that worshippers believed in. *Đạo Mẫu* has always been a religion with no scripture, no formal organizational structure, and no hierarchy of *đông*. There were no rules for good living or ethical behavior, no explanation how life and human beings came to be, and no concerns about an afterlife. Other belief systems dealt with these matters. It was a folk religion, which was essentially focused on



the performance of certain rituals to show gratefulness, please the spirits, and insure their support. Temples are simple and functional structures, and there are no grand cathedrals or showy edifices to honor the pantheon of deities and spirits worshipped. The pantheon of deities worshipped is extensive and now numbers close to seventy identifiable deities

Despite its ordinariness, there was one aspect of worship that was spectacular and riveting for a people leading relatively drab lives. This was the *lên đồng* ceremony. The ceremony had two purposes: as a means whereby worshippers could honor the spirits by offering gifts, and being the vehicle for summoning the spirits so that the wishes of the worshipper could be made directly to them. It is the *đồng* who plays the important role of an intermediary bringing the individual worshipper and the spirits together to hear the requests of the worshiper for support and a boon. The *lên đồng* ceremony becomes the vehicle for this encounter. During the ceremony the *đồng* becomes a shaman—a person possessed by the spirits that are being summoned, wildly dancing and singing as each of the spirits enters her. Her persona changes, her speech changes, and she changes her appearance as she is possessed by different spirits.

The performance of the *đồng* as shaman is described as orgiastic and hypnotic and mesmerizing by worshippers and on lookers—performance art that transforms the *đồng* into different personalities and transfixes worshippers in an emotionally charged and cathartic session. Ngô Đức Thịnh (1994) and Đặng Văn Lung (1991) were among the first scholars to use the name *Đạo Mẫu* or the Mother Goddess religion. They held that this religion stems from the indigenous belief of worshipping spirits and female deities as creative and protective resources for people living in an agricultural society.

Worshippers believe that the Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* or the Mother Goddess of Heaven is the Supreme Deity of *Đạo Mẫu* and the *lên đồng* ritual or spirit possession is the main practice of *Đạo Mẫu*. It is through this ritual ceremony that worshipper and the spirits come together to communicate. According to Ngô Đức Thịnh (1994, 2006, 2008) *Đạo Mẫu* evolved from a cult worshipping female deities (*Tục thờ Nữ thần*), to one worshipping the Mother Goddess (*Tục thờ Mẫu*), to the Mother Goddess Religion of the Three/Four Palaces (*Đạo thờ Mẫu Tam phủ/Tứ phủ* or *Đạo Mẫu*). The name: “Religion of the Four Palaces” reflects the cosmology of the Vietnamese—a belief in Four Palaces *in the Universe*: a Palace of Heaven (*thiên phủ*), a Palace of Earth (*địa phủ*), a Palace of Upland Forests (*nhạc phủ*) and a Palace of Water (*thủy (thoải) phủ*).

FIGURE 1. THE HÀNG TRỐNG FOLK PAINTINGS



- 1: The Religion of the Four Palaces (Đạo Tứ Phủ) Governed by Four Mother Goddesses
- 2: The Religion of the Three Palaces (Đạo Tam Phủ) Governed by Three Mother Goddesses
- 3: The Cult of General Trần Hưng Đạo (Đạo Thánh Trần)

Đạo Mẫu has also been called the “Three Palaces religion” (*Đạo Tam phủ*) based on belief in a cosmos with three palaces or earthly domains, each governed by a different spiritual manifestation of the Mother Goddess: The Mother Goddess of the Nine Heavens (*Thánh Mẫu Cửu Thiên*) governs the Palace of Heaven, the Mother Goddess of Earth (*Mẫu Địa*) governs the Palace of Earth (the physical ground), the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests (*Thánh Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*) governs the Palace of Upland Forests, and the Mother Goddess of Water (*Mẫu Thoải*) governs the Palace of Water (see Figure 1).



Worshipping at Different Temples

The worship of the Mother Goddess has persisted in Vietnam and it has become a cornerstone of the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people. Over time, many of the manifestations of the Goddess and the practices of the religion, the spiritual incarnations and forms of worship and the role of worshippers, and religious masters have changed. These changes reflect adaptation to changing political and social needs. Despite these changes, the core belief has remained constant—that there is a spiritual world beyond life governed by a Mother Goddess, and there is need to perform the ritual ceremonies to show respect for the spirits, and to honor them to gain merit and receive benefits.

