

Научная статья

УДК 2-64/2-664-3/2-664-5

DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2024-23-10-118-128

## The Worship of Mother Goddess in the South of Vietnam: Cultural Exchange and Acculturation among Vietnamese, Cham, Chinese and Khmer People

Tran Xuan Hiep<sup>1</sup>, Nguyen Huu Phuc<sup>2</sup>, Nguyen Tuan Binh<sup>3</sup>  
Le Hoang Kiet<sup>4</sup>, Nguyen Thi Bich Giang<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dong A University  
Da Nang City, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup> Historical Science Association of Thua Thien Hue Province  
Hue City, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup> Hue University  
Hue City, Vietnam

<sup>4</sup> Can Tho University  
Can Tho City, Vietnam

<sup>5</sup> Duy Tan University  
Da Nang City, Vietnam

<sup>1</sup> hieptx@donga.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5236-993X>

<sup>2</sup> thienphuc2509history@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4582-711X>

<sup>3</sup> nguyentuanbinh@hueuni.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9968-1952>

<sup>4</sup> kietnckh1999@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9878-711X>

<sup>5</sup> nguyenthibichgiang@duytan.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7171-2307>

### Abstract

Cultural exchanges and acculturation play an important role, as a necessary requirement for the existence and development of each community and each nation. In Southern Vietnam, beginning from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, this area witnessed an extremely vibrant process of cultural exchange and acculturation. It was this process that contributed to the formation of a new identity among several ethnic groups, among which the custom of Mother Goddess worship serves as a vivid testament for the process of the Vietnamese – Cham – Chinese – Khmer cultural exchange and acculturation in Southern Vietnam. By utilizing historical and logical research methods combined with analysis and comparison methods, this article aims to delve deep into the process of the Vietnamese – Cham – Chinese – Khmer cultural exchange and acculturation in Southern Vietnam and the traces of cultural contact by these ethnic groups which are reflected in the belief of Mother Goddess worship.

### Keywords

exchange, acculturation, Mother Goddess worship, Southern region

### For citation

Tran Xuan Hiep, Nguyen Huu Phuc, Nguyen Tuan Binh, Le Hoang Kiet, Nguyen Thi Bich Giang. The Worship of Mother Goddess in the South of Vietnam: Cultural Exchange and Acculturation among Vietnamese, Cham, Chinese and Khmer People. *Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology*, 2024, vol. 23, no. 10: Oriental Studies, pp. 118–128. DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2024-23-10-118-128

© Tran Xuan Hiep, Nguyen Huu Phuc, Nguyen Tuan Binh,  
Le Hoang Kiet, Nguyen Thi Bich Giang, 2024

ISSN 1818-7919

Вестник НГУ. Серия: История, филология. 2024. Т. 23, № 10: Востоковедение. С. 118–128

Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology, 2024, vol. 23, no. 10: Oriental Studies, pp. 118–128

## Поклонение Матери-богине на юге Вьетнама: культурный обмен и аккультурация между вьетнамцами, тямами, китайцами и кхмерами

Чан Суан Хьеп<sup>1</sup>, Нгуен Хьу Фук<sup>2</sup>, Нгуен Туан Бинь<sup>3</sup>  
Ле Хоанг Кьет<sup>4</sup>, Нгуен Тхи Бить Зянг<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Университет Донг А  
Дананг, Вьетнам

<sup>2</sup> Историческая ассоциация провинции Тхыатхьен-Хюэ  
Хюэ, Вьетнам

<sup>3</sup> Университет Хюэ  
Хюэ, Вьетнам

<sup>4</sup> Университет Кантхо  
Кантхо, Вьетнам

<sup>5</sup> Университет Зуи Тан  
Дананг, Вьетнам

<sup>1</sup> hieptx@donga.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5236-993X>

<sup>2</sup> thienphuc2509history@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4582-711X>

<sup>3</sup> nguyentuanbinh@hueuni.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9968-1952>

<sup>4</sup> kietnckh1999@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9878-711X>

<sup>5</sup> nguyenthibichgiang@duytan.edu.vn, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7171-2307>

### Аннотация

Культурный обмен и аккультурация очень важны как необходимое условие существования и развития каждого сообщества и каждой нации. Южный Вьетнам в период с XVI и до XVIII столетия был свидетелем чрезвычайно активного процесса культурного обмена и аккультурации. Именно этот процесс привел к формированию новой идентичности среди нескольких этнических групп. Распространенный у этих групп обычай почитания Матери-богини служит живым свидетельством процесса вьетнамо-тямо-китайско-кхмерского культурного обмена и аккультурации в Южном Вьетнаме. Используя методы исторического и логического исследования в сочетании с методом анализа и сравнительным методом, авторы этой статьи предприняли попытку глубокого погружения в процесс вьетнамо-тямо-китайско-кхмерского культурного обмена и аккультурации в Южном Вьетнаме. Прослеживаются культурные контакты этих этнических групп, которые нашли отражение в вере и почитании Матери-богини.

