

# THE ROLE OF MOTHER GODDESS WORSHIP IN THE SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF PEOPLE IN LAM DONG PROVINCE, VIETNAM

## Abstract

The beliefs in Vietnamese Mother Goddesses Worship, commonly called Mother Goddesses, worship Mother Goddesses herself, Mother Goddess of Three Palaces and Four Palaces appear to be quite popular and have deep historical and social origins among the people of Lam Dong province, Vietnam.. Although they are all worship of feminine gods, the worship of goddesses, “Thanh Mau”, “Thanh Co”, Mother of the Three Palaces, and the Four Palaces are not completely identical. This article explores the process of formation, development and typical features of Mother Goddess worship in the cultural life of people in Lam Dong province, Vietnam. Based on the analysis of the actual situation of worshipping Mother Goddesses of the people of Lam Dong, the authors propose a number of policy implications that contribute to preserving the beauty of Mother Goddess worship and promoting the Vietnamese culture of progressive, imbued with beautiful national identity.

**Keywords:** spiritual values, Mother Goddess worshipping beliefs, cultural life, primitive religion

## Introduction

### 1. Introduction

The belief in Mother Goddesses is an indigenous folk belief, which is unique in Vietnam, formed from the dawn of the nation, and has a transformation process corresponding to each development period of social life. According to author Vu Hong Van (2020), “Mẫu” is a Sino-Vietnamese word, while pure Vietnamese is “Mẹ” and “Mụ” which all means mother; the original meaning of “Mẫu” (mother) refers to a woman who gives birth to a child. “Mẫu” (mother) also has the meaning of honouring, and features such as Mother Au Co, Mother Lieu Hanh, and Mother Thuong Ngan... In the past, Vietnamese people lived by farming, the ancient Vietnamese people were aware of the similarities between land, water, trees and mother, hence the way to call it “Mother Tree”, “Mother Earth”, “Mother Water” is formed. Mother is the symbol, the source of birth and growth. Mother Goddess worship is the belief, honor and worship of goddesses associated with natural phenomena, the universe is believed by people to have the power to create and protect the life of people (Ngo Bach, 2010). From that awareness, in their mind, the ancient Vietnamese deified their mother, treating her as a god. Mother Goddess worship is the result of Vietnamese creativity expressing the aspiration for the protection, enveloping and boundless love of motherly love; it has become a source of underground water crept in the roots of Vietnamese culture. Monitoring the process of formation and development, across regions; the unique

acculturation and integration of Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship has created a multi-layered, multi-coloured appearance.

As a key province in the Central Highlands region, Lam Dong is a “brilliant land” with many colors of cultural interference and interweaving formed during the long-standing settlement process. There are 47 ethnic groups living in the whole province, with 25.72% ethnic minorities (Lam Dong Provincial People's Committee, 2020). This place leaves many poetic imprints by the typical cultural features from many rural areas and ethnic groups. The community here lives mainly by farming, shifting cultivation, animal husbandry, etc. They are basically still an agricultural society, so they have a very high community character. In the research article *Understanding Vietnamese Cultural Identity*, Professor Tran Ngoc Them (2006) wrote: “In principle of community organization, agricultural people prefer to organize according to the principle of respect. An emotional lifestyle inevitably leads to an attitude of respect for virtue, respect for literature, and respect for women.” For that reason, the people of Lam Dong province always uphold the position and role of women and mothers in life.

In the current context, the phenomenon of moral degradation is taking place more and more strongly. Specific manifestations are pragmatic lifestyle, cult of money, selfish individuals, corruption, social evils increasing day by day; unemployment, ecological pollution, fatal diseases, rampant social evils... Many people despise morality and spiritual and human values, and promote material interests. It can be said that it is the market economy that has created the cult of money and turned it into a dominant factor in many relationships. Because of that, people often fall into insecurity and anxiety. Mother Goddess worship acts as a great spiritual fulcrum, a place for people to seek comfort, hope and relieve troubles in life. This belief also has the function of moral education, orienting people to a noble living personality.

