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#### **ABSTRACT**

Len dong (going into a trance) is a ritual whereby a medium incarnates the souls of gods and spirits. It is associated with the religions and belief systems of various ethnic groups. This paper describes Len Dong as it is practiced as part of the cult of the Holy Mothers to minister to the needs of the population and bring good health and prosperity. This form of Len Dong originated in rural agricultural society, however, as society has changed and a market economy has developed, the ritual has become urbanised and is particularly popular today among small businessmen and tradesmen. It has now become a familiar phenomenon in urban society in Vietnam. The medium's trance provides individuals and groups with a way to relieve the stresses and strains that are features of urban, industrial society, it helps them achieve a sense of balance, gives them an idea of how to behave and gives them a way of integrating with their community. Some people also find in Len Dong a sense of security and trust in the spiritual life that brings them success and good fortune. There are also people who simply see it as a form of entertainment.

#### Introduction

In the South appears the Tenth Prince who is A wonderful figure, With talent, courage and intelligence, Good at literature and martial arts, He deliberately wanders everywhere, With a bag of poems and Buddhist sutras, Sometimes erotic, sometimes benevolent Sometimes he admires a blooming flower, Sometimes he waits for the moonrise. (Song to the Tenth Prince) The shamanistic rituals found among many of Vietnam's minority peoples involve 'soul journeys', for example the *Then* of the *Tay* people leads a spirit army on a campaign to recover her client's soul. However, in the *Len Dong* (going into a trance) ceremony of the *Kinh* (Viet) people, the gods are called into the ritual space and incarnated in the body of the medium. Many of the songs performed during *Len Dong* describe deities coming down into the ritual space or journeying through the landscape.

Len Dong, also called hau bong (service to the shades of the deities) or hau dong (the service of the medium) is performed throughout Vietnam as an intrinsic part of the cult of the Holy Mothers (Dao Mau)<sup>1</sup>, honoured by the Kinh.<sup>2</sup> In this ceremony, the mediums are merely the empty bodies or 'seats' into which the souls, or shades, of the deities and gods will be incarnated. Many of the deities are figures who served the country in the past and were subsequently deified and worshipped by the common people. Nearly sixty deities are worshipped in the pantheon of the cult of the Four Palaces. Depending on the specific occasion and on the medium, only a few of them will come down and be incarnated during any particular performance of Len Dong, and some deities seldom, or never, descend to earth.

The divinity's journey into this world, via the medium's body, is expressed through a number of ritual actions: dancing, giving advice, distributing gifts, curing disease and driving evil spirits away. In contrast with many other religions, and with the activities of other spirit mediums among the *Kinh*, the cult of the Holy Mothers does not focus on the world of the dead but on the real, earthly world of good health and prosperity. The cult of the Holy Mothers is therefore very popular among business people in the new market economy. Followers believe that the supernatural world of gods and spirits will grant them their earthly desires through the agency of an *Ong* 

Dong (male medium) or a Ba Dong (female medium) during the Len Dong ritual.

To encourage the deities to enter his or her body, the medium relies on a range of techniques, used before and during the rites to achieve a state of ecstasy. Techniques vary from one medium to another, but their ecstatic state is always enhanced by the sensory elements of the *Len Dong* ritual - the strong colours of the costumes and offerings (green, red, and yellow), the music and *hat van* (invocation hymns), dances, and even such stimuli as alcohol, cigarettes, betel and areca nut, tea, incense and flowers. Nowadays, however, many of the mediums' performances seem contrived and their states of ecstasy are unconvincing.

Nobody can voluntarily become a medium; a person must be selected by the gods, and, if the chosen person does not accept their calling, they will frequently experience misfortune (co day) in the form of illness or bad luck.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the gods descend at will into the medium; the medium is not supposed to have any control over which deities appear during a particular performance of *Len Dong*. In practice, however, many mediums clearly decide in advance that they will incarnate certain deities in accordance with their relationship with certain gods or their own intentions in the ritual.

Although *Len Dong* is a religious rite of the cult of the Holy Mothers of the Four Palaces, it includes many artistic elements like music, song, dance and costume. The *hat van* and music are particularly noteworthy examples of the performing arts of the *Kinh* people. Today, researchers have discovered that there is a close relationship between the *hat van* and other categories of folk songs. However, *hat van* could only have originated in the environment of the cult of the Holy Mothers and the ceremonies of *Len Dong*. Some *hat van* tunes are no

longer included in the ceremony; instead they have become secular folk songs and are widely performed. But only in the ceremonies of *Len Dong* can the *hat van* really be appreciated as folk songs of the *Kinh* people in the Red River Delta. The *hat van* could not exist without the ceremony *of Len Dong*, and vice versa.

