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Cultural schemas and folk-belief: an insight into the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in Vietnam

Ly Thi Phuong Tran¹✉, Tan Hoang Phan² & Nhu Vo Tam Nguyen³

Religious belief, as noted by scholars like Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Max Weber (1864–1920), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and William James (1842–1910), reflects shared values, shapes human conduct, and provides spiritual strength. Furthermore, it is considered a template that expresses the basic spiritual needs and aspirations of human life, containing many cultural values and characteristics of the thinking of ethnic communities. Moreover, people perceive everything by schemas formed in memory. In this study, the authors chose the subject of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess—one of the most popular and ancient beliefs in Vietnam and inscribed by UNESCO as a Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016. Employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, linguistic materials, and field research, the study explores how Vietnamese cultural beliefs shape perception, behavior, and lifestyle. Therefore, understanding and analyzing the characteristics of the beliefs in worshipping the Mother Goddess through the lens of Cultural Linguistics can present the actual spiritual experiences of Vietnamese people. From this unique perspective, the process of perceiving the world has meaning to the language and behavior of a community culture.

¹The Faculty of Social Sciences Teacher Education, Saigon University, 273 An Duong Vuong Street, Ward 3, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. ²Saigon University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. ³FPT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. ✉email: tply@sgu.edu.vn

Introduction

In 1973, Geertz argued that religious belief is a system of symbols through which humans interpret the world around them and orient their behavior. It not only is an important part of the culture but also contributes to the cultural identity of each nation. In addition, Durkheim (1912) also asserted that religion is a manifestation of collective consciousness, which is a way for people to express identity and connect with their communities. According to Dung (2017) religious beliefs play a major role in forming and developing the customs and festivals of each ethnic group and region. They are cultural and spiritual phenomena that not only reflect intrinsic human spiritual aspirations and desires but also foster and preserve cultural values. In Vietnam, awareness of the divine world is clearly expressed through many beliefs. For many years, the cult of the Mother Goddess in Vietnam has been the subject of research by scientists from both Vietnam and abroad. These studies have focused on the history, development, pantheon, rituals, and festivals of the cult, as well as its role in the lives of Vietnamese people. Specifically, in the study “The Cult of the Mother Goddess in Vietnam: History, Beliefs, and Rituals” by Williams (2012), the author stated that worshipping the Mother Goddess not only is a cornerstone of Vietnamese folk beliefs but also embodies the deep-rooted cultural, spiritual, and religious values of the Vietnamese community. Likewise, in the work “The Vietnamese Mother Goddess”, Whitmore (2012) argued that the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, a distinctive cultural feature of the Vietnamese people, has made a significant contribution to the formation and development of the national cultural identity.

In addition, there are some of the most notable studies on the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in Vietnam such as “Vietnamese Belief In Worshipping the Mother Goddess: Theoretical and Practical Issues” (Thuy, 2014) and “The Belief In Worshipping the Mother Goddess and Festivals in Vietnam” (Van, 2014). Besides that, research on the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in Vietnam has been conducted by many scholars as Dinh et al. (2022), Vu (2006), Ngo (2002, 2018), Salemink (2014), and Taylor (2004). According to the findings of previous studies, the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in Vietnam is a unique folk belief that expresses the deep respect, veneration, and adoration of female deities associated with natural phenomena and the universe. These female deities are said to possess the power to create, protect, and shelter human life. This belief is largely due to the profound influence of the matriarchal social structure on early agricultural culture, as the Vietnamese have a tradition of worshipping female deities.

The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess has an impact on the value of faith, based on which Vietnamese people believe that there is a spiritual world, besides the real world, with the gods, the goddesses, and the saints. Therefore, the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is associated with many traditional festivals such as the Châu văn festival, the Phú Tây Hồ festival, the Bà Chúa Kho festival, and so on. As a consequence, worshipping the Mother Goddess has created inspiration for many artistic works such as ca trù, hát văn, poetry, and more. These works not only express faith in the divine but also reflect the cultural and spiritual values of the Vietnamese people. Even in the worship utensils, there are often many traditional motifs and patterns of the Vietnamese people. The cult of the Mother Goddess is like a rich cultural treasure trove, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Manh, 2023). The rituals, actions, and language used when participating in and organizing worship are also followed by the formula created by the faith of the believers. In a specific situation, each believer in the ceremony has different roles and responsibilities and must know how to practice the movements

and language in accordance with the rules of that ritual. These general principles are expressed by the author through cultural schemas in the concept of human life. Cultural schemas are the basis of the theoretical foundation of Cultural Linguistics. This research direction allows scholars from various fields to explore the characteristics of language in the human mind through the encoding of culturally constructed concepts within the scope of human experience (Sharifian, 2011, 2014, 2015; Sharifian and Palmer, 2007). Inheriting the concept of cognitive linguist Palmer (1996), Cultural Linguistics was born to study the relationship between language, culture, and concept, which is inseparable in many fields, including beliefs and religious rituals. Cultural schemas allow the recipient to grasp beliefs, norms, rules, and expectations about behavior and values related to different aspects and components of experience through language (Sharifian, 2017). Cultural schemas are developed through the basic experience of individuals in a particular community. Research works on the role and application of schemas in decoding cultural concepts through language by scientists such as Nishida (1999), Sharifian (2011, 2017), Farraniva and Acmed-Ismael (2021), Augoustinos et al. (2017), Lu (2017), Higgins (2021).

Based on schema classification of scholar Sharifian, this paper investigates the cultural characteristics of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of Vietnamese people. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the manifestations of the cultural schemas of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of Vietnamese people?
2. How is the process of implementing the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of Vietnamese people shown through cultural schemas?
3. How are local cultural characteristics represented through the cultural schemas?

By analyzing the basic cultural conceptualization of the Vietnamese people expressed through the cultural schema of Mother worship, this paper aims to clarify the human philosophies and indigenous origins of the cultural belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of the Vietnamese people throughout history.

Analytical framework

Cultural schemas. Cultural Schemas actually originated as a branch of cognitive schemas. In the period between the 1930s and the beginning of the twentieth century, there were many cognitive scientists such as Bartlett (1932), Bobrow and Norman (1975), Minsky (1975), Rumelhart (1980), D’Andrade (1995), Holland and Cole (1995), Derry (1996), Strauss and Quinn (1997) and Sharifian (2001).

Several ways of classifying cultural maps have been published by many researchers. Cook (1994) distinguished the schema of cultural differences into three types: world schema, text schema, and language schema. Cook (1994) used “word schema” to show the schematic organization of world knowledge; “text schema” to refer to the “typical order of real-world or fictional events”; and “language schema” refers to general knowledge of the grammar of a language. Nishida’s intercultural (1999) categorized schemas according to the culturally related approach. Nishida grouped social interaction schemas into eight categories: (a) fact-and-concept schemas; (b) person schemas; (c) self schemas; (d) role schemas; (e) context schemas; (f) procedure schemas; (g) strategy schemas; (h) emotion schemas. Based on the division of the above schemas, Sharifian (2011, 2017) said that the cultural schema is written in small capital letters, focusing on the following five types

of schemas: (a) event schemas; (b) role schemas; (c) image schemas; (d) propositional schemas; (e) emotion schemas.

