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“Sacred Femininity” And Cultural Vitality: An Interdisciplinary Study of Vietnamese Mother Goddess Worship in the Context of Globalization

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Article

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Abstract

Mother Goddess Worship is one of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of 2016, which represents a distinct folk belief phenomenon of Vietnam, whereby the power of goddesses is value-added, which occurs in the cosmology, history of humanity, and community. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this article takes into account both religious anthropology and feminist theory as well as performance studies and with emphasis put on the concept of cultural vitality, in order to examine how traditional values are preserved, revolutionized, and reinvented in the environment of globalization, to understand Mother Goddess Worship. Based on data collected from participant observation at “temples” and “places of Mother Goddess Worship”, semi-structured interviews with the practicing community, and analysis of ancient documents, the study clarifies: the symbol of “sacred femininity” constructed through the system of “Three Palaces” - “Four Palaces”, color system, costumes and performances; the role of the “mediumship ceremony” as a form of performing art connecting the community and reaffirming identity; the channels of diffusion and adaptation of Mother Goddess Worship through cultural tourism, international festivals and digital media; the challenges of commercialization and simplification of rituals. The results suggest that Mother Goddess Worship may be understood not only as a cultural heritage phenomenon but also as a sustainable socio-cultural mechanism through which communities maintain identity and adaptive capacity in changing contexts. The article proposes an interpretive analytical framework for research on goddess worship and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam's era of integration.

1. Introduction

Mother Goddess Worship in Vietnam is one of the unique folk beliefs of Vietnam, formed and developed over many centuries, reflecting the multidimensional relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural world (Tran, Phan, & Nguyen, 2024). The system of temples to worship goddesses of “*Tam phủ*” (Three Palaces) - “*Tứ phủ*” (Four Palaces), with “*Mẫu Thượng Thiên*” (Mother Goddess of Heaven), “*Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*” (Mother Goddess of Mountains), “*Mẫu Thoải*” (Mother Goddess of Water), and “*Mẫu Địa*” (Mother Goddess of Earth), representing the universality of the universe, while affirming the central role of women in the spiritual life and culture of Vietnam (Fjelstad & Hien, 2011). In particular, “*Mẫu Liễu Hạnh*” (Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*), the deity who has both mythical and historical elements, is a typical symbol of “sacred femininity” (Gheran, 2022). The “*hầu đồng*” (mediumship ceremony) ritual, with the combination of “*chầu văn*” (ritual singing) music, costumes, dance, and acting, not only recreates the system of religious symbols but is also a performing art space where the community participates in creating sacred experiences (Thuật, 2023). On December 1, 2016, UNESCO recognized Vietnam’s traditional practice of “*Thờ Mẫu Tam Phủ*” (Worship of Mother Goddesses) as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, creating a premise for this phenomenon to enter international academic and cultural forums (Senepin & Camille, 2021).

The process of globalization and the strong development of communication technology have expanded the space for practicing Mother Goddess Worship beyond the local community, while creating conditions

for rituals and Mother Goddess images to be widely disseminated on digital platforms (T. M. T. Nguyen, 2022). Besides the opportunities for cultural dissemination and exchange, this phenomenon also faces challenges such as the risk of commercialization, performance, and distortion of core elements, reducing the sacredness and cultural depth of the ritual.

Studying Mother Goddess Worship through the lens of combining “sacred femininity” and “cultural vitality” not only helps to identify the preservation and transformation mechanisms of this heritage but also contributes to expanding the theoretical framework of goddess religion in Southeast Asia and other indigenous communities (Do Thanh Do & Tuyet). Along with that, the context of globalization, along with the development of digital media, is posing an urgent need to understand how a traditional religious practice adapts, spreads, and at the same time protects its identity (Mohyeddin, 2024).