### Ключевые слова

обмен, аккультурация, почитание Матери-богини, Южный регион

### Для цитирования

Чан Суан Хьеп, Нгуен Хьу Фук, Нгуен Туан Бинь, Ле Хоанг Кьет, Нгуен Тхи Бить Зянг. Поклонение Матери-богине на юге Вьетнама: культурный обмен и аккультурация между вьетнамцами, тямами, китайцами и кхмерами (на англ. яз.) // Вестник НГУ. Серия: История, филология. 2024. Т. 23, № 10: Востоковедение. С. 118–128. DOI 10.25205/1818-7919-2024-23-10-118-128

## Introduction

As a result of intensified southward advance under Nguyen Lords' reigns, from a desolate and swampy land, the Southern region of Vietnam turned out to be a rich and prosperous land and thereby transformed Vietnam not only in terms of nature but also in terms of culture. A totally new region compared to the North, with its dynamics and openness, both economically and culturally, which had the power of pulling the whole country out of stagnation in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, linking an entire country profoundly influenced by Chinese culture over a thousand years, with the roots of South East Asian culture [Dai, 2017, p. 94]. Li Tana in her work "Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries" wrote that "Advancing southward, Vietnamese people in the state of Dang Trong had close contact with the indigenous ethnic groups of different cultures" [Tana, 2016, p. 220].

For the belief of Mother Goddess worship, the presence of different images of Holy Mothers such as Ba Chua Xu (Goddess of the Land), Ba Den (Black Goddess), Thien Y A Na, Holy Mother Thien Hau, Ngu hanh Tien Nuong (Goddesses of Five Elements), and others, reflects Vietnamese – Cham – Chinese – Khmer cultural interaction. Gathering previously researched documents and using various methods of research as a base, will help analyze the typical features of the customs of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region from the perspective of cultural exchange and acculturation.

In relation to the matter of cultural exchange and acculturation, many studies have been carried out. Researcher Nguyen Thua Hy in his study “Acculturation in Vietnam under the perspective of systematical theory” has analyzed the acculturation in Vietnam using complex and multi-dimensional thinking. In terms of cultural exchange and acculturation in Southern Vietnam in particular, Pham Thi Hue in her study titled “The process of cultural exchange and acculturation in the Southern region from 16<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century” pointed out: “This region possesses a diverse culture. Because this was the land where many ethnic groups converged and where Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Christian cultures met, exchanged and, to a certain extent, penetrated each other. Diversity, as understood from the aspect of ethnicity, was the coexistence of the cultures of the ethnic groups living together in the same land. Moreover, diversity is comprised within each ethnic group’s culture. The combination of the two above-mentioned basic contents of cultural diversity is the momentum of development for each ethnic group in particular and Vietnamese nation in general in the Southern region” [Hue, 2015, p. 60]. The group of researchers including Tu Thi Loan, Nguyen Chi Hien and Vu Anh Tu have put a lot of effort in carrying out the research “Cultural exchange in the history of Vietnam” which provided a general basis of reasoning on cultural exchange, the process of cultural exchange over the course of history, clarifying the manifestations, qualities and characteristics of each period. This study allowed its readers understand the influence of foreign cultures on Vietnamese culture, determine the core identity values of Vietnamese national culture as well as assess the factors of acculturation from foreign cultures in the course of cultural exchange [Loan, 2019, p. 10].

The belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region has attracted the attention of many researchers. Researcher Nguyen Thanh Loi contributed with a series of studies [Loi, 2007; 2010; 2015]. In these studies, Nguyen Thanh Loi classified the goddesses worshipped by the people in the Southern region into a system. In the study “Belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region: identity and values” many issues regarding the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region were discussed. By summarizing the above appraisals, this can be called a phenomenon of cultural interaction in the wake of Vietnamese migrants’ paces to the new land. Therefore, the implementation of a comprehensive study on the appearances and the typical features of the custom of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region through the approach on the factors of cultural exchange and acculturation is meaningful.

### **Grounds for Vietnamese people to receive foreign cultures**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, groups of Vietnamese people following the Nguyen Lords coming to the South for territorial expansion, were already living together with Cham, Khmer and Chinese people, which naturally resulted in selective absorbing and borrowing various factors from other ethnic groups. Besides, the waves of Chinese immigrants created a multi-ethnic settlement area in the country. Therefore, with the presence of the four ethnic groups in the same land, there emerged a cohesiveness in the ethnic groups’ communities, which enabled the Vietnamese actively take on various factors of indigenous culture and gradually make them their own [Hue, 2015, p. 57]. It is evident that “the residents’ culture in the new land, regardless of ethnicity, is the combination of traditional culture in their sub-consciousness, in their blood and the natural and historical conditions of the new land. It flourished in a condition that was far from the place of origin both spatially and temporally” [Ho Chi Minh city, 2006, p. 135].