The belief in Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong area contains many distinct features in the overall cultural picture in general, which is reflected in the process of residence, living and working. However, Mother Goddess Worship is undergoing many changes, especially in the context of modernized society and cultural diversification. Therefore, it is necessary to have a deeper study, analysis and assessment of the actual situation and point out the factors affecting this belief.

## **2. Origin and formation process of Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong**

The land of Lam Dong today has long been inhabited by humans, whose descendants until then were the communities of Ma, Co Ho, MNong, Chu Ru, Rac Lay,... In the 19th century, the indigenous people’s main production methods were swidden cultivation, burning forests for farming, and their economy was self-sufficient (Lam Dong Provincial People's Committee, 2001). Cultivation is the main production industry, in addition to hunting and gathering, raising livestock and poultry, handicraft industries such as weaving, forging, and knitting have just begun to develop, economic exchanges are still very limited. With that feature, the people here consider the hills and dense forests to be sacred and worshiped, many people in Lam Dong still believe

that the worship of gods, spirits, fairies women... is to protect the family and community from calamities, diseases and bring many good things; This can be considered as the basis for the conception of Mother Goddess worship in this area.

The Vietnamese community in Lam Dong is a contributor, immigrated from many different regions of the country. Their appearance has brought along many traditional cultural elements from their homeland, including the belief in Mother Goddesses worship. According to some historical records: the belief in Mother Goddess worship appeared on the Lang Biang plateau in the mid-20s of the twentieth century along with the migration, settlement and formation of Vietnamese communities from many different regions of the country (Bui Thi Thoa, 2019).

Right after the Buddhist revival movement in the early twentieth century, this religion was present in Lam Dong. In 1921, Buddhist Monk Thich Nhon Thu (Tran Xin) followed the emigrants from Khanh Hoa and arrived in Da Lat. After finding a remote and unexplored hill (now in Da Thuan hamlet, ward 6, Da Lat), he stopped and built a small altar. In 1923, that wooden altar was restored and upgraded to become the first pagoda in Da Lat in particular and Lam Dong in general, with the name Linh Quang Pagoda (Linh Quang Tu) (Buddhist Association of Lam Dong Province, 2008). Traditionally, Buddhist temples in Vietnam often have a worship arrangement in the form of “in the front of altar worship Buddhist and in the back worship Mother Goddess”, so after Linh Quang temple was built, a shrine to worship Mother Goddess of Three Palaces/ Four palaces was also built. Therefore, the milestone marking the appearance of the belief of Mother Goddesses of Three Palaces and Four Palaces on the Lam Dong plateau is 1923 along with the appearance of the Mother worshiping palace in Linh Quang Tu. After nearly a century, in addition to preserving the cultural and religious values of the original homeland, the Mother Goddess worship of the North and the mother worship of the Central Highlands people have merged to create diversity in the form of worship and religious activities.

Information from relevant sources indicates that Thien Ya Na Temple - the first temple to worship Mother Goddess of Three Palaces, the first Four Palaces in Da Lat was built in the mid-20s (circa 1923-1927) of the twentieth century (Bui Thi Thoa, 2019). Mother Goddess worship activities gradually gained attention in the community activities of the people, which was the cause leading to the appearance of Thien Ya Na Temple at this time. Thien Ya Na Mother Temple is the first Mother temple built and worshiped separately in Da Lat in particular and Lam Dong in general. This temple is arranged to worship in the form of worshipping the Central Mother, in which the Mother Goddess Thien Ya Na is worshiped as the main god and is worshiped in the main palace. The left altar worships Mother Thuong Ngan, the right side worships Mother Thoai. In addition to the inner palace, there are also a number of shrines to worship the outside, such as the Ngu Vi Thanh Ba Altar Ngu Vi Thanh Cau Altar, Ngu Ho Altar, Soul Altar (Bui Thi Thoa, 2019). The temple was established as a spiritual place for a part of Vietnamese people originating from the central provinces, mainly Hue people. When coming to settle in a new land, a part of Hue people brought with

them a type of belief that is quite common in Hue - that is, the belief of Mother Goddess. Until now, Thien Ya Na Temple is still a community temple - a place of religious activities of many copper bars in Lam Dong province and tourists from all over the world.