THE IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY ON ĐẠO MẪU

Over its long history, the *Đạo Mẫu* has had a changing relationship with the rulers and governments. In some periods, *Đạo Mẫu* rose in popularity as state rulers used the religion to justify their suppression or conquest of the people. Some of these rulers deified their own ancestors, making them part of the body of spirits worshipped as manifestations of the Mother Goddess. During the premodern period, a time marked by a centralized Confucian patriarchy, the beliefs and rituals of the religion were suppressed by the rulers of the country. This was documented in legal codes in the sixteenth and nineteenth century in Vietnam (the Le Code and Gia Long Code, respectively, see Norton, 2009, pp. 21-23; Taylor, 2004, p. 9).

In the colonial period, scholars and civil authorities saw aspects of local religious practices like shamanism and “female possession” as a potential threat to the ruling authority of the colonial government (Hailly 1866, Richard 1928 (1868), and Diguët 1906). During this period some scholars criticized the beliefs of the *Đạo Mẫu* as being superstitious. They argued that these beliefs denigrated national values and development (Long Chương, 1942; Nhất Lang, 1952; Phan Kế Bính, 1913).

Other scholars such as Cadiere (1992 [1955]) and Giran (1912) valued this religion as “an original production of the religious thought of the Vietnamese” and a “true religion of the Vietnamese.” In the early Socialist period many of the rites and ceremonies of the *Đạo Mẫu* were viewed as superstitious practices. Since *Đổi Mới*, however, the government has taken a more conciliatory view to this folk religion. Instead of banning the practices of the *Đạo Mẫu*, authorities chose to justify the continuance of the religion and elevate its status on the grounds that the *Đạo Mẫu* was a cultural tradition, not a religion per se. The motivation for this action seems to have been a desire to promote nationalism across the country, using this religion to unify the country and help give it a national identity.

Thus, since the 1980s the practice of the rituals and ceremonies of *Đạo Mẫu* have flourished as scholars have legitimized this folk religion in nationalist and cultural terms (Norton, 2009, p. 51) and as being an important part of the

traditional cultural fabric of the Vietnamese. During this period the government demonstrated its support of the *Đạo Mẫu* as a “cultural treasure” by staging regional and national competitions of the music and dance performances associated with the *lên đồng* ceremony.

Amusingly, a differentiation was made between “superstitious *lên đồng*” and a “non-superstitious/rational *lên đồng*” to allow this essential aspect of *Đạo Mẫu* to gain recognition by the government as part of the cultural heritage of Vietnamese people as a “non-superstitious/rational cultural activity.” As recently as September 2010, the Vietnamese government clarified the issue of recognition by promulgating a regulation, *Decree 75/2010/NĐ-CP*, to prohibit all superstitious forms of *lên đồng*. Anyone caught performing superstitious *lên đồng* practices would be required to pay a fine of 1.000.000 to 3.000.000 VND. The debate on what is superstitious *lên đồng* and what is non-superstitious *lên đồng* is ongoing although the Decree has been in effect for over five years.

Some scholars viewed this action by the national government supporting the worship of the Mother Goddess to be an astute official response. Even while religion in general was banned, this interpretation allowed the socialist government to support this folk religion by viewing its ceremonies and rituals as being part of traditional culture of the country. It also legitimized the music and dance performances of the *lên đồng* ceremony as traditional music and a variance of dramatic folk opera. By this action, the government thus secularized the religion and used it to promote a national identity while giving it a new life as a source of popular entertainment.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION ON ĐẠO MẪU

The most significant “threat” faced by *Đạo Mẫu* in the present day is the onset of commercialization, partly resulting from official government support of the *lên đồng* ceremony as an entertainment venue. The rapid adoption of media technology has accelerated this development. This article focuses on the changes brought about in three areas: the impact of media on the *Đạo Mẫu*; changes to the *lên đồng* ceremonies and the ritual offering of gifts; and the impact of modernization on the *đồng*.