In the early stage of colonization and reclamation, beliefs seemed essential, being the spiritual support which was indispensable so as to struggle against dangers, disaster, the versatility of nature and society. To satisfy that demand, the Vietnamese not only carried the custom of ancestor worship with them but also paid homage to Mother Goddesses. Therefore, the image and the role of traditional women in Vietnamese culture was accepted and confirmed by the immigrants when they reached the new land. From this perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge that the cults of Goddesses by the people in the Southern region show the aspiration of living in harmony with nature and honouring Vietnamese women's traditional values that are heroism and unyieldingness. It was the residents' demand and desire of a peaceful and happy life that led to the establishment of the goddess' positions in the new land where "one can feel fearful when birds are chirping and can be scared when fish are swishing." That righteous aspiration expressed the creative thinking which originated from the geo-historical, geo-culture and geo-political context of the Southern region.

It was the potent of the female deities granting protection and support to the country and people that was greatly praised and believed by Vietnamese immigrants in the Southern region. The Vietnamese in the Southern region, with a flexible and delighted attitude, fervently believed in the sacredness of female deities so they could easily integrate the Vietnamese deities with those of the other ethnic groups including Khmer, Cham and Chinese people, creating a system of goddesses which was rich and diversified. Huynh Tinh Cua had a full set of statistics in his book "Tu vi" (Vietnamese language graphemes) published in 1895. "Seven goddesses, three uncles: Ba Chua Tien (Prime Goddess), Ba Chua Ngoc (Jade Goddess), Ba Chua Xu (Land Goddess), Ba Co Hy (Goddess Co Hy), Ba Chua Dong (Grotto Goddess) Ba Thuy (Water Goddess), Ba Hoa (Fire Goddess). Uncle Tray, Uncle Qui were Jade Goddess' children, and Uncle Ly, Uncle Thon, whose names were spoken into a rhythm; in total there were three uncles [Nam, 2016, p. 171]. On the other hand, it was the background of rice-planting agricultural civilization and the custom of female deity worship from their ancestors' land in the Northern delta region which created conditions for the growth and flourishing of the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region but with a new appearance. From the custom of Tam Phu (Three Palaces) and Tu Phu (Four Palaces) worship, the Vietnamese, with creativity and dexterity, have set up the images of the Ba Chua Xu and Ba Den (Muk Luk) as the main deities in the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region.

Going upstream in the course of history to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the custom of Mother Goddess worship flourished at its peak in the Northern delta region, the principal role was of Holy Mother Lieu Hanh. However, when the Vietnamese from the North and Northern Central region advanced to the South, where the belief of Mother Goddess worship had not been established firmly and when they came to the Central region and the Southern region, the Vietnamese had to receive the system of female deity and Mother Goddess worship from Cham people and Khmer people and then Vietnamized it into Mother Thien Y A Na, Ba Chua Xu (Goddess of the land), Linh Son Thanh Mau (Sacred Mountain Holy Mother) [Ha, Dai, 2014, pp. 93–94]. One matter for further discussion is that the progenitors for Ba Chua Xu, Ba Den of Khmer people and even Po Inur Nagar of Cham people were all influenced by Hinduism in which the role of god Shiva was prominent.

### **Traces of Cham culture in the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region**

Regarding Vietnamese culture, for a nation of wet rice planting, women in daily life in the communes and villages are always the people who control the "trunks and keys" in the household. Moreover, with the communities relying on cultivation economy, productiveness was everyone's wish. Having enough food and clothes was the goal for them, and it was also the premise for a life of happiness and people implicitly acknowledged and honoured the image of women in daily life in the community, expressed not only in its perception but also in emotional and spiritual life. This is the basis which is very important for the Vietnamese to absorb easily and Vietnamize the alien deities from other ethnic groups in their southward advance and cohabitation in the new land.

Also, “on the same starting platform of economic and cultural form, Cham peoples’ mother of agriculture Poh Nagar in the beginning gained the Vietnamese farmers’ faith in their course of southward advance” [Thong, 2001, pp. 26–27]. Consequently, Vietnamese people received the image of Poh Inur Nagar to turn it into their own mother with the name Thien Y A Na (fig. 1, 1). However, the process of receiving the image of Poh Inur Nagar and Vietnamizing it into Thien Y A Na as it is today must have been long. “In the course of history, Cham people’s female deity continued to be integrated into the Vietnamese systems of deities at different levels according to each geological and historical ordinate, spreading from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century stretching from the regions of O and Ly to Hue, Southern Central region, Nha Trang with different names such as Thien Y A Na, Chua Tien (Prime Goddess), Ba Chua Xu (Goddess of the land) etc.” [Trang, Phuc, 2013, p. 68]. Explaining the Vietnamization of the name Thien Y A Na, researcher Sakaya Truong Van Mon wrote: “Po: his majestic, king, deity; Ina/Inur: mother, female, Nagar/Nargar (Sanskrit: Nagara): motherland, country. Later Po Inu Nagar of Cham people was called by the Vietnamese as Dien Ba Chua Ngoc. This proper name was also Sinicized as Dien Phi Chua Ngoc (Ba was Sinicized into Phi)” [Thin, 2013, pp. 621–622]. It can be said that this was a kind of creative and delicate Vietnamization in the process of receiving Goddess Poh Inu Nagar from Cham people to transform her into Thien Y A Na of Vietnamese people and then this goddess became the main deity of the belief of Tu Phu worship in the Central region [Phuc, 2021, p. 62].