By expanding upon the problems/ gaps identified above, this research paper answers several questions: How is the symbol of sacred femininity in Mother Goddess Worship constructed and produced? How and in what ways does the hầu đồng (mediumship ceremony) strengthen the sense of community? How do the phenomena of globalization and digital media affect the practice and sense of this tradition? And what are the components behind the sustained vitality of Mother Goddess Worship despite the quick cultural and social changes?

1.1 Aim of the Study

In this regard, therefore, the study aims to assess how the cultural vitality of the Mother Goddess Worship in Vietnam is reproduced and sustained with special references to how the symbol of the considered sacred femininity is being established and represented within the frameworks of globalization and digital mediation.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the above theoretical and practical issues, this study focuses on answering the following research questions:

1. Through what factors is “sacred femininity” in Mother Goddess Worship constructed and expressed?

2. How do the “hầu đồng” (mediumship ceremony) ritual and its performance elements contribute to the consolidation of community identity and the maintenance of cultural continuity?

3. How have globalization and digital media affected the practice and perception of Mother Goddess Worship?

4. What socio-cultural factors ensure the vitality and adaptability of Mother Goddess Worship in the current context?

5. Can a model be constructed to compare the cultural vitality of Mother Goddess Worship with other forms of goddess worship in other cultures?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of the history of research on Mother Goddess Worship

Mother Goddess Worship is a distinct folk belief phenomenon that developed over Vietnam's long history. Historical records and folk legends indicate that the roots of Mother Goddess Worship date back to the Middle Ages, linked to the worship of goddesses who safeguard crops, water sources, and community life (Hong Van, 2020). However, starting from the 16th century, with the rise and widespread popularity of the image of "*Mẫu Liễu Hạnh*" (Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*), a deity with legendary traits closely tied to Vietnam's history, this belief system has significantly influenced the construction of temples, rituals, and community practices (Phuong, Phuc, Binh, Giang, & Hiep, 2024).

One of the peculiarities of Mother Goddess Worship is a great ability of cultural integration. The tradition is very strong in terms of the local contexts, as well as in terms of including and absorbing various religious and spiritual contents (Hoang, 2025). These are elements of Taoism: the cosmology of *Tam Phủ* (Three Palaces) and *Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces), the principles of the Feng Shui system, and the Buddhist elements, i.e., the image of Guan Yin and the philosophy of compassion. Besides that, native animistic religion, including mountain and river gods, national heroes, like *Trần Hưng Đạo* (*Hưng Đạo Đại Vương*, the *Trưng* Sisters (*hai Bà Trưng*), and Lady *Triệu* (*Bà Triệu*), are also implicitly incorporated. This resilience, flexibility, and vitality across centuries have not only widened the content and expressive means of the worship but also offered it, through this dynamic process of incorporation, a distinctly varied content and form of the deities' veneration (Mut, 2021).

Scientific research on Mother Goddess Worship began to appear in the early 20th century in the works of French scholars from the "*École française d'Extrême-Orient*" (EFEO). Gustave Dumoutier (1904) was one of the first foreigners to describe the worship of goddesses in the North (Vietnam) in his work "*Gustave Dumoutier*", paying attention to the historical-cultural aspects and the connection with indigenous beliefs (Maitre, 1904). Henri Maspero (1928), in his work "*Mythologie de la Chine moderne*", went deeper into comparing Vietnamese goddess worship with the system of goddess worship in China, analyzing the influence of Taoism and Buddhism, but still placing Mother Goddess Worship within the broader scope of research on Indochinese religion (Maspero, 2004). Maurice Durand also mentioned it in a French publication in 1959 about "spirit possession" in Vietnam. "Although he was also quoted through many documents of *Nhất Lang* plus witnessed several "spirit possession" sessions in Hanoi with *Vũ Thạch* temple and in Tuyen Quang province with Giùm temple, although he did not give a clear assessment, but through what he wrote, it shows that he is inclined towards the hypothesis that "spirit possession" has a connection with Shamanism" (T. Nguyen, Quy, Nguyen, Babieva, & Ruchkina, 2020).