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA TECHNOLOGY ON ĐẠO MẪU

Media technology has had a revolutionary impact on *Đạo Mẫu*. It has led to commercialization and popularization of *Đạo Mẫu* on an unprecedented scale and has been a boon to the *Đạo Mẫu*. It has given rise to a new industry—the production of video and audio tapes of *lên đồng* ritual performances and *Chầu văn* ritual music.

These tapes are sold for both ritual and entertainment purposes. Purchasers are both worshippers of *Đạo Mẫu* as well as professional actors and singers using these materials as teaching aids or for their value as personal entertainment.



Spirit Incarnations in a Video Tape of a *Lên Đồng* Ritual

A *Đồng* living in Canada who was interviewed for this article told of how valuable the audio tapes of ceremonial music was to her. She said it enabled her to conduct a *lên đồng* ceremony authentically in a country where there were no traditional musicians. She also told of how she used the video tapes as a teaching guide for herself to insure a traditional performance. While the use of these materials made her incarnations staged as she simply went through the motions of being possessed by the spirits, rather than being an authentic manifestation of spirit possession, she said that neither the followers nor the spirits seemed to mind this modern touch. Her observation was that worshippers came to see and participate in a performance and that is what she provided. Whether she was spirit possessed, or simply a good stage performer did not matter. In her mind the *lên đồng* ceremony was simply good theater, and the media materials helped her put on a good performance. The efficacy of the performance in having a worshipper have a request for help answered by the spirits was no longer consequential as in the past.

Thanks to the advent of videos, the *lên đồng* ritual performances are also seen as pure entertainment—in the movies and TV dramas or Vietnamese “soaps” and in staged theatrical performances. In one popular show on Vietnamese television, *Chạy án (Twisting Justice)*, the main character calls on the spiritual force of the Mother Goddess to help her son to avoid legal punishment. Huong Dung, the actress playing this character was asked whether she was herself a Dong or had acquired the powers of a Dong as her performance was rated highly. She described how she was able to perform the *lên đồng* ritual in the movie:

To prepare for this scene, I bought a video tape of 36 spirit incarnations of Đạo Mẫu to learn. I had never practiced or watched a *hầu đồng* before so I asked an experienced Dong to teach me how to dance and sing and perform hand movements or the proper way of holding fire candles. I realized that the *hầu đồng* performer when incarnating the spirit is “shocked” for a moment with a feeling like holding the entire self-energy for the burying spirit incarnation and collapsed after finishing the performance. My Dong teacher and I both are so surprised about my performance. The group of actors and actresses in this movie were also surprised about my *hầu đồng* performance. (Thanh Huyen, 2008)

What is significant about her response is the acknowledgement that acting practice may be as effective as spiritual inspiration in creating the appearance of a shamanistic trance.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE RITUALS AND CEREMONIES OF ĐẠO MẪU

Besides its impact on the *lên đồng* ritual, secularization and modernization has also made an impact on another aspect of the *Đạo Mẫu ceremony*—the ritual burning of the offering of paper money. This ritual was the means by which offerings are made to the spirits to show respect and keep them happy and ever willing to provide their support to worshippers. The underlying belief of the worshippers was that the spirit world was much like the real world and spirits needed money and appreciated delicacies and the good things of life. Ritual burning of representations was simply the means of transporting these items symbolically, as was the offering of fruits and flowers at the temples.

In the past, the preferred offering was the burning of paper money denominated in the local currency, with modernization the variety of its paper offerings was expanded and new “gift items” offered during the *lên đồng* ceremony. In his study of the custom of burning paper money as an offeratory custom in China, Blake (2011) shows that the paper offerings in Vietnam also faced rapid change because of “the invasion of exotic objects” and the “shift in the mode of production (of the

paper money) from hand to machine.” Blake observes: “Global-based consumer economics is penetrating the paper money custom via the new exotic offerings based on the possibility of unlimited desires.” In the past the ritual practice of burning paper money was practiced with constraint, although always with a sense of largesse, now the custom includes the burning of traditional replicas of treasured items such as cars, TV sets, refrigerators, as well as money in different national currencies, even sex toys and weapons. Blake goes on to say:

This seems more in the spirit of frivolity and self-indulgence rather than in the serious hope of sending these items to loved ones in the afterworld—the idea being that as humans covet cars and television sets and washing machines, so the spirits must also find these items of value.