Cultural schemas contain schemas that represent the general perception and formation of ideas related to a particular cultural group. A cultural schema is a mental model built from cultural perceptions of people. Cultural schemas are shared by many members of a community, and they can capture cultural informational meanings. More specifically, it is the beliefs, norms, rules, and expectations about behaviors and values related to different aspects and components of an individual's experience in a social context. As Sharifian (2011) puts it, cultural schema captures the roots of knowledge that provide the basis for a substantial part of the encyclopedic and pragmatic significance of human language. It is a substantial foundation for shared knowledge, or assumptions, shared by members of the public discourse. Regarding the meaning of diagrams in recording the interaction process between people and the surrounding environment, Taylor and Crocker (1981) determined that they have the following characteristics:

- provide a structure against which the experience is mapped;
- direct the encoding and retrieval of information from memory;
- affect the efficiency and speed of information processing;
- instructions to fill in the gaps in the available information;
- provide samples for problem solving;
- facilitate the assessment of experience;
- facilitate future predictions, goal setting, planning, and goal execution.

It can be seen that the existence of cultural schemas reflects the interaction of each individual performing the ritual in a cultural group (Sharifian, 2017). When making appropriate inferences and assumptions, each member is based on cultural knowledge that they have experienced through practice and learning from many other members. Once successfully implemented, they are familiar with the cultural knowledge contained in these schemas (Nishida, 1999). Moreover, this knowledge gives important meaning to the performance of communicative behaviors in a community. It is important to understand that the cultural schema is distributed heterogeneously in the minds of each member of a cultural group. Besides that, every member of a cultural community can negotiate and renegotiate the information in this schema, passing it on to future generations (Sharifian, 2011, 2017). In conclusion, cultural schema, a fundamental part of human cognition and communication, allows members to understand and interpret the world, and interact with others in a culturally appropriate way.

The belief in Vietnamese worshipping the Mother Goddess. The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, also known as the worship of the Tam phủ (Three Palaces) and Tứ phủ (Four Palaces), is a unique cultural phenomenon of the Vietnamese community that formed and developed on the basis of worshipping the Goddesses and the local Mother Goddess. It is an indigenous belief with foreign influences from Taoism, and it contributes to the appreciation of women in society. This religious belief is gendered in the image of a mother, through which Vietnamese women have expressed their desire for liberation from the prejudices and constraints of the feudalism of Confucian society. Recognized by UNESCO in December 2016, this Vietnamese ritual was inscribed on the Representative List. With the appearance of this type of worship, the Vietnamese language community has experienced the culture through its existence. Traces of this belief's language practice show that cultural awareness of patterns in space and time is associated not only

with indigenous factors but also with acclimatization factors from other linguistic-cultural communities.

The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess has been a core part of Vietnamese culture since the Vietnamese people lived in the mountains. The first Mother Goddess is Mẫu Thượng Thiên, also known as Mẫu Nghi Thiên Hạ (Mother of the Sky) and followed by Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) and Mẫu Thủy/Mẫu Thoải (Mother of the Waters), respectively. Mẫu Địa (Mother of the Earth) is the final Mother Goddess. Besides that, the concept encompasses both a primitive cosmological system and a sense of humanity. It views the universe as divided into three or four regions ruled by the Mother Goddesses, who govern heaven, mountains or forests, rivers or waters, and the land. Therefore, the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess has emphasized the importance of gratitude to ancestors, origins, and natural objects, such as trees, land, and water since the cultural experience of the inhabitants of wet rice farming. At the same time, The Eastern belief in the transformation of nature into god has led to a unique cultural-artistic integration process, which is clearly and dramatically developed in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess. The belief has incorporated unique cultural forms such as language arts, performing arts, and other forms of community activities. The process of language practice in this belief is the process of performing cultural activities. The most prominent ritual of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is the Hầu Đổng ritual, in which a priest or priestess mimics the deities by dressing and acting like them. This form of spiritual theater is closely linked with the nation's history and has a symbolic meaning with all its elements of performance, including vibrant sacred dances and a type of music ceremony known as the singing of Châu Văn. UNESCO (2016) has officially registered this form of performance in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity with the title of Practices related to the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of Three Realms.

Methods

This paper is based on the analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics proposed by Sharifian (2001). Based on the division of the cultural schemas of Sharifian (2011, 2017) as well as survey practice, the authors determined that the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess of Vietnamese people is founded on three basic types of schemas: role schemas, event schemas, and image schemas. The authors use qualitative methods to survey, analyze, and evaluate the linguistic corpus system. The corpus is analyzed and explained by the above types of cultural diagrams of Sharifian (2011, 2017). The corpus includes eighty Châu Văn songs collected from the works: *Điện thần và nghi thức hầu đồng Việt Nam* (Temple of God and rituals of Vietnamese courtesans) by Hiep et al. (2019), *Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion) by Thinh (2009), and extracted from video recordings of Hầu Đổng and shadow dance sessions to record the language used in the practices from source material on YouTube.

The authors conducted field methods at temples in the southern region of Vietnam, including the Miao of Wuxing in Nha Be District, and the Miao of Thiên Hậu Mother Goddess in District 5, Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the Shrine of the Sam Mountain Goddess in Nui Sam ward, Chau Doc City, An Giang Province by taking photographs of the temples and rituals as documentation. Moreover, eighty châu văn songs are extracted from videos of Hầu Đổng rituals to identify the language used in the rituals. The authors compared the songs with data collected from the following works: *Điện thần và nghi thức hầu đồng Việt Nam* (Temple of God and rituals of Vietnamese courtesans) by

Hiep et al. (2019); Điện thần và nghi thức hầu đồng Việt Nam (Temple of God and rituals of Vietnamese courtesans) by Hiep (2019); Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam (Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion) by Thinh (2009); Đạo Mẫu Việt Nam, tập 2 (Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion, Volume 2) by Thinh (2019).

Finding and discussion

According to Farzad Sharifian (2011, 2017), cultural schemas are reflected in the language and help to conceptualize cultural experiences. The survey results identified four cultural schemas including role schemas, event schemas, image schemas, and emotional schemas in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess.

Role schemas in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess.

Role schemas are used to study the roles of individuals in society, as reflected through the language of different cultures. The theory originated in social psychology, Augoustinos, Walker, and Donaghue (1995) referred to the role schema as a knowledge structure in which people have specific positions and roles within a subculture. The theory has been widely studied and applied by scholars. For example, Gumperz (1982) used the theory to study how social roles are reflected in the Hindu language in India. The results showed that social roles are reflected in various ways, such as the use of formal or informal language, technical language, and slang. Ervin Tripp (1976) also applied role schema theory to study gender roles in the American language. Scholars have also applied the theory to the study of world religions. For example, Barker (1984) used role schemas theory to explore gender roles reflected through Mormon religious practices, such as language use, dress, and religious rituals. Orsi (1996) studied social roles in Catholic religious practices through role schemas. Vásquez (2011) also applied the theory to the religious practices of Latinos in the United States. In Vietnam, scholars have also achieved some results in studies of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess (Ngoc, 2015), Hanoi (Dung, 2017), and Hai Phong (Dung, 2020) through role schema theory.