In addition to Thien Ya Na Mother Goddess Temple, a number of other Mother Goddess Temples also gradually appeared in Da Lat along with the process of building villages and hamlets of the Vietnamese. Among them, there are some worship facilities such as Linh Buu Temple (1932), Vien Son Dien (1935), Vietnam Thanh Mau Temple (1947), Bao Huong Linh Tu (1962), Cat Linh Tu Stream (1965), Van Huong Linh Tu (1965)... Most of these places of worship are located in the early settlement areas of Vietnamese people originating from the Northern and Central provinces who migrated in different historical times. For example, Cat Linh Tu Stream, Bao Huong Linh Tu (in the area of Xuan An Hamlet), Van Huong Linh Tu (in the Nghe Tinh hamlet area) or Linh Buu Temple (in the Ha Dong hamlet area) (Bui Thi Thoa, 2018). Among these temples, the worship also has different nuances: Van Huong Huong Phu, Cat Linh Tu Stream, Bao Huong Linh Tu ... are worshiped in the form of worshipping the northern region Mother (made by Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh as the god); while Linh Buu Temple, Thien Ya Na Temple... worship Mother in the central region form (by Mother Thien Ya Na as the goddess).

Every year until the 3rd day of the third lunar month - Mother Van Huong/Mau Lieu Hanh, all the religious officials of the city and the province gather on the Vietnamese Temple of the Mother Goddess of Da Lat - The main temple of the Mother Goddess of Lam Dong province - to carry out the procession of Mother Goddess Van Huong and pray for a year of favorable rain and wind, national peace, health, fortune... The emergence of Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong has made the picture of religious activities and beliefs of Vietnamese residents here more diverse and rich. In addition to the custom of worshipping family gods such as God of Wealth, God of the Soil, Kitchen God, etc., the emergence of the worship of Mother Goddesses worshiped on a community scale (both within the private sphere) has contributed to increasing the community's sympathy in the spiritual cultural life here. Not only stopping at praying for their families to be healthy and prosperous (through the gods), the Mother Goddess as saints who govern the heavens, forests, rivers, streams... will meet the community's expectations for national peace, good weather and good crops.

### **3. Characteristics of the practice of Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong province**

According to data from the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism (VH-TT-DL), Lam Dong has carried out an inventory and review as of 2019 in the province, and there are currently 144 Mother Goddess worshipping establishments distributed in localities. Most of the temples and shrines here are quite small in scale, the vast majority of religious establishments are temples and shrines at home. Public temples worshiped at the village scale account for a small number: in Da Lat (2 establishments), Bao Loc (2 establishments), Duc Trong (3 establishments), Don Duong (2

establishments); the remaining 8 districts in the province do not have communal temples at all. Worshipping activities, organizing festivals and religious activities are all carried out in a civilized way of life at the establishments. Regarding the scale of worship, most of the temples and shrines of Mother Goddesses in Lam Dong are quite small in size, lacking traditional architectural worship works (Bui Thi Thoa, 2021). However, a number of Mother Goddess worshipping establishments here have been created, and there more charming landscapes with rockeries and typical decorations of the Northern Mother Goddess temple, such as the royal couplets painted with gold paint, canopy, parasol, community hat, Lord/Adoration hat, etc.

### *On the form of worship*

The belief in Mother Goddess worship in the Central Highlands in general and Lam Dong province in particular is mixed and combined from different types of beliefs. The Vietnamese community in Lam Dong province is mainly comprised of nomads from many different regions of the country, most of which is the North (Vu Thuy Hang & Doan Thi Hong Nhung, 2018). Their appearance has brought along many traditional cultural elements from their homeland, including the belief in Mother Goddesses. In terms of methods of worship, the custom of Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong has certain characteristics, which is the parallel existence of two forms of worship (Bui Thi Thoa, 2021).

- The form of Mother Goddess worship in the North: In Lam Dong, the mother worshipping establishments of this group account for an outstanding number with 125 establishments. Basically, this line of worship is a relatively intact copy of the form of Mother Goddess worship in the Northern Delta. According to statistics, these establishments are distributed in almost all districts and cities in the province. Among them, there are some main temples such as Cat Linh Tu Stream, Chua Thuong Ngan Temple (Da Lat), Thanh Mau Temple, Uncle Doi Lam Son Temple, Mau Song Son Temple, Cau Be Doi Ngang Temple, etc.