Thus, printed pictures of these objects—ranging from Mercedes Benz and BMW autos (the preferred brands), name brand hand bags (Coach and Gucci), and large screen TVs came to be available for ritual burning as an offering to family spirits and deities with power—to be sent by “Spirit Express” to the other world. Another industry is thus created—the mass production of representations of things to be used in the ritual burning of offerings. In some instances temples have become stores where any number of representations is available for purchase by the worshipper, some even produced at the temple site, others imported from commercial print shops. In this way the temple has become a place of commerce, as well as a place for worship.

Still another modern development is the emphasis on lavishness and excess. Where the *lên đồng* ritual was originally simply a means to exchange a simple message between worshippers and the Mother Goddess or other spirits to gain spiritual assistance. In time, the notion arose that the degree of spiritual support gained is a function of the offerings made and the *lên đồng* rituals have evolved to become like a business arrangement that a *Đồng* negotiates with *Đạo Mẫu* spirits. Again, using real life experiences as a standard, followers and some *Đồng* have come to believe that the more costly and showy the ritual ceremony or offering the better the response from the spirits. Many *lên đồng* ceremonies thus became extravagant stage productions and the offerings presented have become excessive and ostentatious.

An example of this development was reported in the VietNamNet News (Thu Ly, 2010) and tells how *Đạo Mẫu* mediums in Hanoi spent hundreds of millions of VND to organize their *lên đồng* ritual. Their guiding principle was: “The more money you spend for your *lên đồng* ritual, the better your business is as well as the better you can keep peace in your heart and mind.”

A newspaper account showed how quickly the cost of conducting the ceremony could rise. During a *lên đồng* ceremony, the officiating *đồng* usually distributes money as gifts from the spirits which possess her as she enters into various incarnations. Normally, 5,000 VND bills or 10,000 VND bills would be given to the participants. In this extravaganza ceremony 50,000, 100,000 and 500,000 VND bills were given. Close supporters of the medium got at least 10,000,000 VND (\$500 USD) per person as “spirit money,” other participants got spirit-favors amounting to 3,000,000 VND (\$150 USD). This showed how the production of a *lên đồng* ceremony could easily cost hundreds of thousands in USD. Of course, these gifts were for “show only,” as participants and worshippers were expected to contribute an even greater amount to the officiating *đồng* for her role in conducting the ceremony and for the expenses incurred. The publicity gained by the event insured an even longer list of participants for the next scheduled performance. And, the *đồng* could look forward to earning more money during the next “blockbuster” performance.

Another new development having its impact on *Đạo Mẫu* is globalization. How this factor had an impact is amusing. One of the *đồng* interviewed, Medium Minh, explained that as globalization has an impact on Vietnam, it also has an impact on the spirit world:

Spirits nowadays travel to America, Australia or France where there are many *Đạo Mẫu* mediums, they know these products and they also like these products too. Unless you cannot find them, you should prepare the best you can to offer to the spirit. I always provide the best brand-name products. For example, I only choose Godiva chocolate or La Maison du Chocolat. For cigarettes I choose Three Three Three “333 cigarettes” made in London which you can only buy in an overseas duty free shop and brought to Vietnam as a “hand-carry” by travelers. If you are not experienced, people would sell you the 333 cigarettes were made in Singapore which is much cheaper.

Đồng Minh continued telling me about her preparation for *lên đồng* rituals:

My boyfriend’s mediumship root is to serve the Seventh Prince spirit. You know how this spirit can play and enjoy a “pleasure” life. So, we not only prepare big boat, strong horses but also the Mercedes car, even Boeing plane for him to travel faster and more comfortably. We bought Coach Watch and a Bulgari suit for him because he is a connoisseur of fashion and style. These “brand-name” paper offerings (*hàng mã cao cấp*) are often more expensive than “ordinary” paper offerings (*hàng mã thông thường*). However, spirits with good taste would accept and approve your sincere-heart (*thành tâm*) with more enthusiasm and give you your wishes a higher priority.