### The pantheon of the cult of the Holy Mothers.

The cult of the Holy Mothers is distinct from other folk beliefs in that it has its own complete and well-defined hierarchy. The supreme divinity of the cult is *Thanh Mau* (the Saint Mother). Sometimes, the Saint Mother is supervised by *Ngoc Hoang* (the Jade Emperor) or *Phat Ba Quan* (Buddha-Avaloketesvara). However, despite the nominal supremacy of these figures, the cult has only a loose association with Taoist or Buddhist belief and practice.

The Saint Mother can be embodied in three or four Mother Goddesses who govern the different domains or 'palaces' that comprise the universe. These are *Thien Phu* (the Realm of Heaven), *Dia Phu* (the Realm of Earth), *Thoai Phu* (the Realm of Water) and *Nhac Phu* (the Realm of Mountains and Forests). Each domain or 'palace' has a characteristic colour - red for heaven, yellow for the earth, white for water and green for the mountains and forests. All of the deities appearing in *Len Dong* wear coloured costumes that link them with one of these domains as a follower of one or other of the Mother Goddesses. Under these Mother Goddesses there is a hierarchy of other divinities. They are:

(i) *Quan Lon* (the Great Mandarins). There are ten gods in this category but only the first five (*Ngu vi quan lon*) are regularly worshipped and incarnated through mediums.

(ii) Chau Ba (the Holy Dames). There are twelve of them. However, the first four Holy Dames governing the four palaces are the reincarnations of the four Mother Goddesses, so they are the most important and are often incarnated.

(iii) Ong Hoang (the Princes). There are ten Princes, listed in order of their importance. However, the three incarnated most frequently are the Hoang Ba (the Third Prince) Hoang Bay (the Seventh Prince) and Hoang Muoi (the Tenth Prince).

(iv) Co (the Royal Damsels). These are listed in order of their importance from Co de Nhat or co Ca (the

First) to co Be (the Twelfth). The Damsels are the attendants of the Mother Goddesses and the Holy Dames. The Damsels often have local names linking them to places where they are worshipped, for example, the Twelfth Damsel is often called the 'Little Damsel of Bac Le in Lang Son Province'. There is also the Damsel of Cam Duong (the First at Cam Duong, Lao Cai), the Damsel of Chin Gieng (the Ninth in Thanh Hoa), the Damsel of Dong Mo (the Second at Dong Mo, Lang Son) and so on.

(v) Cau (Boy Attendants). There are ten Boy Attendants who are mischievous attendants to the Princes. However, cau Bo or cau Ba (the Third Boy Attendant) and cau Be or cau Muoi (the Youngest Boy Attendant) are the ones most often incarnated.

The pantheon of the cult of the Holy Mothers also includes *Ong Lot*, the Snake (Sir Lot) and *Quan Ion Ho* (the five Great Tiger Mandarins) who are also sometimes incarnated.

In addition to the four palaces associated with the Mother Goddesses, folk belief also recognises *Phu Tran Trieu* (the Palace of the Tran Dynasty) which is associated with the worship of General Tran Hung Dao who vanquished the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Some Mother Goddess temples, including Tran Hung Dao, honour him as the highest deity, equating him with the Jade Emperor. When he and his attendants are incarnated they punish evil ghosts and demons and cure disease.

Similarly, some other deities have been associated with historical figures. For example, Mau Thuong Thien (the Holy Mother of Heaven) is identified with Princess Lieu Hanh, a daughter of the Jade Emperor who was transfigured as a girl in the earthly world. Mau Thuong Ngan (the Holy Mother of Mountains and Forests) is Princess La Binh, a daughter of Genie Son Tinh and Princess My Nuong, and a granddaughter of Hung Kinh. Ong Hoang de nhat (the First Prince) embodies the brilliant general, Le Loi, who won national independence from the Chinese Ming Dynasty in the fifteenth century. The Tenth Prince was a mandarin of the fifteenth century Le Dynasty who helped the nation expand territorially. The historical nature of these deities of the cult of the Holy Mothers links daily life - expressed through the needs and wants of the worshippers - with national history. Mother Goddess worship is, simultaneously, an evocation of the nation's history and a deification of patriotism.

The divinities of the cult of the Holy Mothers are worshipped in a number of temples, palaces and sanctuaries - wherever the Kinh people have settled, from the north to the south, from the plains to the mountains. Generally speaking, each god has his principal sanctuary and many subordinate sanctuaries. For example, although the principal sanctuary of the Holy Mother of Heaven is situated in Phu Giay, Nam Dinh Province, and that of the Holy Mother of Mountains and Forests is at Bac Le in Lang Son Province, they are also worshipped in many other localities. Followers often leave their own incense pots at temples or shrines associated with a particular deity to ensure that that particular god protects them.