During the period 1945–1975, due to the war and the socio-political context, research on Mother Goddess Worship in the North was almost interrupted, and almost no research was carried out. While in the South, there were still scattered ethnographic records in specialized journals and travel books.

Overall, during this time, research on Mother Goddess Worship received little attention. After 1975, especially from the 1990s onwards, along with the restoration and development of religious anthropology and the country's renovation policy, research on Mother Goddess Worship in Vietnam entered a period of strong development (Mut, 2021). Phuong et al. (2024) and Tran et al. (2024) have had fundamental works, affirming that Mother Goddess Worship is a complete indigenous belief system, with its own temple structure, rituals, and philosophy of life (Phuong et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024). Hein (2020) approaches from an anthropological perspective, emphasizing flexibility, regional diversity, and adaptability to contemporary social contexts (Hiền, 2020).

In addition, international scholars such as Chen and Yang (2022) and Iquito (2024) extended the scope of research beyond Vietnam, comparing Mother Goddess Worship with goddess worship phenomena in Southeast Asia and analyzing the relationship between this belief and the process of globalization, migration, and cultural tourism (Chen & Yang, 2022; Iquitos, 2024). These works contribute to placing Mother Goddess Worship in the context of international academic dialogue, while emphasizing the concept of “living heritage”, a heritage that both preserves traditional elements and continuously adapts and regenerates to survive in new social conditions.

The study of Mother Goddess Worship has gone through three main phases: (i) Pre-1975 mainland, where ethnographic documentation and travelogues were made during this period with heavy input by French and Vietnamese scholars. (ii) 1975–1990, where research was limited and hence few individual records were made (iii) 1990 to date, where research was revived and strong development through various methodological ideas such as history, ethnology, anthropology, art studies, gender studies, as well as heritage theory. The findings indicate the cultural significance of Mother Goddess Worship in Vietnam and provide a theoretical and interpretive background for new analytical approaches, particularly those related to sacred femininity and cultural vitality.

2.2. Ethnography and history of Mother Goddess Worship

Based on the general foundation of Ngo Duc Thinh (1996) on the structure of the pantheon, the ritual of “lền đồng” (spirit possession), “hầu đồng” (serving the reflections) and the human and cosmological dimensions of Mother Goddess Worship, together with the anthropological approach of Tran et al. (2024) emphasizing the flexibility and adaptability according to the social context, it can be seen that the process of “demythologizing” superstitious prejudices has taken place in parallel with the process of academicization and heritageization (Tran et al., 2024).

International studies have contributed to strengthening this argument: Philip Taylor (2004) shows that Mother Goddess Worship is a religious pilgrimage experience rich in identity construction, operating in contemporary economic and symbolic networks (Taylor, 2004). Roszko (2022) analyzes how markets, urbanization, and ritual performances reconfigure the sacred in urban spaces (Roszko, 2022). Whereas Nguyen Thi Hien (2023) clarifies mediumship as a therapeutic social mechanism, both empowering gender subjects and creating translocal communities of practice (T. H. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023).

The inscription of " Vietnam's traditional practice of "*Thờ Mẫu Tam Phủ*" (Worship of Mother Goddesses)" into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2016) continues to legitimize the cultural-historical value of this practice, while opening up a conceptual framework that recognizes Mother Goddess Worship as a dynamic system of rituals and symbols, capable of adapting, re-interpreting and negotiating with modernity, thereby going beyond the "superstitious" frame of reference to become a source of identity and living heritage (UNESCO, 2016).

