

Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh under the View of Religious Studies

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ABSTRACT: The paper introduces a new approach to an interesting phenomenon of indigenous belief in the North and Middle of Vietnam: the Cult of Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh that originated in Phủ Giày, Nam Định province. By thoroughly examining relevant materials, the author attempts to prove that the cult should not be considered a folk belief but better categorized into a national mixed religion. Once being seen as a religion, an appropriate behavior with it is obviously required.

A New Religion

There have been many researches on Mother Liễu, the goddess who is worshiped at Phủ Giày (Kim Thái commune, Vụ Bản district, Nam Định province). These works, from different angles, however, share the same view of previous studies which considered this phenomenon as “folk culture and belief”. In my own viewpoint, bearing in mind that one should not separate cultural phenomenon with religious one, the term “folk” should not be used because even if it is an adjective its meaning is to be understood the same: to express a certain state of existence and spill-over effect, or it is the “remanent features” of a different cultural “stream” considered “noble/high” but in the latter's more simple, rather low and maybe distorted form. Consequently, there appeared two contrast viewpoints, one looks down on this “folk” culture with prejudice and the other sees it as an effective replacement of what the “noble culture” cannot express. The second viewpoint also indirectly reveals the incompetence or carelessness in studying traditional culture.

To avoid falling into unnecessary debate, instead of using the term “folk”, I would like to use the adjective “popular” or “mass”. “Populaire” in French or “popular” in English is used to refer to cultural characteristic embeded within the masses, whether it is represented in daily life or in a form of more quintessence

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found in the upper class only. The idea to compare the two cultural streams is more for academic purposes than for presenting the state of culture in our country. The case of Mother Liễu worshiped at Phủ Giầy has showed that it is impossible to contrast what is called “folk” culture with what is called “noble” culture.

I will not discuss the definition of “culture” because it is more important to perceive culture and express its real and lively nature. Discussing on Mother Liễu worship, we need to turn back to the religious picture in Đại Việt nation at the Middle era that is from the 10th to the first half of the 20th century. In the case of Mother worship in general and Mother Liễu in particular, I assume that there certainly existed an interaction between Buddhism (more specifically Tantrist sect, Pure Land sect), Taoism, Confucianism – all of them, mainstream religions – and the religion of the native people, I prefer to call it Animism, in the formation of some domestic religions, including Mother worship and related rituals; then the taking shape of other religions such as Nội Đạo tràng at the end of 16th century and Tiên Thiên Thánh Giáo at the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century. These domestic or inner born religions were formed by the combination of religious elements that were available in the Đại Việt society. This can be considered the first wave of religious integration by the Vietnamese that showed their sense of initiative. The second wave of Vietnamese religious integration took place in the 20th century resulted in the emergence of Caodaism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism. This wave, however, only happened with the Vietnamese who lived in the southern part of the country.

I use the word “religion” at its broad meaning, especially when it is placed in the context as the subject of religious history studies in particular or religious studies in general. Religion formed in history can be presented by components following this map: *Religion = sacred entity, super-experience entity, super-nature <—> myth <—> belief <—> practice (worship, pray, ritual) <—> moral community (church and unchurched).*

Thus, we must find out that whether Mother Liễu worship is separated or combined within Nội Đạo tràng, or in Tiên Thiên Thánh giáo, which are both popular regions founded in history and continuing their existence up to now. Moreover, principally, even if one can consider this a “folk” worship and not credible, it is, however, not different in comparison with big religions regarding the nature of a religion’s various expressions.

We should consider Mother Liễu worship, with its related rituals and non-homogeneous followers, a religion, or in a short form: Mother Liễu Hạnh worship. It is important to identify its religious status because we need to consider our “behavior” with it in the current context. Because Mother worship has the pantheon like Tam Tòa – Tứ phủ (Three Thrones – Four Palaces) it should fall into Shamanism. There is, however, no evidence to prove that “going into a trance”, “attending a trance” and “getting into a trance” are the same when the Shamans’ soul escape from the physical body to get to Heaven asking for help. The only common feature is that there exists an entity called “hồn” (soul). The concept of “soul”, however, is the central concept of every theistic religion. In the case of Vietnamese and with ancient believers, this is also true with Buddhism, a religion with atheistic nature.