In cultural linguistics, Sharifan (2017) refers to the study of Nishida (1999), one of the first studies to introduce a classification of schemas based on the culturally informed approach. In the study, a role schema is defined as comprising knowledge about the achieved and ascribed social roles as well as the expected behaviors associated with these roles. People from different cultural groups will construct different categories and schemas for the same role (Nishida, 1999). Based on this theoretical foundation, the research team applied it to practice, specifically using it to study and build role schemas in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess.

Emerging from the depths of Vietnamese spiritual adoration, Châu Văn songs proved that the revered trio of goddesses – Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky), Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains), and Mẫu Thoải (Mother of the Water)—are the embodiment of the sky, the mountains, and the water. Seeing that these three primordial deities have long been interwoven into the cultural fabric of Vietnamese life, their presence deeply etched in the daily consciousness of the people. In a later addition, the Vietnamese embraced Mẫu Địa (Mother of Earth), an incarnation of Mẫu Thượng Thiên, to symbolize the harmonious balance between the heavens and the earth. The poetic verses of “Tam tòa Thánh Mẫu” (Three temples dedicated to the Mother Goddess) beautifully capture the essence and significance of these goddesses.

Ngày lành mở tiệc ung dung (On a good day, open a leisurely party)

Thỉnh chư tiên Thánh công đồng đàn duyên (Invite deva realm, goddess in the shrines of the three realms and four realms to meeting)

Thỉnh mời Đệ nhất thiên tiên/ Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Please invite Mother of the Sky)

...

Thực tài Thánh mẫu quá ưa (The power of the Mother Goddess is so sacred)

Thỉnh chư tiên thánh ngự ca điện tiền (Please invite gods of deva realm to attend and sing at the palace)

Thỉnh mời Thủy tinh chúa tiên/ Mẫu Thủy (Please invite the Mother of the Water)

Long vương thần nữ ngự đến thủy cung (Dragon goddess go to Dragon King of Wells and Springs)

...

Nguyện xin tiên thánh uy nguy giáng đền (Pray for the mighty gods to descend upon the temple)

Thỉnh mời Sơn lâm chúa tiên/Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Please invite the Mother of the Mountains)

Vốn xưa sinh ở trên đền Đông Cuông (Originally born at Dong Cuong temple)

To be easily visualized, the first figure shows the following models.

Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky), one of the four Mother Goddesses in the Vietnamese folk religion, is the ruler of the Sky Realm. In the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, she is considered the supreme deity, and the source of all things. In a symmetrical vertical axis of the first figure, Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky) is at the top, which represents the supreme goddess, and the ruler of the Tứ phủ (Four Palaces). Below is Mẫu Địa (Mother of the Earth), the incarnation of Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky), embodying the harmony and equilibrium of heaven and earth, or the concept of “Trời tròn Đất vuông” (round sky, square earth). Vietnamese people believe that the sky is a circle, representing perfection and eternity. The earth is a square, representing stability and stability. The Vietnamese concept of “Trời tròn Đất vuông” (round sky, square earth), a humanistic concept, is reflected in the respect of humans for nature (Trong, 2009; Khoat, 2007; Huyen, 1992a; Chi, 2004).

There are many legends about Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky), but the most popular is the legend of Princess Thanh Vân, as told in the book “Thượng Thiên Thánh Mẫu Truyện” (story of the Mother of the Sky) (Vu, 1932). In this legend, Princess Thanh Vân, a daughter of the Jade Emperor, is sent to the mortal world to save humanity. The text further details that Princess Thanh Vân takes on many different forms, including Thánh Mẫu Liễu Hạnh (Liễu Hạnh Mother Goddess), the most popular goddess in the belief, as evidenced by the song “Liễu Hạnh Thánh Mẫu” (Liễu Hạnh Mother Goddess).

“Liễu Hạnh Thánh Mẫu ngự trên trời (Liễu Hạnh Mother Goddess is in the sky)

Cưỡi rồng mây xuống cứu đời (She rides the cloud dragon to save people)

Bà phù hộ cho dân lành (She blesses good people)

Bà ban cho phúc đức thọ trường” (She bestows the blessing of longevity)

In Vietnamese folk temples, Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky) is often placed in the highest center position, while Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) and Mẫu Thoải (Mother of the Water) are on two sides. Furthermore, Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky) is described as a dignified powerful figure, and in red clothing (Vu, 1932).

In Fig. 1, the left side of the symmetrical horizontal axis is Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains), and Mẫu Thoải (Mother of the Water) is on the right. This is based on the placement of the Mother Goddesses in Vietnamese folk temples.

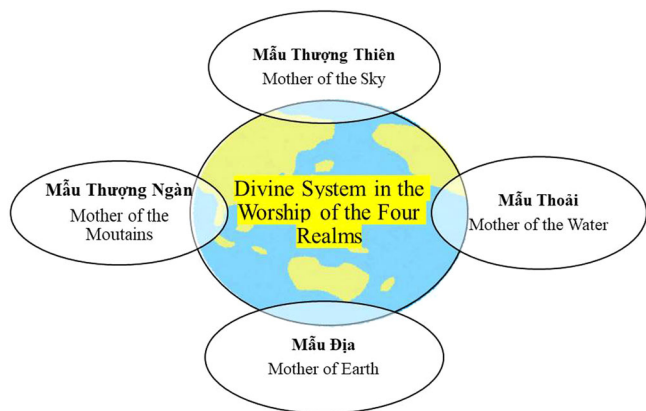


Fig. 1 Role schemas of the divine system in the worship of the Four Palaces (Source: authors).

The placement of Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) to the left of Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky) is a reflection of her role as protector. More specifically, worshiped in many temples and shrines in the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam, such as Bắc Lệ temple, Suối Mỡ temple, Thượng temple, and so on, the goddess is believed to give the people favorable climates, fruitful harvests, good health, and happy families. According to legend, Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) is the daughter of Sơn Tinh¹ and Mỵ Nương², and the granddaughter of Hùng King. She often followed her father on his travels to the mountains, where she was loved and respected by the spirits. When growing up, she was married to a mountain spirit and became not only Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) but also the protector of the highlanders (Thap, 2004). However, in some Mother Goddess temples, Mẫu Thượng Ngàn (Mother of the Mountains) is to the right of Mẫu Thượng Thiên (Mother of the Sky), which is due to the customs and traditions of the region or the beliefs of the people in the peculiar area.