*Fig. 1. Mother Goddesses of South Vietnam:*

1 – Goddess Poh Inu Nagar; 2 – Ba Chua Xu (Goddess of the Land) worshipped in An Giang; 3 – Ngu Hanh Nuong (Goddesses of Five Elements) worshipped in Ho Chi Minh City; 4 – Ba Den (Linh Son Thanh Mau) worshipped in Tay Ninh province. All photos made by the authors

*Рис. 1. Матери-богини Южного Вьетнама:*

1 – Богиня По Нагар; 2 – Ба Тюа Сы (Богиня земли), почитаемая в провинции Анзянг; 3 – Нгу Хань Ньонг Ньонг (Богини пяти элементов), почитаемые в Хошимине; 4 – Ба Ден (Линь Сон Тхань Мау), почитаемая в провинции Тэйнинь. Все фото сделаны авторами

In terms of the origin of the worship of Ba Chua Xu in the Southern region, of which the centre is based at Sam mountain (An Giang) as writer Son Nam wrote “The figure to worship was once a male Buddhist statue of Khmer people which had been long forgotten on the hillside of Sam mountain. The Vietnamese brought the statue into a temple, beautifying it by painting to make it to have a female appearance wearing silk clothes and necklace” [Nam, 2016, p. 173]. From this document and according to archaeologists, the statue of the Goddess was the incarnation of Shiva, which is a unique piece of artistic work carved in the 6<sup>th</sup> century from a kind of sedimentary rock called schist. This kind of rock is formed in the deltas with blue holes and has fine-grained structure, in which each layer is a cycle of sedimentation and only when the sea is calm, this sedimentation phenomenon can take place. Many researchers agreed that the statue is of a male deity. However, when the Vietnamese came to this place, because of their Mother Goddess worship belief from their place of origin, they shaped the statue as a mother goddess with a simple and popular name Ba Chua Xu, Ngung Man Nuong Nuong, Chua Xu Nuong Nuong etc. [Hue, 2014, p. 310].

For Vietnamese people, Ba Chua Xu has become a similarity to Avalokitesvara, and for Chinese people, she is regarded as Ma Hau or Thien Hau Nuong Nuong (fig. 1, 2). She is considered to be a sacred goddess having the power of supporting and guarding people. And because of that, “in the Southern region, almost every household had a shrine to worship Ba Chua Xu located in the corner of the house or the garden, In the forest of U Minh, people cutting wood or seeking honey also worshipped Ba Chua Xu praying for well-being, prevention from malaria and occupational risks” [Binh, Diem, Duong, 1990, p. 377].

From the reception of the factors of Cham culture, in order to gradually assert Ba Chua Xu as the Vietnamese people's goddess, they made up factors showing the sacredness of the Goddess and passed these from generation to generation through legends and personification by the storytellers about the deities worshipped to make the stories more appealing and exciting. There is a legend about the origin of Ba Chua Xu as follows: She used to appear to say that she was Ba Chua Xu, promising that if the villagers carried her down from the mountain, she would bless the people to have favourable weather, good crops, protection from pillage, wild animal attacks and epidemics. Later, the villagers gathered to discuss carrying the statue of the Goddess to worship but there was one thing that was strange: dozens of male youngsters could not carry the statue. Suddenly, a woman acting as a medium proclaimed that she was Ba Chua Xu saying that there needed to be nine virgin girls to carry her down from the mountain. The villagers did accordingly and miraculously the girls could carry the statue quite gently. Coming up to the foot of the mountain, the statue became so heavy that nobody could move it, so the villagers thought that the goddess wanted to stay there so they started to build the temple at the place where it is today [Dao, Binh, 2021, p. 39].

Or there is a story about the sacredness of the Goddess in protecting the villagers in the fight against the foreign invaders as follows: The Vietnamese living in this region were often attacked and pillaged by the Siamese. When they had discovered the statue on the mountain and placed an urn to pray to the Goddess, people believing in her power often ran to the top of the mountain to pray. Indeed, when they came to burn incense to pray to her, they were all safe. Therefore, the people in this region had more and more faith in the goddess.

Evidently, the concept of Mother of the Land was one thing that the Vietnamese received from the Cham and attached it into a Brahman statue and circumstantially created a new image of land mother that was Ba Chua Xu. Hence, a unique religious phenomenon came into existence. It is composed of the characteristics of South East Asian beliefs such as the cults of female deities, the cult of earth, mediums and witches [Dai, 2017, p. 104].