- The central form of mother worship: If the Northern form of Mother Goddess worship worships Mother Lieu Hanh as the main deity, the followers of this worship line worship Mother Goddess Thien Ya Na as the head of the temple (Nguyen Huu Thong, 2001). However, compared to the Northern form of the Mother Goddess, “Thánh Trần” rarely appears in the Mother shrines of this form in Lam Dong. However, it is still possible to see the existence of many other saints such as the Five Saints of Thuong Thien (Mrs. First to Mrs. Fifth), the Five Saints of Trung Thien (including Mrs. Metal, Mrs. Wood, Ms. Water, Ms. Fire and Ms. Earth), “Quan Thánh Đế Quân”... through some main temples in Hue. In Lam Dong, there are 14 establishments for worshipping the Mother Goddess of this group, the main religious activities of these establishments are “hầu hội” or “hầu huế” sessions distributed mainly in: Da Lat, Bao Loc, Lam Ha, Duc Trong, Lac Duong. Among them can be mentioned are Thien Ya Na Mother Goddess Temple, Vietnam Mother Goddess Temple, Linh Buu Temple (Da Lat), Thap Nhi Tien Co (Bao Loc), Long Tinh Dien (Lam Ha), Linh Tam Phuoc Dien (Lac Duong) ... The owners of these establishments

are Vietnamese from Thua Thien - Hue or the central provinces who migrated in different periods of time.

In addition to the above two basic forms, Lam Dong also exists a few Mother Goddess worshipping establishments with a very diverse worshipping method such as: Mixing worship between the North and Central forms of Mother Goddess worship (Bui Thi Thoa, 2019); the combination of “half shrine, half temple”, the owners of these establishments are usually shamans, there are many Buddhas worshiped in the temple and these establishments often do not follow the astral holidays of the Mother Goddess religion, especially without the medium; establishments that are shrines to spirits who died young, do not have the activities of the medium.

Over the course of development, up to now, Mother Goddess worship has formed three forms of worship representing the three regions of North - Central - South. In the form of worshipping Mother Goddesses in the North, it is easy to see the appearance of the main god – Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh - and a system of nearly 60 different gods. In addition to the Triplet Mother Goddess Temple of three regions in Viet Nam, there are also the “Quan Lón” (5 people), Chau Ba, Ong Hoang, Aunts, (check about 5 people please; it seems you listed 6 people)Uncles, Tiger, Snake. In the form of worshipping Mother Goddess in Central region, in addition to the main deity, Thien Ya Na, there are also the Five Saints (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth), Ton Ong, Chau Ba, Ong Hoang, the Aunts, and the Uncles. ... (Dang Van Lung, 2004). Meanwhile, the gods in Southern Mother Goddess worship are the result of the cultural fusion of many ethnic groups such as Vietnamese, Champa, Khmer and Hoa” (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010). When coming to Lam Dong, the arrangement of worship in the Mother Goddess shrine was different: in addition to Triplet Mother Goddess Temple of three regions in Viet Nam, Lord Son Trang, the Four Palaces Council (with Quan Lon, Mr. Hoang...) There is also the worship of “Bà Chúa Xứ, Bác Hồ”, God of Fortune, God of the Soil, and even the altar of ancestors is arranged in the inner palace; In addition to the Gods of the Three Palaces, the Four Palaces also have the worship of “Bà Chúa Kho”, Uncle Ho,... Thus, in addition to the gods who belong to the Four Palaces, such as the Jade Emperor God, the Mother Goddess, “Quan Lón, Châu”, Ms, Uncle,... Mother Goddess shrine in Lam Dong also has the presence of many characters who belong to other types of folk beliefs. The above small analysis shows that the people of Lam Dong province are not really strict about placing certain gods in the Mother Goddess shrine. For them, the shrine is a common space for saints and gods - who the people here believe can protect and bless them.