In the religious picture of the Vietnamese in the Middle era, there was a mixture of different elements from mainstream, especially Tantrist sect, Pure Land sect with the important role of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva as a female Bodhisattva), Taoism (with the theory of Dao and pantheon with many deities who take care of different aspects of human life, the world and the space) and the order of Confucianism (considered as an arrangement of deities according to a strict order and the role of the Jade Emperor who in behalf of the Sun to set position for all deities) and beliefs and rituals of indigenous animism (with three most important factors: agricultural ceremony - in which the most important is fecundity belief, ancestor worship and natural deities worship).

The combination of those three religions once called “Three Religion come from one source” under the viewpoint of Confucianism of Song dynasty that refers to philosophical perspective, world view and philosophy of life of the people at that time while the religious dimension as a system I have drawn above was often neglected. In my own opinion, this is a shortcoming that needs to be complemented. If we do not consider the religious dimension of that structure, we will label what that structure had created into the category of “folk” concept that in many cases, under the official viewpoint, is similar to “underdeveloped”, “simple”, “heresy”, “wrong” or “superstitious” in the modern discourse.

However there exists a question: What class’s needs the religion aims at and how influential it is?

Based on my experience and field-works regarding the followers, I would argue that many social classes find in Mother Liễu worship a support and some power. The fact that its followers always scatter somewhere obviously does not make a sense of

a close organization. This means the followers can join or leave the religion anytime they want to. There is neither requirement from deities when a follower want to join or leave the neither religion nor regulations ask him to practice everyday. There is only belief in her protection that followers come and stay. However, traders make the most dynamic and devout group which creates the lively atmosphere for the Mother death anniversary (lunar March).

Yet daily worship is also found in followers who are peasants in the region and neighbouring provinces. This is the group of followers that is the most experienced, simple and hardworking. This group itself contributes significantly to the enduring vitality of the religion since its birth. Besides, basing on the changes we can be well aware of, the followers could be Confucian scholars, officers and especially a ruler such as king *Đông Khánh*. This means, the followers' loose relation with the religion can be considered a specific character of this religion. Followers' vapour can be seen as a typical character of this religion. Until present, however, we would see no more vapour. There is, however, not yet a precise sociological research on followers of the Mother Liễu worship at perspectives of spirituality and psychology. But I would suppose that they are a collective of individuals with the same need for a good health, prosperity and continual development. This need is not found in other religions. Moreover, followers has found a place to express their strong hope for the deity's protection for daily life, daily prosperity or in other word for the real life on earth, not for a long-sighted future or for the life after death, after the long enduring strive for a total enlightenment or after hard practice to be immortal.

Thus, religions worship Mothers that belong to Three Thrones – Four Palaces or Mother Liễu are religions of Life, not of Death or Life-Death. The answer for happiness and prosperity can be found right in the reality, not in life after death. Is this one of the deepest characteristics of the Vietnamese's spirituality that once said to be full of sensualism? I can feel its rapid-fire breathe.

Among the followers, we should also pay attention to the group that makes their living by acting as a go-between between Mother and other ordinary followers. They are called: “ông đồng, bà đồng” (male and female medium). Even hidden under Chinese language, those titles show a lively picture of male and female “shaman” who were visible in villages but nearly invisible in national historical books. Their vital role in an agricultural society was found in the dawn of human race, and only modern ethnologist and anthropologist carry out research on them. Of course, the intermediary role between deities and followers of male or female medium is not similar to that of

“pô”, “me”, “moi” in Mường people, “then”, “tào” in Thái, Tày, Nùng, Dao people. They have a spiritual space that is both defined and invisible: instead of being included in a world view vertically, horizontally or both, that space is however identified according to “region” or “palace” of the universe. This universe has boundary that is limited and shown by “thiên” (heaven), “địa” (land), “thủy” (water), “nhạc” (heave, land, water, forest) which is both clear and vague enough to limit in one region or broad to several regions or even the whole universe. Their physical bodies are no longer because they have become “racks” where the deities who are responsible for managing the regions or thrones would get into. This helps to narrow the gap between the deities and the believers and satisfies the followers’ need to get closer to the deities. In other words, these people are special followers. But there is an order among male and female according to their position in doing service for “palaces” that bases on their experience working with the deities however none of them can be the ultimate leader.