### **Traces of Chinese culture in the Mother worship belief in the South**

Mother Goddess worship is a folk belief which was formed by many factors, among which was the cultural exchange with Chinese people. It is clear that after one thousand years of Chinese domination and the later policies allowing Chinese people to settle under the reign of Nguyen Lords, good conditions were created for Chinese culture in general and beliefs in particular took

root in the Southern region where Ngu Hanh Nuong Nuong is proof of the Sino-Vietnamese cultural exchange and integration process (fig. 1, 3).

It is necessary to assert that Vietnamese culture has integrated with, rather than assimilated to Chinese culture. With the reception of the theory of five elements, the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South created its own ladies of five elements. Therefore, five ladies of five elements (Ngu Hanh Nuong Nuong) were prevalent in shrines and temples in the Southern region. The shrines to worship Ngu Hanh Nuong Nuong are often quite simple with the tablets written in Chinese characters or Vietnamese describing their titles and sometimes, their tablets are replaced with gypsum or cement statues and the bodies are painted correlating to specific colours: white for Kim Duc Thanh Phi (Metal holy mistress), green for Moc Duc Thanh Phi (Wood holy mistress), red for Hoa Duc Thanh Phi (Fire holy mistress), black or purple for Thuy Duc Thanh Phi (Water Holy Mistress) and yellow for Tho Duc Thanh Phi (Earth Holy Mistress). The presence of the shrines from hamlets to villages to communal houses and pagodas where those deities have the status of guardian deities has shown the strong vitality of the customs of worshipping female deities in the Southern region.

Based on the custom of Water Mother worship in the Northern region and as a result of cohabitation with the Chinese, Vietnamese people have developed the custom of worshipping Thien Hau – Goddess of the Sea. Not only for Chinese people but also for Vietnamese people, dignifying Thien Hau means not only adoring and worshipping her as a glorified deity but also through the example of a filial, benevolent, virtuous and well-behaving personality, the lessons she teaches are spread throughout communities. Therefore, in Vietnamese people's perception, she is not only the goddess of the sea but also the guardian goddess who brings stability, prosperity and luck and good things in daily life. If in the Northern region, there is a custom of "borrowing money" from Ba Chua Kho (Goddess of Storehouse), the Vietnamese have a custom of coming to the shrines to ask for "loc" (grants) or "borrow money" on the 15th day of the first lunar month or Chinese people's Nguyen Tieu festival or Vietnamese people's Thuong Nguyen festival and then pay the debt in the last months of the year [Dai, 2017, p. 103].

From this point, we can see that the belief of Mother Goddess worship which developed extensively in the Southern region was the integration of the worship of Thien Hau (Heavenly Empress) following the immigrants in the period of the Ming and Qing dynasties. When they were able to settle safely in the Southern region and with the gratitude for being helped, people built temples to worship Thien Hau in many places. In Ho Chi Minh City there are twenty temples to worship Thien Hau including That Phu Thien Hau Cung (does not exist nowadays), Temple of Thien Hau – Quang Trieu Congregation Hall (Ong Lanh Bridge Goddess Pagoda), Temple of Thien Hau (Thanh Mau Temple – District 3), Temple of Thien Hau – On Lang Congregation Hall (Guan Yin Pagoda), Temple of Thien Hau – Ha Chuong Congregation Hall (Ha Huong Goddess Pagoda), Temple of Thien Hau – Tue Thanh Congregation Hall (Cho Lon Mother Goddess Pagoda), Temple of Thien Hau – Quan Tan Congregation Hall (Thien Hau pagoda) and others [Tuyet, 2014, p. 406].

### **Traces of Khmer culture in the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region**

Attached to the civilization of wet rice farming, Vietnamese people could easily receive the Goddess of Neang Khmau of the Khmer people and quickly Vietnamized this goddess with a new name Ba Den (Sacred Mountain Holy Mother). For this reason, the Vietnamese only absorbed the image of Neang Khmau although the Khmer people worshipped both deities Neang Khmau (Black Goddess) and Mesar (White Goddess). Clearly, Vietnamese people while advancing southward possessed creativity, always looking for new things and continually received selectively the good and the progressive from other peoples to enrich and boost their own national culture. Therefore, the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region had the presence and resemblance of the belief of deity worship from other ethnic groups such as the Cham, Khmer and Chinese when they came to settle in the new land creating specific colours and highlighting Vietnamese cultural

identity. It is indeed in accordance with the remarks of PhD Le Ba Vuong. “The gradual process of “Vietnamization” of the local cultural factors was also the process to assert the Vietnamese factors in the land of the South, also reflecting the eminent influence of Vietnamese factors through the presence of deities having Northern origin or the simple hidden positions of the indigenous deities on the altars attaching to the milestones by the Vietnamese in the newly colonized territories” [Vuong, 2021, pp. 33–34].