2.3. Mother Goddess Worship's Arts and Performance Research Group

Mother Goddess Worship, from the perspective of arts and performance, has explained why the practice remains so vibrant in modern times. Ancient sources and recent research confirm that "hầu đồng" (mediumship ceremony) ritual is a form of comprehensive ritual performance, where "chầu văn" (ritual singing) music, "*vũ bộ*" (movements), makeup, costumes, and "nghi trượng" (decorative items) connect, creating an aesthetic experience that both "leads the way" to the sacred state and creates community (C. Nguyen, Duc, Hà, & Thu, 2024). Preliminary systematic studies of chầu văn (ritual singing) had defined its importance as a multicultural musical and expressive element of the Mother Goddess Worship. Its melodic and rhythmic patterns, vocal delivery, instrumentation, and its role as a music structure directing the movement and flow of the ritual have been studied. Later scholarship has also shown that hầu đồng (spirit possession) functions as a spiritual practice as well as a form of expressivity through the artistic traditions of such practices, which has a codified use of rhythm and props, symbolic color use, and the order in which the mediumship performances follow (Tran et al., 2024).

On the level of performance aesthetics, Dong Khanh (2020) emphasizes the synthesis of "chầu văn" (ritual singing) of "*hầu đồng*" (mediumship ceremony) ritual: singing, instrument sounds, and beats blend into dance movements, changing costumes, changing props, creating a series of symbolic "incarnations" according to each medium price (Tran et al., 2024). This reading helps distinguish ritual performance (associated with the community of believers, ethical standards, and the purpose of praying for peace and gratitude) from stage performance (oriented to a wide audience, with different aesthetic conventions). Here, the boundary is not for simple opposition, but to indicate the conditions for preserving the "sacredness" of ritual art in the context of tourism and communication.

In the anthropological dimension of the body, Nguyen Kim Hien (2004) sees "spirit possession" as a therapeutic spiritual cultural activity, where music, movement, and social interaction help restore emotional balance, relationships, and beliefs. This therapeutic interpretation clarifies the aesthetic and sacred mechanisms: art does not stand outside the ritual but is the "sensory organ" of the ritual, allowing the subject and the community to experience protection, salvation, and gratitude.

Cross-cultural interpretations further expand the analytical framework. Jay McDanie (2021) proposes to see Mother Goddess Worship as a "sacred ecology," in which the goddess's spiritual forces and images place humans in a symbiotic network with the larger life. This perspective helps to connect the art, the symbol of "*hầu đồng*" (mediumship ceremony), with the ethics of caring for life, thereby explaining the appeal of ritual performance to the public outside the community of believers.

Analysis of the above studies shows that: (i) "*Chầu văn*" (ritual singing) is the musical grammar, the rhythm of organizing the ritual; (ii) "*hầu đồng*" (mediumship ceremony)" is a comprehensive ritual performance, ensuring sacredness thanks to community rules and ethical purposes; (iii) the therapeutic dimension turns art into a means of re-establishing spiritual-social order; (iv) ecological and intercultural connections open up new interpretive spaces for the art of Mother Goddess Worship. Further research directions could focus on the criteria for assessing "sacredness" in the context of theatricalization, the set of indicators for training and teaching "chầu văn" (ritual singing), and the impact of digital media on the grammar of ritual performance.

2.4. Gender and "sacred femininity" of Mother Goddess Worship

The selected group of documents suggests a consistent research trajectory on "sacred femininity" in Mother Goddess Worship, connecting the layers of goddess symbols, the mechanism of practicing "spirit possession", cultural schemas, women's soft power, and the issue of protecting sacredness in the context of modernization and heritage. Although different in genre (monographs, academic articles, policy papers, heritage), these works all indicate that "sacred femininity" is both a symbolic axis and a socio-ethical resource, building capacity agency for women and the community.

First of all, Tho's study of "*Chầu bà*" (2022), in the Mother Goddess Worship, clarifies the structure of goddesses and saints as a sacred "symbol", where the *Chầu* (ladies) take on different functional domains (protection, wealth, health, happiness, etc.). This system provides sacred feminine archetypes that are both close to everyday life and have transcendent authority. Thanks to that, the relationship between incense-disciples and Mother Goddesses and Chau is not only worship but also a process of moralizing life, an important foundation for understanding how "sacred femininity" permeates the structure of family, livelihood, and community.