Regarding the extent of influence during changes of time and space, until present, Mother Liễu worship is no more limited in cities or provinces such as Nam Định, Thanh Hóa, Hanoi or in many other places in the North but also extended to the Middle (Hòn Chén temple in Huế) and the South (with emigrants’ steps after 1954). After the establishment of Tiên Thiên Thánh Giáo, Mother Liễu worship’s influence has gone from local level to the whole nation. The Mother is considered the Queen Mother of the whole North, along with the homeland mother and goddess Thiên Y A Na in the Middle and the Queen of homeland in the South. If we also enlist Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu (Mother goddess of holy mountain), there are two goddess taking care of the homeland who were conferred title by the feudal monarchy. Thus I see no reason to call Mother Liễu worship in particular and Mother worship in general a “folk” belief.

I hereby would like to propose a comment: There is a universal characteristic in the situation of religion in Vietnam. Except for animism which was the ultimate ancient religion and none has learned how it spread, almost big religions according to text from the beginning of Christian era were promulgated downward from the upper class in the society (aristocrat, the royal family, high ranking state officer) to the lower class of common people in cities or in the countryside. It was then reproduced by the intellectuals in cities or in villages (sacred specialist, healer, teacher, professional master, priest, retired state officer) to be new forms of religion with teachings that were rather close to understanding ability and daily customs of common people, along with world religions that had entered the country. In other

word, in the Middle time, there were internal-born religions co-existed with religions coming from oversea. It does not mean we have no exception. Exceptions are religions with Western origin such as Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholicism, for instance, did not follow the mechanism of downward promulgation as said above in the first three centuries. During this time, the religion was spread upward, from common people to the ones belonged to the upper class.

Mother Liễu worship came into life thanked to the combination of different elements. This religious pluralism is without a pure origin. One can easily indicate various expressions, or “techniques” and methods borrowed from other religions to constitute a new religion. Before introducing constitutional elements, I want to make a question: “Why there appeared a new religion with borrowing elements while others had existed already?” I try to answer the question as follow:

May be we need to find the reason for this from individual freedom that was enough to encourage creativeness, even in the realm of spirituality. What I have just said seems to be in contrast with common viewpoints, because in Đại Việt monarchy society, there was no such thing as individual freedom. Yet in my opinion, there were times when individual freedom in Đại Việt society was in bloom resulted in a culture that we call “folk culture”. According to reliable materials, one of the times was in the 15th century, after king Lê Thánh Tông had passed away, social stability went away with his death. Political upheavals and social disorder happned so often that no political forces could control the situation. There had never been in history strong criticism on kings and lords which means a protest to social order. There appeared common people’s popular idioms aiming at kings and lords such as “piggy king” (meant king Lê Tương Dực), “to be over head and ears in debts like lord Chôm”. Hồ Xuân Hương was born in 18th century when satirical had become so popular. With her talent in literature and poetry, she became a famous figure who dared to negate the contemporary parchiarchy that was considered foundation of social power. There had been a change in social order and consequently individual freedom could have caused liberation in religion, especially with the contribution of dynamic and non-politic forces of businessman and handicraft onwers. Archaeological discoveries and excavation both on land and under water in recent years reveal persuasive evidences of lively existence of people who created the commodity market economy in Đại Việt era. Additionally, as previous researches had revealed, the Vietnamese woman’s role in the family and in doing business was undeniable. This shows that the women were even dynamic and initiative in religion, not only in the boundary of family or in doing business and on the other side, proves for the “easiness” and “ordinariness”

when the religion was mainly created for themselves. In other words, let see who were the founders of this religion? I want to call women, coming from various social classes, yet especially who were doing business, “co-founders” of the religion. In any case, the common determinant must be the existence of individual freedom.

So, the question is whether there was a reverse evolution? Why after the 15th century only the economy developed significantly while the whole society was in crisis? These are not easy to answer.