The placement of Mẫu Thoài (Mother of the Water) to the right of Mẫu Thượng Thiên in Fig. 1 is indicative of her role as the protector of the riverine region. This is reflected in the fact that she is worshiped in many temples and shrines in the northern riverine regions of Vietnam, such as Bà Chúa Kho Temple, Bà Chúa Thượng Ngàn Temple, and Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh Temple. At these temples, people pray to Mẫu Thoài (Mother of the Water) for her blessing of favorable weather, bountiful harvests, good health, and happy families. According to legend, Mẫu Thoài (Mother of the Water) is the youngest daughter of King Bát Hải Động Đình. She is a goddess with the power to control the rivers and waters, and to protect the people of the riverine areas. Mẫu Thoài (Mother of the Water) ensures that they have rain and sunshine in the right amount, bountiful crops, healthy people, and happy families (Tháp, 2004).

a. Role Schemas the divine system in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in the North

Văn công đồng or Châu Văn songs provide a comprehensive overview of the gods in the Mẫu Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces) system of worship. Châu Văn is not only a type of folk literature typically expressed in the form of stories, songs, and dances but also the product of Vietnamese labor and activities. Moreover, the Vietnamese folk religious literature plays an important role in reflecting and disseminating the Mẫu Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces) belief system. It often tells stories about the gods in the Mẫu Tứ Phủ (Four Palaces) system, including their origins, biographies, accomplishments, and the miracles they have performed, as well

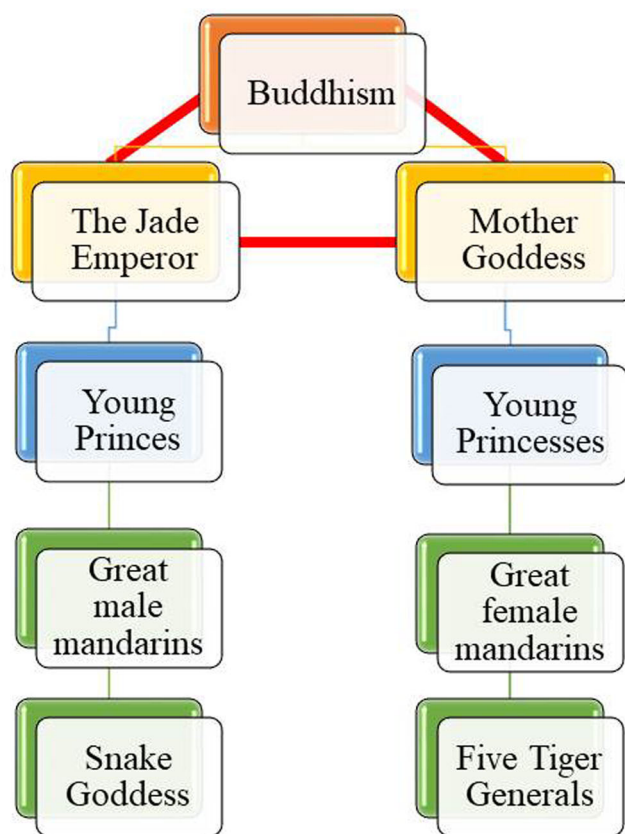


Fig. 2 Role schemas of the divine system in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in the North (Source: authors).

as expresses the faith and aspirations of the Vietnamese people for the protection of the gods in their lives, as shown in Fig. 2.

The above role schema in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess shows the cultural fusion between Buddhism and the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess. Figure 2 was constructed based on the Vietnamese conception of the gender-based arrangement of “Nam tả, nữ hữu” (male is on the left while female is on the right). In particular, in Vietnamese religious ceremonies, men typically stand on the left and women stand on the right. This arrangement expresses respect for the gods as well as the distinction between men and women. Therefore, the right column represents the ranks of female deities, including the Mother Goddess, Châu Bà³ (a female deity in the Mẫu Tứ Phủ), and Young Princesses. In contrast, the left column represents the ranks of male deities, including the Jade Emperor, and Princes.

Moreover, the model is also based on the Vietnamese cultural conception of “tiền Phật hậu Mẫu” (Buddha is in front, while the Mother Goddess is at back). In addition, this conception reflects the reverence of the Vietnamese people for both the Buddhists and the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess. The term “tiền Phật” (Buddha is in front) means that Buddhism is worshiped first, reflecting a reverence for the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. In fact, Buddhism is a major world religion that has had a profound influence on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. On the other hand, Buddhism has both enriched moral and humanistic values, and given more meaningful lives for people. (Thuy, 2021a; Tho, 2022a; Hang, 2020a).

In addition, in Fig. 2, the term “Hậu Mẫu” (Mother Goddess is at back) is juxtaposed to the male Jade Emperor which indicates that the Mother Goddess is worshiped within Buddhism, which evinces the Vietnamese reverence for the deities in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess. The belief in worshipping the

Mother Goddess is a native Vietnamese belief system that reflects standing in awe of the goddesses who govern the earth, sky, rivers, trees, and so on. The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess provides the Vietnamese people with faith in the protection of the deities, helping them to overcome difficulties as well as misfortunes, and to strive for a peaceful and happy life. (Thuy, 2021a; Tho, 2022a; Hang, 2020a). The conception of “*tiên Phật, hậu Mẫu*” (Buddha is in front, while Mother Goddess is at back) is a sign of the harmony between the two major belief systems with deep cultural and spiritual values, contributing to enriching the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people.

Châu bà (young princesses) are the incarnations of the Mother Goddess who descend to earth with the purpose of helping the people. They are known for their noble qualities, contributions to the nation, outstanding talents, extraordinary wisdom, compassion, and kindness. There are many famous *Châu bà* (young princesses) in the Mother Goddess religion (Tho, 2022b; Thuy, 2021a; Hang, 2020b).

Other deities include *Châu Đệ Nhất Thượng Thiên*, *Châu Đệ Nhị Thượng Ngàn*, and *Châu Đệ Tứ Khâm Sai*. *Châu Đệ Nhất Thượng Thiên* is the head of the *Mẫu Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces) and governs heaven while wearing red robes. *Châu Đệ Nhị Thượng Ngàn* superintends the mountains and forests and wears green robes. *Châu Đệ Tam Thoải Phủ* governs the waters and seas, and wears white robes. *Châu Đệ Tứ Khâm Sai* has the power to represent the Mother Goddess on earth and wears yellow robes.

The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is a complex belief system that includes a hierarchy of deities. The highest-ranking deities are the *Châu Bà* (young princesses), while *Vương Cô* (great female mandarins—the attendants of the *Châu Bà*) is under the *Châu Bà*. In the *Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces), there are twelve *Vương Cô* (great female mandarins), who govern all regions of Vietnam, from the mountains to the rivers, and are the maids serving the *Thánh Mẫu* (Mother Goddess) and the *Châu Bà* (young princesses). Furthermore, each *Vương Cô* (great female mandarin) has a unique history, powers, and roles in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess. When descending to earth, the *Vương Cô* (great female mandarins) will transform into different roles in the Four Palaces to serve the young princesses, and the Mother Goddess (Thuy, 2021b). Moreover, another important figure in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is the *Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers Goddess) standing on five mountains and representing each direction of the world. Specifically, the *Hoàng Hổ* (Golden Tiger Goddess) in the center governs the central region, while the *Xích Hổ* (Red Tiger Goddess) governs the south, and the *Lục hổ* (Green Tiger Goddess) governs the east, as well as the *Bạch hổ* (White Tiger Goddess) governs the west, the *Hắc Hổ* (Black Tiger Goddess), in the end, governs the north (Y, 2002; Khanh, 2007). In addition, the symbol of the *Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers Goddess) not only represents the strength, majesty, and power of the deities in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess but also exemplifies the protection and care of the deities of humanity. In the Mother Goddess temples, the symbol of the Five Tigers Goddess is often placed in a prominent position, such as in front of the temple gate, in the back hall, or on the altar. Similarly, the symbol is also used in the Mother Goddess rituals, such as lion dances and dragon dances.