On the level of practice and body, Nguyen Thi Hien (2010) examines the phenomenon of "yin disease" and diagnosis and treatment in "spirit possession" of Vietnamese people, thereby pointing out the therapeutic mechanism associated with body expression and "chầu văn" music (ritual singing) and social interaction. Rituals not only "cure" illness in the sense of mental and physical illness, but also re-establish moral and relational order, strengthen the authority of the medium, mostly women or practitioners with expressive "feminine" qualities. From here, "sacred feminine" appears as a mediating

power connecting individuals, families, and spirits, contributing to the practical empowerment of the practitioner in everyday life.

Approaching the cognitive framework, Tran, Phan & Nguyen (2024) apply the theory of "cultural schemas" to explain why the belief in Mother Goddess Worship has social durability. Cultural cognitive schemas (e.g., gratitude and revenge, protection, salvation, happiness-death-longevity) help believers structure their experiences, interpret risks, and choose actions. This perspective is important because it explains "sacred feminine" not as a discrete superstition, but as a coherent framework of meaning, capable of guiding practice and adapting to new contexts (migration, urban, digital media).

On the social power level, Vu Thi Tu Anh (2016) emphasizes the "soft power" of women in Mother Goddess culture: through merit, ritual organization, "temple" network, palace, and cultural intermediary function, women accumulate prestige, social capital, and negotiating capacity in the community. This is a secular dimension of "feminine sacredness", where power is not imposed by coercion but operates through symbolic recognition, gratitude, and the ability to connect.

The issue of "sacredness" in the context of heritage and marketization is raised directly by Truong Vui (2023). The article warns of the risk of theatricalization and commercialization eroding the sacred depth and calls for a mechanism to protect sacredness based on community norms and the responsibilities of relevant parties. Here, "feminine sacredness" is not only a symbolic value but also an ethical standard that governs practice, setting the boundary between artistic performance and religious rituals.

To broaden the scope of comparison, Orsi (1996) shows that the devotion to St. Jude in American urban Catholicism creates a "feminine moral space" where women restructure their ability to endure, hope, and care for their families in precarious circumstances. Although in a different context, Orsi's core thesis supports the understanding of "feminine sacredness" as a constructive ethical-social resource that helps women transform adversity into the capacity to act, similar to the role of Mother Goddess and Chau in Vietnamese life.

Thus, the above studies depict "feminine sacredness" as a three-layered structure: (i) the symbolic layer - "*Chầu bà*", Mother Goddess provides the model of the patron goddess; (ii) the practical layer - the "spirit possession" body, curing "yin disease" that generates intermediate and therapeutic power; (iii) the institutional-social layer (soft power, protecting sacredness) that regulates the relationship between belief, market and heritage. The tensions between sacredness and performance, between empowerment and the risk of essentializing femininity, are the driving force for tradition to continue to negotiate and re-mean in modernity.

2.5. Cultural Vitality and Global Interface of Mother Goddess Worship

Domestic studies emphasize the foundation of rituals and practices as infrastructure to maintain cultural memories, power grids, and palaces. Ngo Bach (2010) systematizes rituals and practices, thereby showing the mechanism of community cohesion and maintaining the "living memory" of tradition. Dam Lan (2020) approaches Mother Goddess Worship from a cultural perspective, clarifying the symbolic effect of "*Tam Phủ*" (Three Palaces) and "*Tứ Phủ*" (Four Palaces) in contemporary life. In terms of institutions and heritage, N.M (2016) presents the image of a "living museum", emphasizing on-site heritage: practices are preserved through the practicing community itself, while expanding the public space. Pham Viet Long (2024) connects preservation with cultural development, emphasizing the openness and ability to absorb social resources of the Mother symbol system. Studies have shown that Mother Goddess Worship operates as a self-regenerating cultural infrastructure thanks to cycles of rituals, merits, pilgrimages, and sacred spaces, ensuring cultural resilience in the face of social change.