#### ***About Mother Goddess Shrine***

In Lam Dong today, with the characteristic of “people contributing”, the Vietnamese way of worshipping Mother here is also a synthesis of many local cultural features: it can be a form of worship that is royalized, regulated by the law and defined as high class as in the North or the form of worshipping Mother has a mixture of the Four Palaces beliefs of the Northern Vietnamese and local folk beliefs such as in the

Central and South Central regions. Here, you can see the shrines owned by the Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh and the standard living and singing activities of the Northern residents; the shrines are headed by the Mother Goddess Thien Ya Na with the style of singing and literature with Hue influences and the way of medium including many “hầu hội” participating in the central region (Nguyen Huu Thong, 2001).

In addition, the localization factor in the Mausoleum in Lam Dong is also formed from historical - cultural factors, including two local gods such as “Ông Chín Thượng Ngàn and Cô Ba Cam Ly”. Those two gods do not belong to the Four Palaces. According to folklore, Ong Chin is a member of an ethnic minority who specializes in gathering medicines to cure diseases for the people. Co Ba Cam Ly is a saint whose name is associated with the place names of Da Lat, Lam Dong - Cam Ly Waterfall. She was an ordinary person, drowned and drifted to Cam Ly waterfall but epiphany and helped people (Bui Thi Thoa, 2018). Because of these very close and secular merits, the followers of Mother Goddess worship in Lam Dong have worshiped Ong Chin Thuong Ngan and Co Ba Cam Ly as gods to worship in the Mother Goddess shrine, and at the same time performed medium act to commemorate the merits as well as to ask for protection and help... Most of the Mother Goddess worshipping establishments in Lam Dong now worship Ong Chin Thuong Ngan. Some places even arrange them a separate board. This is a clear demonstration of the change of Mother Goddess worship in each local cultural environment.

#### **4. Spiritual value of Mother Goddess worship in the cultural life of people in Lam Dong province**

After nearly a century of shaping and developing with distinct characteristics, up to now, Mother Goddess worship has had certain impacts on the cultural life of a part of Lam Dong people in the following aspects: *Promote community values and arouse national pride*

The **religious and religious** rituals of Lam Dong people always contain a deep sense of community, each child here shows their responsibility, attachment and sense of ethnicity to the community. In fact, without the same blood, no country, no neighbors, no colleagues, then the relationship of man with man is really alien. But for many residents in Lam Dong, if they share the same belief in the Mother Goddess and the Four Palace gods, it can make many people who meet for the first time become close, especially those who have the same situation, before officially becoming a follower of the Mother Goddess worship religion. Compared to many other regions in the country, the community cohesion function of Mother Goddess worship is even more meaningful for communities like Lam Dong. Like the anniversary of Hung King's death on March 10, the occasion of the death of Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh on the 3rd day of the third lunar month has become a traditional religious festival of a part of Vietnamese residents in Lam Dong. The festival not only helps them better understand the historical and cultural values of traditional culture... but also a chance to meet and exchange, share ways of performing rituals, preserving and developing

Mother Goddess beliefs as well as joys and sorrows of the “person who have connected with spiritual activities” and daily life.

In the activities of Mother Goddess worship, especially through the medium with their movements suitable for each God, Mother Goddess religion followers in Lam Dong can imagine the victories of the Gods for the nation, helping them to be proud of the nation's tradition of indomitable struggle to build and defend the country, becoming more aware of their roles and responsibilities in the present life (Pham Thi Mai, 2017). Also, through the rite of passage, people here can identify the cultural and spiritual values of the nation through traditional costumes, literary songs, etc. In shrines and temples of Mother Goddess, there is always a space to worship heroes with meritorious services to the country and the heroes are honored as gods by the people. People here believe that these gods are the gods sent to help the people when there are foreign invaders, when they win, when they return to the sacred realm to return to heaven. Along with that, the medium dance clearly is the recollection of the nation's history. People have visualized the great battles of the heroes with gentle, flexible dances, sometimes decisive, sometimes strong.

It is rare to find a form of religion like Mother Goddess worship where the process of arising and integrating cultural value phenomena with such unique ethnic nuances is quite typical. The practice of worshipping Mother Goddesses is a comprehensive performance art with music, songs, dances, costumes, props, manners in performance, and cultural practices such as eating betel nut, drinking wine, offering incense, making fortune or listening to petitions, communicating with the community... (Ngo Duc Think, 2009) all of these expressions are cultural and artistic values. The folk art forms of the nation are integrated, integrated and created in this religion, forming a unique cultural value – the act of medium. Practicing the Mother Goddess Worship Belief as a “living museum”, preserving the history, heritage and cultural identity of the people of Lam Dong province.