## Len Dong or the 'spirit performances' of the cult of the Mother Goddesses.

Len Dong ceremonies are organised at temples, palaces and sanctuaries on various occasions all year round. A Chu den (the medium who guards a particular temple) must hold the ceremonies of Hau xong den (the firstfooting of the temple after the Ceremony of Passage into the New Year), hau thuong nguyen (the fifteenth day of the first lunar month), hau nhap ha (the beginning of summer in the fourth lunar month), tan ha (the end of summer in the seventh lunar month), hau tat nien (the end of the year in the twelfth lunar month) and hap an (the washing of the seals, on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month). However, a medium must also organise a ceremony on the anniversary of the death of his or her patron deity. For example, if a medium's patron deity is the Third Damsel, she must hold a Len Dong to honour her on the twelfth day of the sixth lunar month. Most Len Dong ceremonies take place in the third lunar month (the anniversary of the death of the Holy Mother) and the eighth lunar month (the anniversary of the death of the Holy Father, who is identified with the Jade Emperor, King Bat Hai, otherwise known as Saint Tran).

Before a *Len Dong* ritual, the medium must make meticulous preparations, including choosing an auspicious day that matches his or her horoscope according to the *can so* (lunar calendar), choosing the temple or palace and inviting the faithful, other mediums and supporters. There must also be four *hau dang* (assistants) and *cung van* (liturgical singers).

Preparing garments and votive offerings for the *Len Dong* ceremony also requires much time and labour. Each deity has his or her specific costume which a medium puts on when that god is incarnated. Thus, any medium undertaking service to the *ra dong* (gods and spirits) has to buy many suitable costumes, especially those of his of her patron god.

The votive offerings should match the special character of each occasion on which the medium conducts a ceremony. The offerings may include cakes, sweets, flowers, fruit, alcohol, cigarettes, toys and jewellery. On the anniversaries of the Holy Dames there may be such dishes as crabs, snails and fish. The medium pays special attention to the colour of the votive offerings so that each deity receives offerings of the same colour as the palace with which he or she is associated. For example, red cans of Coke are appropriate for deities from the Celestial Palace, while the green areca nuts that are used to make betel chews are suitable for deities associated with the Palace of Mountains and Forests.

## A typical *Len Dong* ritual at the Dau Temple in Hanoi

This was held by a female medium who I shall call 'H'.

#### A. Preparation and ritual

For several days before the ceremony, *Ba Dong* H had to abstain from sexual intercourse, eat only vegetarian food and fast completely for some of the time to get her body into an exceptionally pure state. According to mediums, these acts of purification are necessary before they can use their bodies as vehicles for the gods. However, in terms of technique, this physical state makes it easier for the medium to go into a trance. <sup>4</sup>

Before stepping on to the mat in front of the altar where the gods were to be incarnated, the medium performed the rituals of so - submitting written requests and giving offerings (rice soup, dried rice and corn, fresh water) to the wandering souls. The letters asked the guardian-god of the temple to give permission for the medium to use her skills to carry out the ceremony of *Len Dong*. This rite was conducted by a person with magic powers and an assistant.

#### B. The rites of Len Dona

After the preparatory rites were completed, the female medium came out of her private room wearing white robes. She greeted all the participants and walked in a leisurely manner to the mat which was surrounded by four hau dang <sup>5</sup> (her assistants). These assistants, male or female, must have learned to serve the deities. They were all the trainees or close associates of medium H, and they helped her to burn incense sticks and offer alcohol, to cover her face with fans and to change costumes during the ceremony.

The liturgical singers sat on the right of the mat. They played music and sang invocation hymns accompanied by traditional musical instruments (a moon-shaped zither, drums, tom-toms, bamboo flutes, cymbals, etc.) of which the dan nguyet (the moon-shaped zither) was the most typical. Sometimes the singer can also be the zither player. Each temple or palace - particularly the big ones usually has its own band of liturgical singers who have spent their lives in close association with the temple and the guardian medium. The bands practice regularly so that they can synchronise their music with the medium's actions. They are often rewarded with votive objects for a good performance - or punished by the medium for unsatisfactory work. In such bands there are usually some well-known singers who are the medium's favourites.

Medium H had organised this ceremony to celebrate the *hau thuong nguyen* festival. Normally, neither the mediums nor any of the other participants can predict which saints and deities are going to come down (*giang dong*) or be incarnated (*nhap dong*). The gods appear when they want to, and when the medium invites them. When a deity descended, the medium made a signal with the fingers of her left hand to show it was a male deity, or with the fingers of her right hand if it was a female god. Then the assistants had to hurry to find the appropriate robes and head cloths and then they carefully dressed and groomed her.

When medium H sat, her four assistants placed a red cloth, called a *khan phu dien* <sup>6</sup> (face-covering veil) on her head. This is the most important rite and was repeated many times - whenever a deity entered (*nhap*) or left (*thang*) the medium. The red cloth signals the passage of the deities into and out of the medium in whom they are incarnated.