From an inter-regional comparison, Nguyen Van Bon (2023) points out the two-way acculturation mechanism between the Northern Vietnamese community and the Central Cham people: the divine layer, rituals, and folk practices interact, borrow, and redefine in cultural "borders". Nguyen Van Tai's case study of Nghe An illustrates a form of micro-localization, where the same framework of "Three Palaces" - "Four Palaces", but the symbolic structure, calendar, and network of subjects (co-teachers, incense followers) have significant variations (Tai, 2023). The multi-configuration of Mother Goddess Worship shows an open system, both unified in its symbolic core and diversified in its geographical and cultural expressions.

Although not directly interpreting globalization in the classical sense, the literature on heritability (N.M, 2016) and the monograph by Pham Viet Long (2024) show that Mother Goddess Worship is entering the framework of heritage governance, linked to cultural tourism, media, and somewhat theatricalization. Under the cultural-historical lens (Hill & Cole, 1995), this is a process of "reframing": practices are reinterpreted in the language of heritage, aesthetics, and creative development. The expansion of audiences and listeners through heritage, tourism, and media creates a dynamic of soft diffusion at the regional and international level, while raising questions about authenticity, performance ethics, and the right to define.

The above studies have shown a "dual" structure: (i) continuous endogenous through ritual infrastructure and community memory; (ii) variable exogeneity through inter-regional adaptation and cultural heritage market interface. The contradictions between sacredness and performance, between identity and economic tourism, are inevitable, but they also create a "negotiation space" for Mother Goddess Worship to continue to re-conceptualize. From a theoretical perspective, the historical-cultural framework helps to connect the practical layer (ritual), the discursive layer (heritage, symbols), and the institutional layer (heritage governance), thereby explaining why Mother Goddess Worship maintains its vitality in the modern context.

2.6. Theoretical gaps and orientations of this study

An overview of the research groups shows that: (i) Ethnographic and historical works have established the foundation for identifying Mother Goddess Worship as a complete belief system; (ii) Artistic and performance studies have clarified the aesthetic and semiotic values of the ritual; (iii) Gender approaches have affirmed the importance of “sacred femininity” in Mother Goddess Worship.

However, there have not been many studies integrating both the theoretical frameworks of “sacred femininity” and cultural vitality to analyze Mother Goddess Worship as a living heritage, especially in the context of globalization and digital media. This gap is the basis for the current study to propose an interdisciplinary analytical framework, both explaining the symbolic value of the goddess and explaining the cultural adaptation mechanism of the practicing community.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research strategy to examine the mechanisms through which the symbol of “sacred femininity” operates within the practice of Mother Goddess Worship and contributes to its cultural vitality. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, values, and experiences as expressed by practitioners and communities involved in this tradition.

Data are collected through multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic documentation of rituals and online activities. The study also employs document analysis of relevant texts, visual materials, and digital media representations to complement field observations and deepen interpretive insights.

3.2 Research Sites and Participants

The research is conducted across multiple sites to capture regional diversity and contextual variations in practice:

(i) the Red River Delta (Hanoi, Ninh Binh) — the central area of temples, palaces, and ritual networks;

(ii) the North Central region (Thanh Hoa, Nghe An) — representing localized adaptations;

(iii) the South (Ho Chi Minh City) — illustrating the dynamics of urbanization;

(iv) cross-border contexts — explored through digital ethnography on online platforms and among overseas Vietnamese communities.

Participants include practitioners (*mediums, cung văn*, custodians), believers, pilgrims, cultural and religious administrators, as well as event and cultural tourism organizers. This diverse group enables a comprehensive understanding of how “sacred femininity” is perceived, performed, and negotiated across social, geographical, and digital spaces.

3.2 Data collection

Ethnography & participant observation: structured field notes in at least 20–24 rituals (schedule, space and time, ceremonial symbols, music, dance, community interactions). Respect areas with rituals where filming is restricted.