Unlike the beliefs of Mother Goddess worship Tam Phu (Three Palaces) or Tu Phu (Four Palaces) in the North and the Central region, where each goddess was in charge of each realm or region, the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South had a more comprehensive function. In regard to nature, the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South had similarities with the Water Goddess and Earth Goddess of Tam Phu and Tu Phu. With the conditions of having many rivers and waterways, the factor of “water” played an important role in economic development and in fostering life; hence, Vietnamese people received the Goddess Neang Khmau from the Khmer to create the image of Ba Den (fig. 1, 4). For the factor of Earth, it is the combination of Goddess Poh Inur Nagar of the Cham people with the goddess of Earth of the Khmer which together created Ba Chu Xu; worshipped everywhere in hamlets and villages in the South. Ba Den and Ba Chua Xu then became the two principal deities in Mother Goddess worship in the South with the two infamous places of worship: Ba Den Mountain in Tay Ninh and Sam Mountain in Chau Doc, An Giang.

Similar to the case of Ba Chua Xu, it was the legends that were used as a “tool” to boost and enhance the role of Ba Den over the years and through many generations in the South. Many myths and legends about Ba Den were passed on orally among the people and a note-worthy story was about a girl called Ly Thi Thien Huong. She was proficient in literature, knew martial arts and often came to a pagoda to pray to Buddha. Although she had dark skin, she was so graceful that she could charm almost anyone. One young man whose name was Le Si Triet, fell in love with her after meeting her just once, however another suitor, the son of a Mandarin found a way to kidnap her and bring her to his house to be his concubine. Luckily, she was rescued by Le Si Triet. When the country was in danger of foreign invasion, Le Si Triet joined the army. Making use of the chance, the Mandarin’s servants came to capture Huong. She had no way to escape, so she killed herself by jumping off a mountain. Later she became a sacred symbol, always supporting the local people to have safety and peacefulness, so in order to worship her, they established a temple with incense burning day and night.

Ba Den is further known through the mysterious story as the deity who foretold Nguyen Anh (King Gia Long later) to save him during the period of conflict with the Tay Son forces in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In order to show gratitude to her, after his coronation, he ordered the building of a statue made of black bronze to worship her and granted her the title Linh Son Thanh Mau, worshipping her in a stone grotto on the mountain called Dien Ba (Linh Son Tien Thach Dong). The next foretelling in a dream was to help Le Van Duyet to gain victory [Vuong, 2021, p. 33]. Then the tablet bearing the title was lost and until the period of Bao Dai, another honorary title tablet was dedicated to her.

### **Characteristics of the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South to the spiritual life**

The belief of Mother Goddess worship in the Southern region was the result of a process of cultural fusion of many strata comprising Cham, Chinese and Khmer residents on the basis of the traditional cult of a Heavenly Father and Earth Mother. It was the cohabitation with indigenous people including Khmer and Cham people and later Chinese people that created the South with a specific cultural identity. The images such as Ba Chua Xu, Ba Den, Thien Y A Na, and so on are the manifestation of cultural integrity and inclusiveness, all having the traits of Hinduism with the outstanding role of the god Shiva.

When Vietnamese people from the Northern and Central regions came to the South to colonize the land, they brought with them the beliefs of Tam Phu, Tu Phu worship and Thanh Tran worship,



among which was the ritual of votive trance. It was on the basis of cultural contact and exchange with other ethnic groups in the South that Vietnamese people have created the dance of “bong roi” or queer dancing. Queer dancing originated from a Cham dance called Pajao in the ritual to worship the Mother of the Land Poh Inur Nagar. Queer dancing meant to give the offerings to the deities; often flowers, gold plates and toy dance afterwards to make the air of the festival more joyful. The temples where goddesses are worshipped often have programs of queer dancing such as Ba Chua Xu, Ba Ngu Hanh, Ba Co Hy, Dieu Tri Kim Mau, Linh Son Thanh Mau, and others and sometimes even Goddess Thien Hau of the Chinese people.

It is clear that the strata of population coming from the Northern and Central regions moving southward brought with them the customs of Mother Goddess worship from their place of origin to the new land, combined with the belief of female deity worship by Cham and Khmer people, so this land gradually witnessed the cultural fusion and interaction with indigenous people’s beliefs, creating the above-mentioned strata of female deities and mother deities.

A notable feature of the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South is the quality of having cultural multilayers. As in the cases of Ba Chua Xu or Linh Son Thanh Mau, it was the result of a cultural exchange between Vietnamese and Khmer people whereas Mother Thien Y A Na, Jade Goddess are the outcomes of Vietnamese – Cham – Chinese – Khmer cultural interaction. Evidently, Thien Y A Na, Ba Chua Xu, Linh Son Thanh Mau all had the interaction with Hinduism through the style of statue decoration and resemblances in patterns and traits resembling the god Shiva, and the most evident feature that was present even in temples worshipping the goddesses – a round stone pillar covered by a red cloth, which is the symbol of Linga (a sacred object in Hinduism). Another note to point out is that these temples also include images of two boys standing by the goddesses: Uncle Tai and Uncle Quy, said to be the goddesses’ sons. Khmer people borrowed the images of the two boys to create the belief of Neak Ta worship to be blessed with good weather and avoidance of risks. In the belief of Mother Goddess worship, Vietnamese people have borrowed the images of the two boys to Vietnamize into uncles to worship as the goddesses’ sons, which can be seen as an expression of the belief of fertility, conveying the wish of birth.