On the left side of the model, there are four deities from top to bottom: *Ngọc Hoàng* (the Jade Emperor), *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes), *Vương Cật* (Great male mandarin), and *Xà Thần* (Snake Goddess). Following the orders of *Ngọc Hoàng* (the Jade Emperor), *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes) are deities who descended to earth to help people. Each *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes), who fought wars, opened up the country, and had outstanding talents as well as compassion, is associated with a historical figure. In the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, *Quan Lớn* (Young

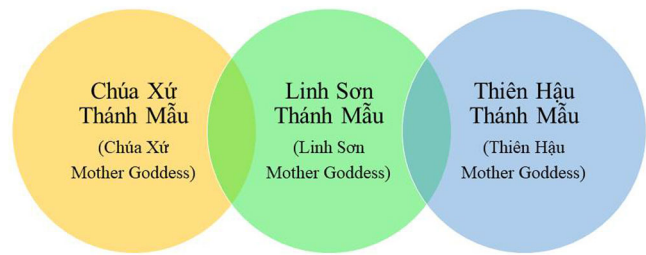


Fig. 3 Role schemas of the divine system in the belief of the Mother Goddess in the South (Source: authors).

Princes) are divided into two main categories including *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes) in heaven, who govern the realms of heaven, such as the celestial court, the celestial realm, and the underworld, and *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes) under heaven, who govern the realms of earth, such as rivers, mountains, and forests. In addition, *Vương Cật* (Great male mandarin), who died before ten year old, manifests to serve *Quan Lớn* (Young Princes) (Y, 2002; Khanh, 2007).

The last deity is *Xà Thần* (Snake Goddess), which represents the strength and authority of the divine beings as well as the wishes of the people for a peaceful and happy life. In the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, *Xà Thần* (Snake Goddess) is a symbol of the strength and authority of the divine beings. Besides, the snakes represent longevity, health, and good luck, as does *Xà Thần* (Snake Goddess). People worship *Xà Thần* (Snake Goddess) with the hope that the divine beings will grant them health, wealth, and good luck (Y, 2002; Huyen, 1992b; Khanh, 2007).

b. Role schemas of the divine system in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in the South

Besides the system of gods according to the “*Tứ Phủ*” worship, the Southern people of Vietnam also worship other Mother Goddess according to their thoughts. In the South, the Mother Goddesses all have equality with each other, but there is no hierarchy. Each Mother Goddess depending on the locality, has different cultural perceptions in Fig. 3.

In Fig. 3, there is *Chúa Xứ* Mother Goddess, also known as *Bà Chúa Xứ*, a goddess of prosperity worshiped in the Mekong Delta region. The goddess is considered not only to be the protector of the people but also to bring them health, wealth, and good luck. *Bà Chúa Xứ* is worshiped at many temples in the Mekong Delta, the most famous of which is the Shrine of the Sam Mountain Goddess in An Giang Province. The Shrine of the Sam Mountain Goddess is an important historical, architectural, and religious site in the region.

Likewise, *Linh Sơn* Mother Goddess, also known as *Bà Đen* (Black Lady Goddess), is a goddess of prosperity worshiped in many temples in the Southwest region of Vietnam, the most famous of which is the Black Lady Mountain Temple in Tây Ninh Province. Moreover, *Linh Sơn* Mother Goddess is a divine being with supreme power who can grant people health, wealth, and good luck. In addition, the symbol of this Mother Goddess is also a fusion of Buddhism and the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess.

Furthermore, *Thiên Hậu* Mother Goddess, a Mother Goddess of Chinese origin, is worshiped in many temples in Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta. The belief in worshipping *Thiên Hậu* Mother Goddess has been formed and developed for a long time and is also closely related to the process of migration and settlement of the Chinese in the Mekong Delta. According to legend, *Thiên Hậu* Mother Goddess rules the sea and helps the Chinese safely cross the sea to a new land. Therefore, Vietnamese

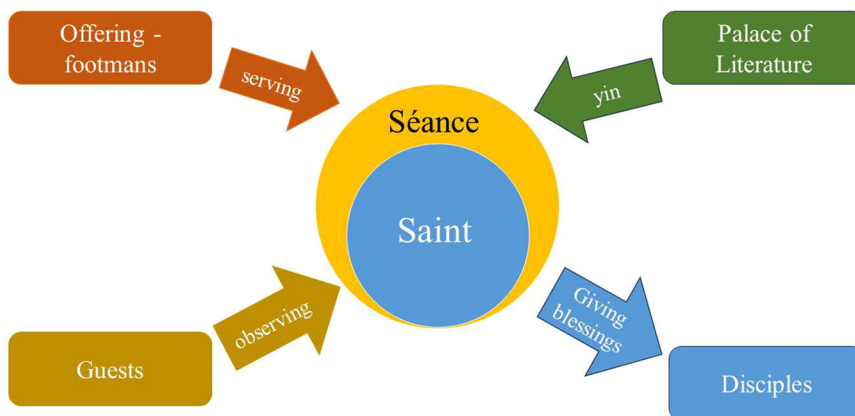


Fig. 4 Role schemas in Hâu Đồng ritual (Source: authors).

also consider Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu as a goddess who protects seafarers. (Hang, 2023; Ha, 2022; Ky, 2020; Linh, 2017).

Role schemas of common in the “Hau Dong” ritual. Hâu Đồng is a Vietnamese ritual of worshiping the Mother Goddess and is also known as “to mount the medium” (Taylor, 2007) or “going into trance” (Thinh, 2003). Also, the ritual is a combination of chanting, dancing, performing arts, and spiritual ceremonies aimed at praying for the blessings of the goddess for humans. The purpose of this ritual is to help humans communicate with the goddess through a person who plays a role called a “Đông” (Séance) in the ceremony. At that time, the person who plays the role of “Séance” will become the embodiment of the Saints or the dead who have made contributions to the country. In detail, the authors summarize this ritual using the model in Fig. 4.

The model describes the roles and rituals of a Hâu Đồng ceremony in general. In the center, the Đông (Séance) is the embodiment of the Saint to communicate with the disciples and guests. During the ceremony, the Offering-footman assists the Séance in becoming the embodiment of the Saint by changing the ceremonial attire. Subsequently, the Palace of Literature creates sounds for the Séance to practice the ritual. After becoming the embodiment of the Saint, the Séance lights incense, dances, listens to Châu Văn, speaks, praises, scolds, and gives wealth to the disciples. At the same time, the guests come to the ceremony for a performance or to learn about folk culture. This role schema is commonly used in the northern region of Vietnam.