#### C. The incarnations.

#### (a) The Holy Mothers.

At the beginning of every ceremony there are the *gia* (incantations)<sup>7</sup> to the Holy Mothers. Medium H, her face covered with the red veil, placed her hands on her thighs while her body swayed slightly. The liturgical singers sang the airs and songs devoted to the Holy Mothers: *We respectfully request the First Holy Mother of the Celestial Palace* ... Medium H's fingers indicated the descent of the Holy Mothers (one, two or three fingers for the First, Second, and Third Holy Mothers respectively) and the liturgical singers performed the invocation hymn to that Goddess. When the medium crossed her hands on her forehead, it was a sign that the deity had ascended (*thang*). Then the liturgical singers played the appropriate air - *The deity goes back to her palace* ...

Usually, three Holy Mothers (the First, Second, and Third) descend but are not incarnated. When that happens, the medium must keep the red veil over her face. This situation is called hau trum khan (hau trang bong or hau trang man) to differentiate it from hau mo khan, which is when the deity descends and is incarnated. When that happens the red face veil is removed.

Medium H's horoscope is not compatible with Saint Tran, so she could only conduct hau trum khan services for Saint Tran and for the First and Second Royal Damsels who are his daughters. Saint Tran's mediums are known for performing remarkable feats like running skewers through their bodies when they incarnate this fearless general.

#### (b) The Great Mandarins.

Following the incarnations of the Holy Mothers came those of the Great Mandarins. Among the ten Great Mandarins, only four were incarnated (the First, Second, Third and Fifth). These deities were military commanders, so their costumes and gestures were stately and imposing. They usually carry their flags of command, bows and swords. These four mandarins belonged to various palaces:-

(i) Quan De Nhat (the First Mandarin) came from the Celestial Palace and wore red garments. He was a celestial god. After coming down to earth to become a mandarin, he lived a religious life and did not make contact with the common people. In the ceremony of

Len Dong he only descended to offer votive incense sticks to the Holy Mothers and then returned to his own world in his xe gia hoi cung (chariot).

(iii) Quan de Nhi (the Second Great Mandarin) and Quan de ngu (the Fifth Great Mandarin) were from the Palace of Mountains and Forests. They wore green costumes. Unlike the First Great Mandarin, they frequently make contact with the common people. After paying tribute to the Holy Mothers, they were incarnated and performed dances with swords and scimitars and showed their appreciation of the hymns that were sung to praise them and their actions.

The Second Great Mandarin manages the deaths and births of the common people:

The Book on Death and Birth written by the Mandarin,

The common people's destiny decided by the Mandarin,

Whoever is dutiful and benevolent, The Mandarin will bless him. (Hymn to the Second Great Mandarin)

These two deities also gave advice, listened to requests, distributed gifts and then ... came back to their palaces in their chariots ...

(iii) Quan de Tam Thoai Phu (the Third Great Mandarin of the Water Palace) wore the white robes that are associated with that domain. After being incarnated, he gave offerings, performed a dance with a sword, received wine and cigarettes from participants, listened to the invocation hymn, distributed presents and ascended.

During the incarnations of the Great Mandarins carried out by medium H, the Fourth only descended on her very briefly, (while the red veil was still covering her face) and he left almost immediately. He was not incarnated into her.

#### (c) The Holy Dames.

Of the twelve Holy Dames (*Thanh Ba or Chau Ba*), only five were incarnated into medium H. They were *Chau De nhi* (the Second Holy Dame of Mountains and Forests), *Chau Thac Bo* (the Holy Dame of Thac Bo), *Chau Luc* (the Sixth Holy Dame), *Chau Muoi Dong Mo* (the Tenth Holy Dame of Dong Mo) and *Chau Be Bac Le* (the Little Holy Dame of Bac Le). *Chau De Nhat and Chau De Tu* (the First and Fourth Holy Dames)

descended but were not incarnated. All the divinities in this category are goddesses of human origin who represent and assist the Holy Mothers of the Four Palaces. Several of them are identified with ethnic minorities. For example, the First Holy Dame is associated with the *Yao* people, the Sixth Holy Dame is linked to the *Nung*, the Tenth is related to the *Tay* and the Holy Dame of Thac Bo is an associate of the *Muong*. Their garments, and the music and dances dedicated to them, are inspired by those of their particular ethnic minority associates.