A Religious Mosaic

My question is what “material” those founders had used to establish a new religion? In case of Mother Liễu worship, we can see a flexible combination full of wording between legend and mediumship practice to build up a god with powerful capacity – the core element for a newly born religion. A colourful picture appears before our eyes with so deep and mingled “colors” and spiritual “shape” that a normal eye can only see the thin surface or simple colours separately such as “red”, “black”, “yellow” or “brown”. Thus I want to try to analyze the picture at its depth in the eye of a researcher on religion and traditional belief in Vietnam.

Via legends that were often misunderstood as the works by the common people, we can see the origin that is half of Fairy half of Bodhisattva of Mother Liễu, a visible integration between fragments of Taoism and Buddhism. This origin is full of poetry and literature and can only be created by talented combination and reproduction by some intellectuals who borrowed ideas in fairy stories that were abundant in the contemporary society. Obviously, those stories attracted intellectuals at that time because of glistening myths. Moreover, they would not be criticized or blamed for having used fairy tales to express their own opinions. Thus, Mother Liễu legend must be the work of a specific “author” and by examining the content of those stories I can affirm that he thoroughly understood the Three Religions. In the stories, meetings of Phùng Khắc Khoan ambassador and Princess Liễu Hạnh remind us of a meaningful and intentional combination of teachings of Taoism and Buddhism. This can be the deepest foundation of this spiritual mosaic.

Interestingly, why there appeared the name of Bùng - the first doctoral candidate (Phùng Khắc Khoan) in the story? Maybe we need another hypothesis: is Bùng the author of Mother Liễu legend or he first created the story which was then enriched and supplemented again and again if we all know that he understood the Three Religions? Anyway, this is my own suspicion and I will wait for more explanations

from colleagues. But I would still argue that the story was the profound work by contemporary intellectuals that we should not entitle it by “folk” literature. It cannot be seen as non-noble even though it was disseminated widely in the countryside under oral versions or in texts with many variants.

So what is the religious combination mentioned in the case of Mother Liễu worship? The legend gives no explanation for the title “Liễu Hạnh”. Changes in her name are generally progressive but partly unexpected. Her first name Giáng Tiên (Descending Fairy) was given according to Her father’s dream when he had a priest cured his wife strange phenomenon: the child did not get out despite the fact that it stayed too long in the mother’s womb. Via the dream, Her father learnt that she was Princess Quỳnh Hoa of the Jade Emperor but sent into exile to the earth after having broken a jade cup.

Some following details around Mother’s birth shows that She was not an ordinary person: Her mother’s so long pregnancy; Her mother only ate vegetable and fruits not fish or meat during her pregnancy; and when Mother was born, the house was full of nice fragrance. Mother was also very good at learning literature and poetry. When She was grown up, she got married to a man that was in fact a Star descending from Heaven with intention to find Her. At the age of 21, when the exile was ended, she flied back to Heaven. But then She was so impressed with the Earth that She asked to be re-born there. This time Her official name was unexpectedly changed to Liễu Hạnh. The Mother Liễu this time, however, instead of staying at a fixed place, wandered about enjoying beautiful sceneries.

Back to our discussion, the combination has become clear:

- Her Mother refused eating fish and meat which means an undeniable sign of “no killing” – the first of Buddhism fundamental rules.
- Mother comes from Heaven court as a daughter of the Jade Emperor – the lord of the Taoism’s pantheon in general;
- Mother is talented in literature and poetry. This is an ideal image of the first social class called “scholars”;
- Mother descended on earth the second times taking the title of Liễu Hạnh. She often traveled widely like a Taoist or a monk.

“Liễu” and “Hạnh” in Chinese is not a name created accidentally without any meaning. Hạnh is one of the sound of letter Hành but different in meaning. But Hạnh here means Hạnh tree according to legend telling about the first meeting of Mother

Liễu and Bùng the first doctoral candidate. The Hạnh tree, according to Thiệu Chử (Nguyễn Hữu Kha) was the tree that Confucian often sat under giving lectures to his students. The name of the tree then was used to refer to place as school. In Tang dynasty, the ones who got the first doctoral degree would be invited to party in a Hạnh garden. That is why the one who succeeded in education was called Hạnh Lâm. Thus, such a story with deep implication cannot be a work by sudden inspiration but by a very intelligent scholar. We can guess more from the pulse of the story.