Role schemas in Hâu Đồng ritual in the South. Figure 4 shows that the person with the role of “Séance” holds a central and essential position in the practice of the Hâu Đồng ritual, while Fig. 5 presents the Hâu Đồng ritual in the Southern region, a person who holds the central and important position is Bồng (Spirit Medium). Indeed, the similarity between both Đông (Séance) and Bồng (Spirit Medium) is that they are the intermediaries between the Saint and the faithful to communicate with each other. However, in Fig. 4, Đông (Séance) is the embodiment of the Saint, while Bồng (Spirit Medium) only represents the Saint to give divine blessings to people. Bồng (Spirit Medium), moreover, has an additional role in representing the group of people to offer and perform dance movements before the gods. Thus, despite the belief in worshiping the Mother Goddess in Vietnam, the roles of Đông (Séance) and Bồng (Spirit Medium) are different. In addition, Fig. 5 also shows the Saint witnessing the ceremony while the person holds the role of supporting the ceremony and receiving divine blessings from Bồng (Spirit

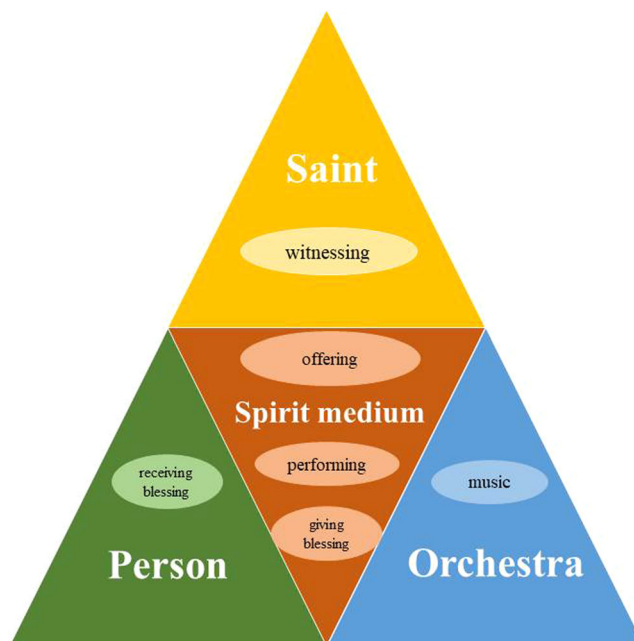


Fig. 5 Role schemas in the ritual of worshipping the belief of the Mother Goddess in the South (Source: authors).

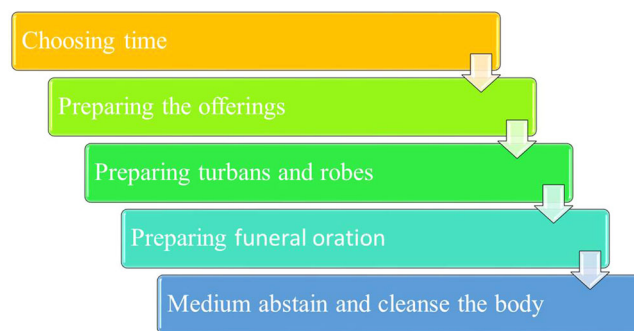


Fig. 6 Event schemas in the preparation the Hâu Đồng ritual (Source: authors).

Medium). Alternatively, the orchestra group plays the music for Bồng (Spirit Medium) to perform in the ceremony.

Event schemas of common in prepare the Hâu Đồng ritual. In the event schemas of ritual preparation Fig. 6, there are five components expressed through language:

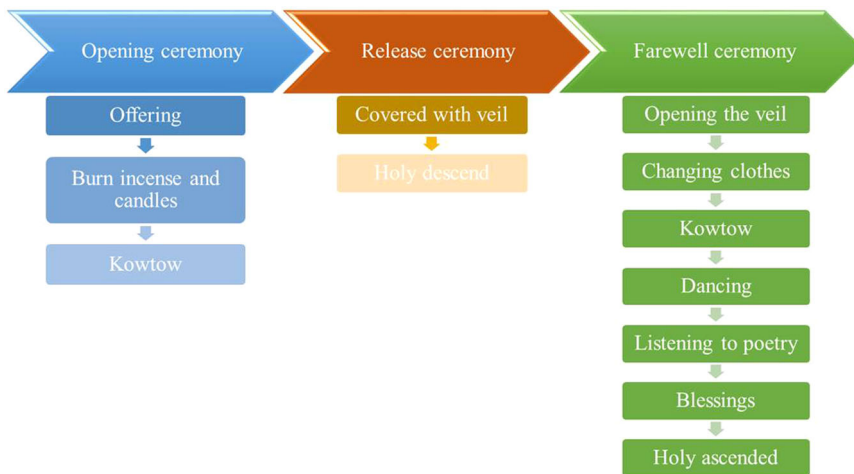


Fig. 7 Event schemas of the Hâu Đổng ritual in the North (Source: authors).

Choosing time: Séance chooses auspicious days based on spiritual principles according to the Eastern calendar. Thus, the date will not be fixed and can be flexible depending on the characteristics.

Preparing the offerings: Séance will prepare necessary items for the ceremony such as votive papers, flowers, candles, fruit cakes, beer, wine, soft drinks, towels, mirrors, combs, etc. in the characteristic color of each temple.

Preparing turbans and robes: Séance will prepare costumes for the ceremony such as khăn châu⁴, and áo ngũ⁵. With the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, costumes are very important since they contribute to expressing the characteristics, style, and personality of each Saint. Séance must always keep in mind the specific offerings and costumes of each copper price in order to be fully prepared.

Preparing funeral oration: People will be in charge of music and singing

Séance abstain and cleanse the body: In this part, before the ceremony, the Séance will keep himself clean and pure because then the saint can enter the Séance.

a. Event schemas of the Hâu Đổng ritual in the North in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess

Event schemas in the Hâu Đổng ritual can be divided into three stages: opening ceremony – release ceremony—farewell ceremony. These three stages have a close relationship with each other to ensure the success of the ceremony as Fig. 7.

Stage 1, the opening ceremony (the embodiment of mortals in the mundane world), includes events such as offering offerings, burning incense, and candles, and bowing.

Offering: The stage is performed by the Séance, while shaman will make an offering to ask for permission to perform the ritual. In addition, Séance will have the role to release life (Tsethar in Buddhism) to make offerings to the souls who have no family or relatives to take care of, not to cause trouble or destruction.

Burning incense and candles to express majesty and create a solemn atmosphere.

Bowing: communicating with Saint to show respect

Stage 2 is the release ceremony (the transition period for mortals to prepare to enter the spiritual world). In the ritual of the horoscope, the veil is the bridge between reality and the divine world. It is the boundary between the worlds of yin and yang, visible and invisible, the mundane world and the divine world. On the other hand, the Hâu Đổng ritual is typically performed in two ways sequentially. In the first, the Séance wears a khăn châu to become the embodiment of a Saint for a brief period. In the

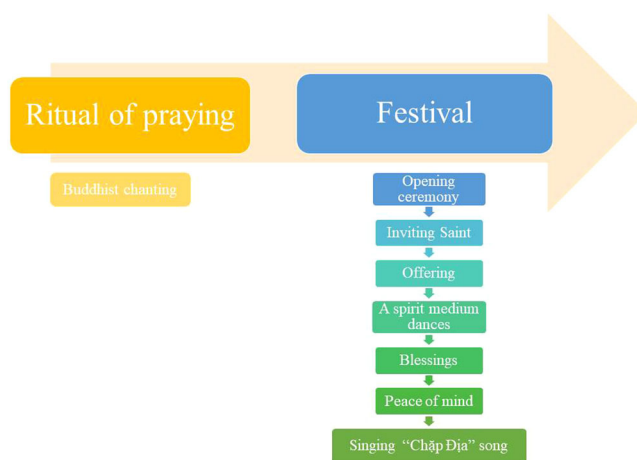


Fig. 8 Event schemas of the Hâu Đổng ritual in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in the South (Source: authors).

second, the Séance stops wearing a khăn châu for a longer period and communicates with the faithful as the embodiment of a Saint.