Thanking the Spirits at the End of Each Year at *Đạo Mẫu* Temples

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE *ĐỒNG*

The Seventh Prince Spirit (*Ông Hoàng Bảy*) is well-known for his casual and debauched life. He often wandered around the nation, made friends, wrote poems but also smoked opium and had a lot of mistresses. *Đạo Mẫu* worshippers often consult with him on commercial issues and getting secret numbers for gambling.

This commercialization of the *Đạo Mẫu* has created a new career path for many Vietnamese women. For many people becoming a *Đồng* is not a religious or spiritual calling, but simply a career choice—an opportunity to make money with no need for much specialized education and training other than being able to perform the *lên đồng* ritual. This is a very significant impact, as it cuts away at the spirituality which underlies the traditional practice of the *Đạo Mẫu* religion.

One of the persons interviewed, a *đông*, Chi and her three daughters are good examples of the modern *Đạo Mẫu đông*. They became *đông* because they could get “big prosperous spirit-favors” (*lộc lớn*). Two younger daughters have shops at the open market where they sell paraphernalia and the goods used in the ritual practices. The mother and the oldest daughter have expanded their “business” to include selling lucky numbers [*Chơi số đề*] for the national lottery. These “modern” *đông* say their success depends on luck. So, they need a lot of spiritual support.

One of the other effects of modernization has been the creation of a new class of *đông*—the show-off medium (*Đông đua*). The traditional worshippers *Đạo Mẫu* often ridicule the *Đông đua*. This is because the *Đông đua* has no deep roots in the spiritual world and has no spiritual calling. For these modern day *đông* the choice is essentially a career choice—a job, albeit a lucrative and glamorous job. They see that a *đông* in the modern world enjoys a fashionable and stylish lifestyle. And, becoming a *đông* has simply become a lucrative job for many of these *Đông đua*.

One of the people interviewed for this article, *đông* Ha’s friend, Minh owns a private medical center in Hanoi. She made a lot of money but was bored by her life—her children went abroad to study; her husband spends little time with her because he is busy with his company. She turns to *Đạo Mẫu*, attracted by the beautiful costumes worn by *đông* Ha and her entourage. She decided to become a *đông* because she wanted to dress in the stylish manner of other *đông* and temple performers. In time, Minh meets and takes a lover—a stylist and makeup artist working for another *đông*, and this further cements her connection to *Đạo Mẫu*. Both are attracted by the lifestyle of the *đông*, and ask a *đông thầy* to help them become *đông*. When they became duly anointed they put on their *lên đông* ritual ceremonies with exuberance and frequency.

The *Đông đua* become caricatures of the traditional medium, and the ritual performances become devoid of any spiritual meaning or significance. The Temple becomes only a stage for a performance to show off the wealth they have and hope to get. For Minh, although *lên đông* rituals are costly, they bring her a lot of happiness. She explained that she wants her ritual performances to be upscale and lavish so she can attract many worshippers. Where the gifts or spirit favors given by the *đông* to worshippers at a *lên đông* ritual are usually something small, Minh’s gifts are extravagant and expensive. And, she expects the Temple offerings of her ritual participants to be lavish and expensive. What she expects back from her worshipper/clients is nothing less than overseas products (*hàng ngoại*) or imported items (*hàng ngoại nhập*) which are as lavish and expensive as her offerings. These imported candies, cookies, cigarettes, beers, etc., often cost more than double the cost of domestic products. However, she says that “overseas things are always better than domestic things” (*Đồ ngoại bao giờ chẳng tốt hơn đồ nội*).

Many of the “new age” *đông* do not focus on a spiritual connection and divine guidance as traditional *đông* did. Many seem to operate in the manner of charlatans and fortune tellers, getting rich off the gifts given by the worshippers and those people wishing to give offerings to get a big boon. Interestingly, everyone has their own way of defining the “respectful and elegant” *đông* and the “unconscious and dullish” *đông*. Some refer to the former as the “old-fashioned” *đông* (*đông cổ*) and the latter as the “new fashion” *đông* (*đông tân*). Others refer to the former as being the “knowledgeable” *đông* (*đông mê tín*).