In all incarnations, after a deity arrives the assistants must hurriedly dress the medium in the costume appropriate to that deity. The costumes of the Holy Dames (tunics, turbans, veils, belts, jewellery, etc.) are very beautiful and imitate the dress of the ethnic minorities with which they are linked. After presenting the votive offerings, the Holy Dames often perform dances with a mua moi (a small torch), 9 with a mua cheo do (an oar), with a mua quat (a fan) or with a *mua kiem* (a sword). The dance with torches can be particularly lively. When medium H was dancing, the worshippers and attendants crowded round her, praising her beauty and her dancing, and, in the guise of the Holy Dame, H threw money to reward the liturgical singers and other participants. The invocation hymns to the Holy Dames were very interesting and meaningful. They are often sung to the tunes of xa thuong, xa lech, which are similar to the music of the various ethnic groups. Of the incarnations of the Holy Dames conducted by medium H on this occasion, the First and Fourth Holy Dames descended but were not incarnated.

#### (d) The Princes.

According to folk tradition, the Princes are mandarins, not military commanders. There are ten Princes, listed in order from the First to the Tenth. All of them were originally people who rendered good service to the common people and to their country. This time, only three Princes were incarnated. They were refined and elegant so their appearance made the ceremony more exciting. They were:

(i) Ong Hoang Ba Thoai Phu (the Third Prince of the Palace of Water) wore a white costume consisting of a white brocade tunic, a white turban, white flower decorations in his ears, a white robe trimmed with white beads and a yellow belt.

As bright as a mirror without any dust, Carrying a sacred wine gourd and a bag of poems, Wearing the royal white robe and yellow belt, a reward from the King,

With a pair of military shoes on his feet and two heo on his shoulders ...

(Hymn to the Third Prince)

(ii) Ong Hoang Bay Bao Ha (the Seventh Prince of Bao Ha) of Nhac Phu (the Palace of Mountains and Forests) wore green garments and was a mandarin who once defended the Lao Cai-Yen Bai region on the northern border:

Travelling from the North to the South, Respectfully request the Seventh Prince of Bao Ha to descend ...

(Hymn to the Seventh Prince)

The Princes, each carrying two *heo* (stick-like weapons symbolising horses)<sup>10</sup> on their shoulders, often recruit *cham linh or bat dong* (novice-servants) for the Holy Mothers. They select whoever is destined to be a *can dong* (medium)<sup>11</sup> from among the followers of the cult of the Holy Mothers and force them to serve the *cham dong* (deities).

This time, medium H, in the incarnation of the Seventh Prince, recruited some 'servant-soldiers' for the Holy Mothers. After offering incense, H, in the guise of the Prince, danced with his heo and all the participants looked worried. Suddenly, the Prince threw his heo to a woman trader from Tang Xuan Market in Hanoi. The woman picked it up, attached a VND 10.000 note (about US.70c) to one end and returned it to the Prince. This action implied that she had agreed to become a servant of the Holy Mothers. (iii) Ong Hoang Muoi (the Tenth Prince) of the Palace of the Earth wore yellow robes. He was the defendermandarin of Nghe An region who performed great deeds for the country. Since his death, he has been worshipped in Nghe An. He is known as a good natured and elegant Prince. He is also extremely sensitive to the beauty of literature. When she manifested the Tenth Prince, medium H sat down to listen to his invocation hymn sung to the tune of phu co (declaiming ancient poems). She expressed his pleasure by tapping her thighs and shouting for joy. Then she rewarded the liturgical singers with money.

The Prince is always generous in distributing gifts (money, cakes, sweets and jewellery), particularly to women. Everybody received his presents with deep respect and some participants gave him votive offerings in return and asked for his protection, and to those participants he gave more gifts accompanied by good advice and good wishes.

A participant gave offerings to the Prince and prayed for help with her son's educational prospects. The Prince accepted. Then, he signalled that he wanted to go back to his palace, so the assistants quickly covered medium H's head with the veil. All the participants were sad that such a cheerful incarnation was ascending.

#### (e) The Royal Damsels.

Following the incarnations of the Princes came those of the twelve Royal Damsels. At this ritual, six Damsels came down and were incarnated in medium H. They were co Doi or co De Nhi (the Second). co Bo (the Third), co Luc (the Sixth), co Chin (the Ninth), and co Be Bac Le and co Be Dong Cuong (the Little Damsels of Bac Le and Dong Cuong). The Royal Damsels are young and unmarried, so their incarnations are always happy, they wear colourful costumes and dance energetically. Like the Holy Dames, the Royal Damsels were usually of ethnic origin so their costumes are related to those of various ethnic minorities. Their turbans and tunics are made of tho cam cloth. The Third Royal Damsel of the Palace of Water wore a white costume like a Muong girl.

During the incarnations of these deities the assistants had to keep preparing new costumes for H. In the incarnations of the Great Mandarins and the Princes she put on whichever garments she was given by the assistants. However, in the incarnations of the Holy Dames and the Royal Damsels, H looked at the costumes carefully, then she made the selection herself, sometimes embarrassing her assistants.