Besides, another manifestation of the quality of cultural multi-strata is in the queer dance and its costume. The dance originated from a Cham folk dance which Cham people, with dexterity in combining Indian dances and their own creation, had created, calling it the Pajao. Cham people dressed as Indian people and the statues of female deities and mother deities often honoured a strong sense of sex. However, due to exchange with Vietnamese people and influences by way of dressing in clothing from old Vietnamese dynasties, the statues of goddesses had more layers of clothes and are more discrete. On the other hand, when combined with the Chinese theory of five elements, the costume in the belief of Mother Goddess worship of Vietnamese people had five colours including red, green, yellow, white and black [Ha, Dai, 2014, p. 92].

By the twentieth century, along with the French policies of colonial development, the second layer of migrants went from the North to the South especially as part of the big migration after the Geneva Agreement in 1954. Unlike the first layer of migrants, the migrants of this time were transported directly from the North to the South. As a consequence, the belief of Mother Goddess worship in the South was divided into two streams. The first one was brought by the immigrants to the South in their mind combining the cultural exchange with Cham people in the Central region, Khmer people in the Southern region and Chinese people. Their main goddesses of this stream were Ba Chua Tien, Ba Chua Ngoc, Ba Thien Hau, Linh Son Thanh Mau and accordingly the first layer of Vietnamese settlers was the subject of this stream of the belief of Mother Goddess worship. The second one in the worship of Mother Goddesses was indeed a copy of the belief of Tam Phu worship in the North with Holy Mother Van Huong (Princess Lieu Hanh) being the main deity.

The belief of Mother Goddess worship of Vietnamese people in general and in the Southern region in particular plays an important role in the spiritual life of some parts of the population nationwide. Almost every urban or rural area, river or mountainous area has a shrine or temple, and even some pagodas, to worship Mother goddesses or female deities. With the history of formation and

development over 300 years and with many ethnic groups residing in the South, the belief has taken root in many people's minds; hence, worship practices are prevalent and there have been many followers.

### Conclusion

Cultural exchange and acculturation were the factors that contributed to the establishment of a new culture in the Southern region of Vietnam. This was also what enabled the binding of the cohabitation of different ethnic groups including Vietnamese, Cham, Chinese and Khmer people living in a geographical space recently possessed by the Vietnamese. In reality, in the process of cohabitation and integration in the new land, these different ethnic groups had considerable contribution to the conveyance of factors from their own cultures.

From the mind of those coming from another place and the faith in the might of supernatural forces, the Goddesses played an important role in the mind of the communities residing in the Southern region as they were considered the representatives of mothers who were ready to guard, support, understand and nurture their children. It is clear that the custom of Mother Goddess worship from the Northern delta region which followed the groups advancing southward, when contacting with Chinese, Cham, and Khmer cultures, was transformed and new features were created. However, this change not only enriched the Vietnamese custom of Mother Goddess worship but also created a new appearance with many typical and unique traits contributing to the abundance and diversity in Vietnamese culture.

### References

- Binh N. C., Diem L. X. & Duong M.** Văn hoá và cư dân Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long [Culture and inhabitants of the Mekong Delta]. Hanoi, Social Sciences Publishing House, 1990, 447 p. (in Viet.)
- Dai D. T.** Một nét đặc sắc của tín ngưỡng dân gian Nam Bộ [Some unique features of Southern folk beliefs]. *Journal of Religious Studies*, 2017, no. 10 (166), pp. 94–114. (in Viet.)
- Dao H. T & Binh N. Q.** Giá trị văn hoá của tín ngưỡng thờ Bà Chúa Xứ núi Sam trong phát triển du lịch tỉnh An Giang [Cultural value of the belief of worshipping Ba Chua Xu in Sam mountain in tourism development in An Giang province]. *Dong Thap University Science Journal*, 2021, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 37–46. (in Viet.)
- Ha T. T. T. & Dai N. T.** “Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở Nam Bộ: sự dung hợp đa văn hoá”, Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở Nam Bộ bản sắc và giá trị [“Mother worship in the South: cross-cultural fusion”, in Mother worship in the South, identity, and values]. Ho Chi Minh City, National Uni. Press, 2014, pp. 92–97. (in Viet.)
- Ho Chi Minh city Association of Historical Sciences. Nam Bộ: đất và người [Southern land and people]. Ho Chi Minh City, Young Publ. House, 2006, vol. 4, 434 p. (in Viet.)
- Hue P. T.** Quá trình giao lưu và tiếp biến văn hoá vùng đất Nam Bộ (thế kỉ XVI–XVIII) [The process of cultural exchange and acculturation in the Southern region (16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries)]. *Journal Science Can Tho University*, 2015, no. 41, pp. 56–60. (in Viet.)
- Hue V. T. K.** Bà Chúa Xứ (Núi Sam) – tính đa lớp văn hoá trong tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở Nam Bộ, Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở Nam Bộ bản sắc và giá trị [Ba Chua Xu (Mountain Sam) – cultural multi-layeredness in Mother Goddess worship in the South, in Mother Goddess worship beliefs in the South, identity, and values]. Ho Chi Minh City, National Uni. Press, 2014, pp. 307–312. (in Viet.)
- Loan T. T.** Giao lưu văn hoá trong lịch sử Việt Nam [Cultural exchange in Vietnamese history]. Hanoi, Labour Publ., 2019, 220 p. (in Viet.)
- Loi N. T.** Tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần ở Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu [Goddess worship in Ba Ria – Vung Tau]. *Journal of Research and Development*, 2007, no. 1 (60), pp. 34–42. (in Viet.)
- Loi N. T.** Tín ngưỡng thờ Đại Càn ở Nam Bộ [The belief in worshipping Dai Can in the South]. *Journal of Religious Studies*, 2010, no. 11, pp. 31–41. (in Viet.)