The third stage is bridging the gap between the divine and human worlds. At this stage, the Séance will open the towel and perform activities under the shadow of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, Séance is a physical prop to create interactions between Saints and mortals. The return to the human world is not the same as before because, at this time, copper has a new appearance and is a support for the Saint. The acts of dancing, listening to Châu Văn song, and granting fortune are events of great significance in the connection between humans and gods. It also shows people’s trust in the Holy Spirit and their desire to be protected and supported.

Through language, the event schema in the Hâu Đổng ritual and the organic relationship between them can be visualized. From there, it can be figured out the cultural awareness expressed through each element in the schemas.

b. Event schema of the Hâu Đổng ritual in the North in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess

Event schema of the Hâu Đổng ritual in the North in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is structured in a simpler form, as shown in Fig. 8.

The Hâu Đổng ritual in the south is typically performed in two stages. The first stage is the ritual of praying, a Buddhist chanting ritual that is performed to invoke the presence of the Saints.

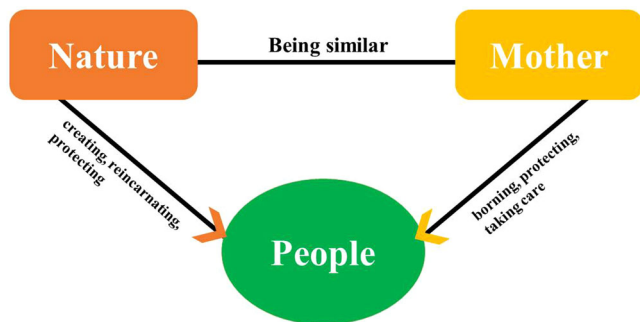


Fig. 9 Image schemas of mother, nature, and people (Source: authors).

Then, the ritual performance includes seven steps, each of which is performed to not only communicate with the Saints but also ask for blessings.

Opening ceremony: The opening ceremony is performed by the orchestra, including gongs, drums, female birthstones, erhu, and trumpets.

Inviting Saint: The Bồng (Spirit Medium) take turns singing to invite her and other Saints to attend.

Offering: The ceremony of offering is that the Medium offer flowers, gold trays, silver trays, etc. to her by dancing movements.

A Bồng (Spirit Medium) dances: The Bồng (Spirit Medium) take turns dancing various dances, performing in front of the Saints.

Blessings: Distributing gifts to people attending the ceremony.

Peace of mind: The ceremony announces the completion of the ceremony, and invites the Medium and the Saints to rest.

Singing “Chấp Địa” song (offering to the Earth song): The ceremony is concluded with a performance that combines singing, dancing, and storytelling, with the main content being about the lives of the gods, goddesses, and immortals.

Both Figs. 7 and 8 show clear characteristics in the steps of the Hầu Đổng ritual between the North and the South of Vietnam. Likewise, the ritual in the belief system reflects not only the unique features of the beliefs of Vietnamese people but also the beautiful traditions that are preserved in the worship rituals performed in the Hầu Đổng ritual.

Image schemas

The relationship between the image schemas of mother, nature, and people in Vietnamese cultural conception. In the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, people believe that humans are always influenced by natural phenomena. For example, nature provides humans with food, such as fruits and vegetables, to survive, as well as shelter, such as forests and land, and protects humans, just as a mother protects her children. As a result, Vietnamese people regard the natural world as a majestic mother. This is evident in the use of the metaphor mother to refer to nature, as well as the use of the Mẹ Thiên Nhiên (Mother of the Nature), and Mẹ Đất (Mother of the Earth) concepts Fig. 9.

Image schema of space. In the prehistoric period, people loved living in forests and caves. In the process of experiencing the body, people put themselves at the center. When looking up, people see the sky. Therefore, in the natural world, people consider heaven to be the supreme being. Following the evolutionary process, humans moved to lower areas; they lived on the banks of rivers and streams Fig. 10. Once again, they experience the body and see the “forest”, their former residence, at a higher level than their present abode. Compared to the land and rivers, the forest and the sky will be in a higher position for the human eye Fig. 10.

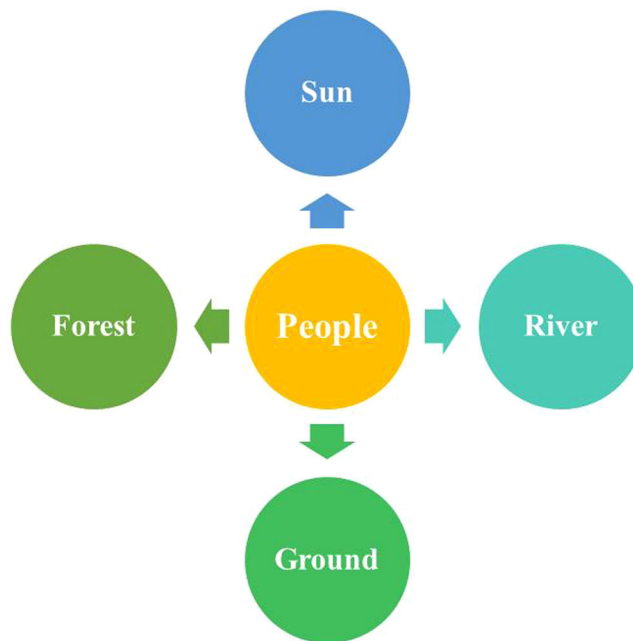


Fig. 10 Image schemas of space (Source: authors).

This has been shown by the way of naming in “Tứ vị thánh mẫu” (The Four Mother Goddesses).

Object schemas

In order to form a language class expressing the characteristics of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, Vietnamese people use their thinking to perceive and interact with the surrounding world culture. Since then, language has become the collective memory bank of the Vietnamese community to store cultural values.

First, it is necessary discuss the word “Mẫu” (mother) in the names of beliefs and gods to see the difference between “Mẫu” and “Mẹ” (mother) in cultural awareness. In terms of symbolic meaning, “Mẫu” and “Mẹ” (mother) both refer to the same image of a woman, carrying the task of creating and maintaining the race. But, when the Vietnamese people apply “Mẫu” (mother) to identify the name of the god, it also has a higher symbolic meaning. It is respect, respect, and gratitude. This comes from people’s perception of their surroundings. At the beginning of history, man had the concept of reproduction and proliferation. The image of a mother is carrying a painful birth, nurturing and caring for her children in the face of changes in the external environment. Since then, “mẹ” (mother) has become the first symbol for reproduction and survival. Therefore, people have believed in love, using the word “Mẫu” (mother) to describe the above phenomena.