During the incarnations of the Royal Damsels, after the first rites there were performances of songs and dances, invocation hymns, the distribution of gifts and then the deities ascended. The invocation hymns praised the beauty of the Royal Damsels but told us very little about them:

On the green hills, there are butterflies and flowers, In the forest, the Royal Damsel descends to flirt with passers-by,

Her garments and shoes are so elegant, Her two lamps are bright in the sky, Like a halo.

In her belt she tucks a comb and flowers.

Her lamps shine everywhere.

[Hymn to the Second Royal Damsel]

Sometimes they highlighted the Goddesses' magical powers:

The Ninth Royal Damsel fans the air to create the wind,

To make everybody, male and female, old and young, happy,

To make flowers bloom in the hills
To cool the hearts of the common people.
(Hymn to the Ninth Royal Damsel)

In the incarnations of the Royal Damsels there are always dances with fans, oars, mua theu hoa (embroidery), with small torches, with mua khan (scarves), with mua qui (baskets on their backs) and with mua lac chuong (small bells). Compared to the animated Then ritual dances of the Tay people, or of powerful shamans elsewhere, the dances of the Royal Damsels are graceful, gentle and merry. At this ceremony all the participants clapped and some shouted words of praise: You, the Royal Damsel, you dance so beautifully, so skilfully! In the dance of mua ganh hoa (baskets of flowers), the Royal Damsel, carrying two baskets of flowers, executed a series of elegant steps. When somebody shouted: You, the Royal Damsel, please send showers! H, in the guise of the deity, threw money, fruit and flowers to the participants. Everyone watching the Len Dong pushed forward and tried to get some of the gifts being distributed by the Goddess. The atmosphere of the ceremony became very playful.

The Ninth Royal Damsel is good at curing disease. Therefore, in her incarnation, participants often pay tribute to her and ask her for remedies. At this ceremony there was a couple who were praying for a cure. Medium H (as the Ninth Royal Damsel) put a cup of water on a plate and then took three burning incense sticks and put them on the altar. While

murmuring some magic words, H inhaled the incense and breathed smoke into the cup three times. At that point the liturgical singers altered the mood, singing songs glorifying the Damsel's ability:

Bright heart, she points at the sky, it becomes blue, She points at the earth, it is damaged, She points at blood, it melts away, She points at demons, they must flee, She points at diseases and they disappear. (Hymn to the Ninth Royal Damsel)

Medium H gave the cup to the couple, they immediately drank from it and prostrated themselves in gratitude to the Damsel.

#### (f) The Boy Attendants.

The final incarnations conducted by medium H were those of the Boy Attendants. There are ten Boy Attendants, ranging in age from one to nine years old. Today, only *Cau Bo* (the Third Boy Attendant) descended and was incarnated. The costumes, gestures and words of the incarnated deity were rather quaint. Apart from the usual rites, the Little Boy Attendant also performed a unicorn dance and a lion dance, shaking his *heo*.

#### D. The close of the ceremony.

At the end of the ceremony, medium H took off the veil and costumes. She stood up and thanked all the participants. She invited them to a banquet as a gift from the gods, a grand final gesture in the cycle of reciprocal generosity that had occurred throughout the ceremony, with the medium providing offerings to her deities and additional offerings coming from her attendants and the other visitors, and the deities (in the person of H) redistributing them to the attendants and visitors.

# Len Dong and urban society - why have 'spirit journeys' flourished in urban society?

In Vietnam, the phenomenon of *Dao Mau* (the cult of the Holy Mothers) and *Len Dong* have traditionally been features of rural and agricultural society in which matrilineality, and a recognition of the important role women play in society, have been reflected in spiritual life and religious beliefs. However, when trading activities,

like country markets in agricultural areas and small businesses in towns, began to develop, particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong* turned into religious services for the benefit of trade. Such religious services prospered in the urban environment. The original forms of *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong* were influenced by Taoism from China, and especially by the appearance of Saint Mother Lieu Hanh. The original primitive form of worship of the Nymphs and the Holy Mothers in the Four Palaces changed to a religion concerned with praying for worldly things - good health, talent, good luck and bounty from heaven.

Doi Moi (the economic reforms of 1986) marked the beginning of industrialisation, modernisation and the development of Vietnam's market economy. Urbanisation in Vietnam has developed at such a pace that at times, in some areas, it has been completely chaotic; many industrial zones and suburban regions surrounding Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh cities have grown rapidly. Urbanisation and the growth of the market economy have disrupted society: people have flocked to the big cities, the urban infrastructure has become overloaded and traditional social systems have broken down. As a result, spiritual and cultural life has suffered. Urban lifestyles have led to people having less faith in themselves and in their communities, so they have turned to supernatural powers as a spiritual outlet, for moral support, and to satisfy their need for something to believe in.