- Loi N. T.** Tín ngưỡng thờ Bà Chúa Xứ ở thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [Belief in worshipping Ba Chua Xu in Ho Chi Minh City]. *Journal of Research and Development*, 2015, no. 5 (122), pp. 34–44. (in Viet.)
- Nam S.** Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long – Nét sinh hoạt xưa và Văn minh miệt vườn [Mekong Delta – Ancient lifestyle and garden civilization]. Hanoi, Young Publ., 2016, 202 p. (in Viet.)
- Phuc N. H.** Những nhân tố tác động đến sự hình thành và phát triển tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tứ phủ ở Huế [Factors affecting the formation and development of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of the Four Palaces in Hue]. *Hue Journal Past and Present*, 2021, no. 163, pp. 58–70. (in Viet.)
- Tana L.** Xứ Đàng Trong lịch sử kinh tế – xã hội Việt Nam thế kỷ 17–18 [Dang Trong the economic and social history of Vietnam in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries]. Transl. by Nguyen Nghi. Hanoi, Young Publ., 2016, 282 p. (in Viet.)
- Thinh N. D.** Văn hoá thờ Nữ thần – Mẫu ở Việt Nam và châu Á: bản sắc và giá trị [Goddess-Mother worship culture in Vietnam and Asia: identity and value]. Hanoi, World Publ., 2013, 903 p. (in Viet.)
- Thong N. H.** Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở miền Trung Việt Nam [Mother Goddess Worship in Central Vietnam]. Hue, Thuan Hoa Publ., 2001, 342 p. (in Viet.)
- Trang H. N. & Phuc N. D.** Đặc khảo về tín ngưỡng thờ gia thần [Special survey on the belief in worshipping family gods]. Ho Chi Minh City, Culture and Arts Publ., 2013, 174 p. (in Viet.)
- Tuyet V. T. A.** Nghiên cứu so sánh tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Thiên Hậu tại các miếu (Hội quán) của người Hoa ở thành phố Hồ Chí Minh với Hội An (Quảng Nam) [Comparative study of Thien Hau worshipping beliefs at temples (Assemblies) of Chinese people in Ho Chi Minh City with Hoi An (Quang Nam), in Mother Goddess worship beliefs in the South, identity, and values]. Ho Chi Minh City, National Uni. Press, 2014, pp. 404–418. (in Viet.)
- Vuong L. B.** Từ góc độ lịch sử lưu dân nhận diện về vị thần chủ trên vùng núi Bà Đen và sự giao thoa tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở Tây Ninh [From the perspective of the history of exile, identify the main deity in the Ba Den mountain area and the interference of religions and beliefs in Tay Ninh]. *Journal of Historical Research*, 2021, no. 1, pp. 28–37. (in Viet.)

#### Information about the Authors

**Tran Xuan Hiep**, PhD (Politics), Associate Professor

Scopus Author ID 57212152131

**Nguyen Huu Phuc**, PhD Student (History)

**Nguyen Tuan Binh**, PhD (History)

Scopus Author ID 57221775698

**Le Hoang Kiet**, PhD Student (International Relations)

**Nguyen Thi Bich Giang**, PhD (English)

#### Информация об авторах

**Чан Суан Хьеп**, PhD (политика), доцент

Scopus Author ID 57212152131

**Нгуен Хьу Фук**, аспирант (история)

**Нгуен Туан Бинь**, PhD (история)

Scopus Author ID 57221775698

**Ле Хоанг Кьет**, аспирант (международные отношения)

**Нгуен Тхи Бить Зянг**, PhD (английский язык)

*The article was submitted on 03.11.2023;*

*approved after reviewing on 01.09.2024; accepted for publication on 30.09.2024*

*Статья поступила в редакцию 03.11.2023;*

*одобрена после рецензирования 01.09.2024; принята к публикации 30.09.2024*