When Bùng the first doctoral candidate first met Mother, he did not know that it was the princess Liễu Hạnh. After a dialog beside a Buddhist temple, he turned to very much admire Her talent. After the Princess had disappeared, the Doctor looked up onto the top of the tree and found 4 letters of Mao Khẩu Công Chúa and a big panel read “Băng Mã Dĩ Tấu”. If combined both the tree and the letters, Bùng would learn the name of the lady and also what she wanted him to do. If the letter Mộc is combined with Khẩu, we will have Hạnh which refers to school. If Mộc joins with Mao, we will have Liễu, which refers to Liễu tree and also the title of one of “28 Stars”. In the old style, if some one was compared with one of those 28 stars, he must be the excellent person without any doubt. Bùng the first doctoral candidate was one of talented people at that time so he could be seen as a star. He was noble but seemed not to be pleased with the temporary society so he was a “moving star”. This is why I doubt Bùng is the very author of legend of Mother Liễu.

That is interesting enough. Yet Liễu tree’s branch is a precious object in the hand of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva found in images and statues in Mahayana Secret School or Pure Land School in China and Vietnam. The Mother herself is female and Hạnh Liễu means the tree. But it can be read as Liễu Hành which means “practise the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s act by a Liễu tree’s branch and pot of sweet dew to save the living beings.

I want to emphasize one point: image of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva shows a figure of a female with such characteristics of a “goddess” that many people misunderstood and worshiped him as other gods popularly via many generations. In reality, there are ideas of divinity borrowing from Bodhisattva but this does not mean that this Bodhisattva no longer played an important role in Buddhism.

Therefore, we can come to a conclusion: Mother Liễu’s name is a mixture of elements from Taoism and Buddhism, and even a little from Confucianism. The method for that mixture can be found in the image of Mother Liễu with both appearance of a fairy and incarnation of a Bodhisattva (mostly Avalokitesvara

Bodhisattva) that reveals strong desire for release from pain and, at the same time, for universal salvation. Symbol of Mother is then a collection of spirituality, a sacred object for worshipping in a part of people who need protection and happiness in daily life.

We also find Her protection in the way of “Tam Quan” (Three Doors) in Taoism with three delegations: Thiên Quan (Heavenly door) offers Happiness, Địa Quan (earthly door) forgives all sins and Thủy Quan (water door) gives verdict on good or bad acts. These are gods for everyone’s life in Taoism conception. Observation from field work, via their similar red robe, found a unity between Mother Liễu and Thiên Mẫu (Heavenly Mother) who belongs to Three Thrones.

Finally, this religious mixture also uses mediumship to complete the separated practice. Thus, Mother Liễu worship in Phú Giày (real name is Vân Cát) can be categorized into national mixed religion which then be developed thanks to later-born national religions.

Conclusion

As discussed above, if we agree that this is a religion, there must be a relevant behavior.

In fact, even though the religion was born not so long ago, and there are points need more discussion, there was a way to define the importance of Mother Liễu worship when a saying had been widely promulgated: “Father’s dead anniversary in August, Mother’s dead anniversary in March”. “Father” here means Saint Trần and “Mother” refers to Mother Liễu. This systematized form can be simple, but it helps showing the certain depth of people’s spiritual life in last several hundreds years. “Recessions” that lead to the use of “folk” to represent a dynamic spiritual reality cannot prevent Mother Liễu worship along time. Time can give answer to any questions. An interference even with good intention is not a wise answer. When people’s need still exists, it must be satisfied and this is also true with spirituality hidden deep within each person.

People’s right to revere to a holy realm is protected by laws beside other basic human rights. Thus, visible recession and performance are not the main reason of the disappearance of a noble need to admire and ask for protection from a Holy Being.

That is why we need more thoughts on Mother Liễu worship and the discussion does not end here.

(translated by Hoàng Văn Chung)