In this context of industrialisation and major social change, religion has prospered; many places of worship like temples, pagodas, communal houses, palaces and shrines have been restored or newly built, and religious services have flourished. Therefore, *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong*, which used to be forbidden, have become increasingly popular. The numerous festivals held at Ba Chua Kho Temple in Bac Ninh Province, Phu Day in Nam Dinh Province, Ba Chua Xu in An Giang Province, and elsewhere, are typical of the renewal of religious belief in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

According to a survey conducted by the Institute for Religious Studies, there are eighty-three temples and palaces that worship Mau (the Holy Mothers). In old Hanoi there are also many family shrines to Ong Dong, Ba Dong and Mau that are almost as big as temples. People now say Tien Phat, hau Mau (worship Buddha and the Holy Mothers). Therefore, the total number of temples, palaces, and shrines (both private and public) where the Holy Mothers are worshipped, and the services

of *Len Dong* take place, now runs into the hundreds. A male or female medium often lives in these places of worship, and surrounding them live hundreds, or even thousands of *Con nhang*, *De tu*<sup>13</sup> (followers of the cult of the Holy Mothers) forming powerful communities of believers in *Dao Mau*. The *Len Dong* services take place every year on the 'anniversary of the death of the father' which falls in the eighth month of the lunar year, and on the 'anniversary of death of the mother' in the third month of the lunar year, in temples, palaces and shrines. In fact, in the three big cities of Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh, literally hundreds of *Len Dong* ceremonies occur daily in the third and eighth months of the lunar year.

There are various versions of *Len Dong* ceremonies and magical rituals in today's urban society. The people who perform them can be divided into two main types.

Firstly, there are a large number of mediums who enjoy the status and fulfilment they get from performing the rituals of *Len Dong*. Some of them may be deluded or unhappy in themselves, but many of them genuinely want to help others. The ones who become temple guardians often become very rich, especially if they also have other business interests.

Secondly, there are mediums known as *Dong dua* (mimickers). They do not have *can so* (horoscopes that predict that they should become mediums) and they practice *Len Dong* as a kind of hobby. Many of them have taken advantage of the cult to become very wealthy at the expense of ordinary worshippers. *Dong dua* used to be very rare, but today there are increasing numbers of them in the cities, becoming rich and bragging about their wealth.

Because the number of these mediums, or self-styled psychics, is increasing, many people now believe that *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong* simply exist to benefit business. For them, *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong* provide spiritual support for business and trading activities and make the mediums who practice them rich, like the psychics (*Cut*) in South Korea

Len Dong rituals in urban areas have indeed gradually diverged from those in rural regions, in the following ways:

(i) The architecture and the decoration of the temples and palaces, the ceremonial garments, the type of offerings, and the styles of *Len Dong* all display urban features.

(ii) There is now a growing emphasis on the cultural side of *Len Dong* performances, especially in Saigon.

(iii) New, nationalistic styles of costume, modern votive offerings, new types of music and invocation hymns are developing. Some pop songs and other contemporary songs and dances are performed as part of the ceremonies. Performance has become more important than the rituals so that *Len Dong* ceremonies are now cultural events at which having fun is as important as worshipping the gods.

(iv) More and more followers of the cult of the Holy Mothers, and ordinary people, are coming to offer their sacrifices and pray to the deities of *Dao Mau* for their private, earthly needs and wants. *Len Dong* has become more accessible and appeals to a wider spectrum of society.

(v) The cult of the Holy Mothers has become commercialised and mercenary because of the things the followers pray for and the way gifts are given to them 'from the gods'.

#### Conclusion

Will Len Dong become an important feature of urban religious/cultural life? There has been much discussion about society's attitude to *Dao Mau* and to shamanistic rituals, including *Len Dong*. Many people ask what cultural and/or positive features there are in *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong*. What superstitious and negative aspects do they have that may not be appropriate for people in modern society?

Firstly, it is a belief of the masses - not only of farmers in rural areas, but also of people in other walks of life and people in cities. When making the pilgrimage to Phu Day - the Holy Mothers' centre of worship - to attend the festival of the 'anniversary of the mother's death' in the third lunar month, or when visiting Tay Ho Palace to worship Saint Mother Lieu Hanh, one sees people from Hanoi and many other cities offering their sacrifices. Going to Ba Chua Kho Temple in Bac Ninh, one can see thousands of people from all walks of life, mostly from the cities, flocking to pray for good fortune and material success at the beginning and end of every year.

People still have faith in the supernatural powers and seek the protection and help of the Saint Mother. This is because, although the development of a market economy has improved living standards for many people, it has also affected people's lives in negative ways. The basic difference between *Dao Mau* (and other shamanistic

forms) and other religious beliefs is that *Dau Mau* is not concerned with life after death, but with life *now* - with people's aspirations for health, success, material benefit and good fortune. These are things that people have always wanted but they have not normally been available through religion.

Urban society, with its unbalanced lifestyle, increasing economic pressures and need to repress the emotions can cause spiritual inhibition, which in turn can cause mental health problems for many people. *Len Dong*, as a positive therapy, can help recreate balance and a sense of community.