*The belief in Mother Goddess worship is the spiritual fulcrum and directs people to a noble lifestyle*

According to author Vu Hong Van (2020), “The belief in Mother Goddess is a manifestation of a part of the spiritual life of Vietnamese people, in which spirituality is the impossible, mysterious, the belief, including superstition. Spiritual life is aimed at the great sacredness, the eternal good that is difficult to achieve in everyday life”. To put it simply, the core value of Mother Goddess worship is the word “heart”. Mother teaches people to live in a good direction, to have a pure heart, to know how to treat people, because every mother teaches her children to know how to live in a good way and do many good things. People who come to worship Mother first have a bright mind, in life they show themselves as people who know how to behave, know how to treat people, sincerely worship ancestors, more than be grateful to those who have contributed to the country.

Unlike many other great religions, which often paint a vision of ecstasy (Nirvana, Heaven, Pentecost, etc.), earthly life is temporary and ephemeral; Mother

Goddess belief does not direct people to life after death, but on the contrary, directs people to the present world, the world in which people live, where people need health and fortune; those are positive desires, consistent with the “existential” concept of people in the modern world (Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, 2021). Practicing the belief of Mother Goddess worship greatly affects people's thinking, helping people to always live a good life and dedicate themselves to real life. Performance forms such as Vietnamese ritual singing or medium costumes show profound educational values through lyrics, songs, and symbolic images. Coming to the place of worship, you will feel peaceful and relaxed by the spiritual space, the sound and the lyrics of singing and literature, the sacredness in the altar decoration, the offerings to the saint, the clothes, jewelry of the medium, ... all create a unique beauty that converges. Through that, people entrust their dreams and aspirations for spiritual life to the Mother Goddess, alleviating the mental and physical pain caused by real life. Mother Goddess has transformed into everything to pray for the people to overcome all difficulties and build a better, more prosperous and happier life. This is the spiritual fulcrum for people after the chaos of life.

Professor - Doctor of Science Ngo Duc Think (2010) shared: “Mother Goddess worship has 4 contents associated with the community, that is: Mother Goddess worship is natural for Vietnamese people; bring 3 constant wishes to people: happiness - fortune - longevity; spiritualization of beliefs towards internal and external harmony and harmony, crystallized as patriotism”. That's why the Mother Goddess religion is aiming for good things for society, embedded in the petition is a commandment for us to have a heart and teach our children and grandchildren to strive to study and become a good person for the development of the country.

#### *Limitations of Mother Goddess Worship in the current context*

If in the past, Mother worship was the deification of beautiful women with the meaning of procreation, purely spiritual, now some people take advantage of other people's beliefs to take “advantage of gods for personal gain”. Some people come to the Mother Goddess not to pray for health and peace, but to pray for wealth, to ask for fortune, to borrow money. Many **superstitious and superstitious** activities taking advantage of people's faith and lightheadedness have penetrated into the religious festivals of Mother Goddess worship. Those who “trade gods and sell gods” have turned the gods, who have merit, into objects for profit (Khanh Dung, 2022). Many believers come to the Mother Goddess not with a pure heart but with the purpose of washing away sins, being protected by the Mother Goddess for their wrong actions in daily life. This has affected the core values that the Mother Goddess worship creed wants to bring people to, making the Mother Goddess worship creed take on the color of superstition in some parts of the population in Lam Dong.

## **5. Conclusion**

Mother Goddess worship is an indispensable part of the cultural life of the people of Lam Dong province. During the development process, this belief was

actively preserved and promoted, making a significant contribution to the maintenance and development of the local traditional culture. However, the Mother Goddess worship religion is facing many alarming challenges. Preserving and promoting the spiritual value of Mother Goddess worship is an urgent task, requiring attention and efforts from all levels and sectors of the province. It is necessary to take specific measures to effectively preserve and promote beliefs, thereby contributing to the cultural and economic development of the province.

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