Many informants think that the argument about who is a real *đông* (*đông thật*) and who is a show-off *đông* (*đông đua*) refers to a competition to be number one in terms of popularity and not necessarily by efficacy in the granting of the wishes of the worshippers. The purity of the Temples of the past, as being places where an individual can commune with the spirit of the Mother Goddess and the spirits of past ancestors, seems to be an aspect which is diminishing in the urban centers. Nowadays, when *đông* cannot afford to host costly rituals, they are not praised for their humility, but pitied for their lack of support and their modest ceremony (*túi đông, túi bóng*). There is no admiration of modesty or poverty, only admiration of financial success.

SUMMARY

The practice of the *Đạo Mẫu* religion continues in the present day. The rituals and ceremonies remain, now sanctioned by the political authorities as a traditional folkloric religious practice, and part of Vietnam’s cultural heritage. Modernization, more specifically secularization and commercialization brought on by the application of the new media technologies, has had a significant impact on the *Đạo Mẫu*. The outward forms of the religion continue though the forms have changed, but the spiritual content appears to be diminished.

Where the *lên đông* ceremony of the past reflected the dramatic behavior of a *Đông*, transformed into a shaman possessed by the spirits, the *lên đông* ceremony of the present day is more a lavishly produced and entertaining cultural performance put on by a gifted actress and talented musicians. Where the *Đông* of the past was viewed as being a person with a special spiritual calling and with the powers of a shaman, the *Đông* of today is more likely a career woman or stage performer in a lucrative occupation of making people happy. Where the ritual offering to the spirits by the worshipper in the past may have been a bit of rice, or a flower or a piece of fruit offered at an altar in a humble and respectful manner; the ritual offering of today has become ostentatious and an almost grotesque show-off offerings made for public consumption.

These changes seem to signify a decline in the spiritual purity one expects or seeks in a religion. However, in studying cultural developments such as folk religion, academics sometimes tend to attribute more meaning and significance than what is intended or perceived by the worshipper. Some impose a higher spiritual meaning to ritual practices and ceremonies and the act of worship. Some impose this meaning on our assessment of the religion. In the eyes of the worshipper, these changes may be more compatible with life as it is actually experienced. What is clear in assessing *Đạo Mẫu* in the present day is that even religion is subject to commercialization and that changes to outward manifestations of ritual and ceremony are inevitable. Some of the changes that the worship of the Mother Goddess has embraced have become quite bizarre and a parody of the spirit of the traditional *lên đồng* ceremony and the behavior of the *Đông* in the more traditional setting and in past times. As a result of the changes, the religious experience of the worshipper of *Đạo Mẫu* may appear to be less authentic. However, is this the reality? Does the worship of the Mother Goddess no longer meet the needs of the worshipper? This study has shown that, there is no loss of spirituality as a result of modern influences as there was no spirituality in the traditional observance of the ritual ceremony in the first place. The only spiritual connection exhibited was in the spirit trance of the *đông* who became a shaman; worshippers were only observers for the main part even as some worshipers may have been swept in by the fervor exhibited by the *đông* in her shamanistic trance.

My observation is that the folk religion emerged as people sought happiness primarily—first through protection from the forces of nature, then by the favorable action of the spirits that were thought to inhabit the transcendent world. The *lên đồng* ritual developed as a means of establishing contact with the spirit world; the offering of gifts to the spirits was a reflection of the hope that a happy spirit god would then bestow a gift of a boon or good health or good fortune on the worshiper in return. A simple quid pro quo relationship and always a business type of relationship—no deep spiritual connection, no bestowal of grace because of the love of a God. The *Đạo Mẫu* has survived modernization in the form of political influence and commercialism very nicely, though the forms of the religion have been changed substantially. How the *Đạo Mẫu* has maintained its seeming relevance is provided by an earlier cited assessment by Norton:

Mediumship (*Đạo Mẫu*) has maintained its popular appeal and social relevance in late socialist Vietnam because it is a flexible religious system that enables contemporary concerns, anxieties, and aspirations to be expressed and mediated, while at the same time maintaining a sense of connection and continuity with the past. (2009, p. 20)

Whether worshippers accept or appreciate the effects of the changes that have come about and whether the folk religion has lost its meaningfulness and impact on the lives of ordinary people is not so clearly manifest and I can make no judgments. This will have to be the subject of a future study.

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