Furthermore, *Dao Mau* encompasses traditional values, history, virtue and culture. It is about being grateful to one's benefactors, thinking about the origin of things and honouring individuals who have served their country. It could be said that the glorification of historic figures and the localisation of *Dau Mau* have made it a symbol of patriotism in Vietnam in which the Holy Mothers are the key characters. The pride and honour of the Vietnamese people has determined that these maternal images have become objects of worship and repositories of people's faith. They stand for the values of humanity, virtue and Vietnamese tradition.

There is much in Dao Mau and Len Dong that is of cultural value. They serve as repositories of legends, stories and mythologies relating to the gods; in addition, they provide a forum for performing music, songs and dances and an opportunity for creativity in building and decorating temples and shrines. Many people see Dao Mau performances as a form of 'spiritual theatre', or even as a culture in their own right. The rites of hau bong, the Len Dong of Dao Mau, have generated a specific style of musical performance - the hat van or invocation hymns. According to Professor Tran Van Khe, hat van, as popular songs, are now one of Vietnam's most internationally famous art forms. The values of history, tradition, virtue and culture have always enhanced Dao Mau as a Vietnamese religious belief; performances of Len Dong have become an important cultural experience in the life of many city-dwellers.

Do the rites of *Dao Mau* and *Len Dong* have any negative or backward-looking features? Yes, of course. As we know, *Dao Mau* is a system of beliefs developed over time from the primitive rites of Nymph worship to more advanced rites like worshipping the Holy Mothers in the Three (or Four) Palaces. It is an extremely complex system, with many ancient features that may not always

seem appropriate for modern society.

But like most religious beliefs, Dao Mao and Len Dong embrace the genuine, the good and the beautiful and oppose evil and wrong doing. Religious faiths do not exist in a vacuum but in human society. Members of society have not only followed and revered religions, but they have also adapted them for different ends, sometimes even for purposes that are not particularly 'religious'. As people search for a more spiritual life, religion is experiencing a revival, but unfortunately many people are taking unfair advantage of this revival for personal gain and belief is becoming commercialised. A large number of people are getting rich through the corrupt use of *Len Dong*, which is against the spirit of religion.

How then should we act: should we reject *Dau Mau* and *Len Dong*? We used to think we should, but in reality we know we cannot. Instead of rejecting *Len Dong*, it would be wiser to develop and adapt it so as to promote its positive features and to minimise its negative effects.

(An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *Museums and Urban Anthropology Conference* in Hanoi. See Ngo Duc Thinh, 2009, 'Mediumship in Vietnam Today' *Museums and Urban Anthropology*, (ed) Amareswar Galla, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi.)

#### **NOTES**

- 1. Dao Mau (the cult of the Holy Mothers) is here understood as that of the Three (or Four) Palaces to differentiate it from the cult of Holy Mothers in general.
- 2. Ngo Duc Thinh (chief author), 1996. *The cult of Holy Mothers in Vietnam*, Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, and 1992. *The Invocation Hymns*, Ethnicity and Culture Publishing House, Hanoi.
- 3. *Co day* means the sufferings (illness, diseases, madness, etc.) the deities inflict on anyone with *can dong* who does not hold the ritual to become a medium.
- 4. Mircea Eliade, 1964. Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy, Princeton University Press.
- 5. Hau dang are the assistants of the mediums in the ceremony of Len Dong. The number of hau dang for each ceremony varies from two to four.
- 6. Khan phu dien is a red rectangular veil used to cover the mediums' head when a deity arrives or leaves
- 7. *Gia* is the period the deity is incarnated in the medium. Thus, in a ceremony of *Len Dong* the number of *gia* is the same as that of the divinities who are incarnated. *Gia* also means the 'seat' of the divinities.
- 8. *Giang* (descending) means a deity descends on the body of a medium and *nhap* (entering) means a deity descends and is incarnated in the medium. In the ceremony of *Len Dong*, not every deity can be incarnated; some only descend and do not enter the body of the medium.
- 9. *Mua moi* is the dance with a small torch. *Moi* is a roll of rough paper coated with an inflammable substance. The mediums usually hold it between their fingers to dance.
- 10. *Heo* is a stick about 50–60 cms long with 2 or 3 bells on the end. It symbolises the horse and rod used by the Princes.
- 11. Can dong. According to tradition, a person with can dong is one whose destiny is to become a medium of the cult of the Holy Mothers. He or she must serve the gods, otherwise they will be punished.
- 12. Fjelstad, Karen and Nguyn Thi Hien, (Eds.), 2006. *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, New York.
- 13. *Con nhang, De tu* are the followers of the cult of the Holy Mothers. They often go to the temples or palaces dedicated to the Holy Mothers or leave their incense bowls there.