On the basis of the above, the vocabulary system of this belief has reflected the thinking of people under the influence of culture. Their appearance can be seen as the deification of the supernatural world to satisfy the spiritual needs of real life through a very close image - the image of the mother Fig. 11. According to the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, Vietnamese people have realized that Mẹ Thiên Nhiên (Mother of the Nature) also carries the meaning of aspirations and wishes for a peaceful life and good crops. The image of the mother in this religion has brought a new symbol, a symbol of faith, containing benevolence, majesty, creativity, and much magic. From a broader perspective, “Mẫu” (mother) has brought the power of happiness, peace, good, and prosperity

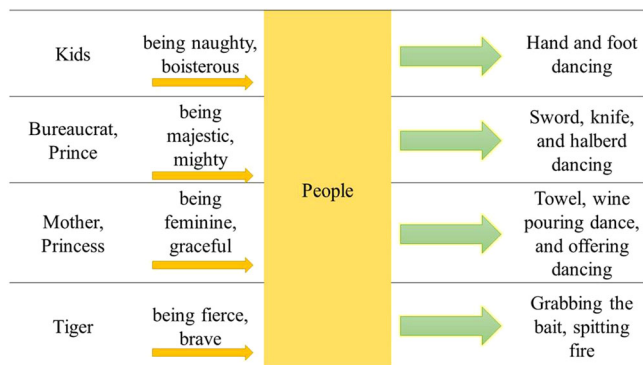


Fig. 11 Object schemas of objects, and people (Source: authors).

and repelled the bad guys that have caused hurt in people’s lives.

As a result, Vietnamese people clearly perceive that life always exists in parallel with the two extremes of yin and yang. However, there is something different about Buddhist thought. In other words, there is “trên dương – dưới âm” (yang above – yin below) concept in Buddhism, while the Vietnamese people believe in worshipping the Mother Goddess according to the yin side and yang side. This shows that, in the worldview of Vietnamese people, a visible world exists parallel to the invisible world. These two worlds blend together, creating a rich and diverse spiritual life.

Through the language of religious practice, it is realized that people looking to “Mẫu” (mother) do not focus on the life of the past or the future but on the life of the present. They go to find answers to problems and concerns arising from the hardships, sufferings, and difficulties of the mortal world. Usually, when it comes to matters of religion and belief, people often think of aspirations to escape the world and go beyond the mundane. Unlike some major religions, which often draw a vision of ecstasy, directing people to a world after death such as nirvana, heaven, and the land of bliss for believers, the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is oriented towards the secular with very close and practical things such as health, money, and fortune in the present life. The target of religious beliefs here is that the “Mẫu Tam Phủ, Tứ Phủ” are close to their own practical life. The great majority of saints who have human and divine origins are the Empress Dowager, the Queen, and the talented Princess, who have contributed to the people and the country. Therefore, these are the attractive reasons for the Vietnamese to develop this belief throughout history: to expand social relations, to do economic business and to expand interpersonal relationships in spiritual life.

Obviously, these are words that express the beliefs and feelings of people with the desire for good things in the present. People wish to be lucky, happy, and prosperous and long to receive the graces and blessings to live in the present. Above all, words indicate activities performed in rituals and ceremonies, such as asking for blessings or getting a fortune, which are meaningful to real life and not to life in another world. People get a fortune to guess their own destiny this year. They borrow money to get fortune from the money offered on the shrine of Grandmother to have good luck in business.

In addition, another cultural awareness that needs to be mentioned in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess is harmonious and integrated thinking. Although it is considered an indigenous belief, over time, this belief has adopted the cultural characteristics of other religions and beliefs to become a unique, diverse, and suitable belief in any country, at any stage of life, or in any society. The belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess not only has its own unique values but also includes extraneous values in the process of nurturing and developing. This thinking

shows that Vietnamese people are willing to integrate and accept all beliefs and religions, even if those beliefs or religions are of indigenous origin or imported from outside. This can be seen clearly through the literary songs and shadow dances of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess.

Conclusion

The language system used in the belief in Vietnamese worshipping the Mother Goddess in South Vietnam that is surveyed in eighty songs of adoration and idle singing is very diverse and rich, containing a layer of cultural sediments imbued with ethnic identity. It has reflected the very important role of spiritual life in the thinking and perception of the people here. Through this study, it is clear to consider the importance of perceiving the surrounding world and the influence of culture on human life, as reflected in language. At this time, the language used in the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in the South is not only a means of communication but also a place to store cultural values and reflect thoughts.

Based on the analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics, the Vietnamese people’s belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess has been formed by the cultural schemas such as role schemas, event schemas, and image schemas, which shape the way Vietnamese people think and perceive the world. Within this belief system, the Vietnamese have categorized things into numerous categories, such as color, number, gender, family, and court. This categorization reflects the importance of hierarchy and order in Vietnamese culture, as well as the reverence for the female divine. They also form cultural metaphors such as Mother Nature and, the faith or admiration of the Mother Goddess. Vietnamese people are culturally aware of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess in a diverse, flexible, and delicate way. In the South, they continued the tradition of this belief when the residents of the North brought it in, and at the same time, they also acclimatized with some other ethnic groups such as the Hoa, Cham, and Khmer. On the basis of the early belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess, the Vietnamese here have enriched their spiritual life through rituals and forms of life that have been preserved by the language for generations.

In general, the cultural schemas of the belief in worshipping the Mother Goddess illustrate the indigenous culture in Vietnam. They represent the exchange and acculturation of Eastern culture with the local culture through the perception, attitude, and behavior of Vietnamese believers. Because Vietnamese culture is an open culture, it always absorbs the quintessence from outside to enrich the values of the nation, in line with the actual trend. By adopting a multicultural perspective, we were able to compare these Vietnamese rituals with those of other cultures around the world. With the results obtained in this article in the direction of Cultural Linguistics, this paper will hopefully be useful for those who want to study the folk beliefs of the East.

Data availability

All data are available on the osf repository.

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Notes

1. Sơn Tinh is a Vietnamese folk deity who is believed to be the protector of the mountains and forests. He is also a symbol of Vietnamese national identity. (Huyen, 1975).
2. Mỵ Nương is a Vietnamese folk figure who is believed to be the wife of Sơn Tinh, the god of the mountains. She is also the mother of the legendary hero Thánh Gióng. (Trang, 2017).

- 3 Châu Bà is an important figure in the Vietnamese folk religion. It is worshiped by people and often associated with nature, fertility, and healing. (Thap, 2004; Nguyen, 2009; Vu, 2012).
- 4 Khăn châu is a long, narrow piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist of the spirit medium and is believed to protect the medium from harm during the ritual. (Thinh, 2003; Taylor, 2007; Nguyen, 2016).
- 5 Áo ngự is a long, flowing robe that is worn over the shoulder, and believed to represent the divine status of the spirit medium. (Thinh, 2003; Taylor, 2007; Nguyen, 2016).

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Ly Thi Phuong Tran.

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