Semi-structured interviews: purposeful sampling combined with “additional recruitment” (snowball), expected 45–60 people; topics revolve around: the concept of “feminine sacredness”, therapeutic mechanisms, mediation, soft power, the boundary between ritual and performance, the impact of heritageization on tourismization. Add 3–4 discussion groups (6–8 people/group) to cross-validate community norms.

Ethnicity index & media content analysis: purposefully sample approximately 25–30 content items (videos, articles) on “hầu đồng” (mediumship ceremony), “chầu văn” (ritual singing) on YouTube, Facebook, TikTok; code the themes, performance forms, reception parameters (views, comments, descriptions of sacredness).

Secondary data: administrative documents, newspaper articles, academic journals, local publications, “temple” and “palace” (worship space and ritual practice of Mother Goddess Worship) documents.

Qualitative data analysis: reflexive thematic analysis; pattern matching between locations; illustration with context-rich quotes and “member checking” with the practicing subject. Ethnomusicology supplement: description of rhythm - mode - rhythmic structure of “chầu văn” (ritual singing); performance analysis (semiotics of costumes, colors, props, movements) to explain the sacred aesthetic mechanism.

4. Results

4.1. Elements of construction and expression of “feminine sacredness” of Mother Goddess Worship

The research results show that the “sacred feminine” in Mother Goddess Worship is constructed as a multi-layered structure, where the axes of symbolism – body – aesthetics – sacred space – moral economy intertwine and operate together. The specific manifestations are as follows:

Firstly, at the symbolic level - the shrine of the gods, the structure of “*Tam Phủ*”, “*Tứ Phủ*” and the system of Mother Goddess - Chầu Bà create a stable “sacred symbol” revolving around the categories of protection - salvation, happiness - prosperity - longevity and justice, gratitude - revenge. This historical–symbolic foundation is established in classical studies of Mother Goddess Worship, clarifying the origin, formation process, and layers of meaning associated with the goddess (Thinh, 1996; Bien, 2000, 2010; Thong, 2001; Khanh, 2008; Van & Hoang, 2020). On the typological level, the image of Chầu Bà concretizes the sacred feminine archetypes, both close to everyday life and carrying transcendent authority through different functional domains (Tho, 2022).

Second, on the body-intermediate level, the ritual of entering a trance, “serving the reflections” (serving the reflections), allows the “sacred” to pass through the body of the medium, thereby transforming tension, trauma, and relationship conflicts into a new moral order of the individual and the community. The mechanism of diagnosing and treating “yin disease” in “*lên đồng*” (spirit possession) clearly illustrates this intermediary function (Hien, 2010).

Third, the aesthetic-ritual layer functions as the “sensory organ” of the sacred: “*chầu văn*” (ritual singing) (melodic system - beat), dance, costumes - color palette, ceremonial symbols and bronze price order combine to guide the liminal state of the community, from the everyday to the sacred (Ngo Duc Thinh, 1992; Nguyen Ngoc Mai, 2017; Dong Khanh, 2020). This aesthetic dimension is not purely performance, but is a means of emotional transformation that creates a sense of protection and gratitude.

Fourth, the sacred-material space (palaces, shrines, family altars) and pilgrimage networks organize regular encounters between believers and goddesses, thereby maintaining collective memory and identity in the flow of popular religion (Taylor, 2004; Bach, 2010). The flexibility of the symbol allows for local variations (especially in the Central region) while still retaining the feminine core (Thong, 2001).

Fifth, at the moral economic level, meritorious practices, wishes, and “ăn lộc” (blessings) operate according to the logic of recognition and “repaying favors”, nurturing ritual infrastructure, vocational training (cung văn, nghi trượng), and social support activities; thereby creating a loop of trust that strengthens the vitality of tradition (Taylor, 2004; Bach, 2010; Namdinh, 2022). Through the lens of cultural schemas, categories such as protection, salvation, or gratitude and revenge help communities structure their experiences, orient their choices, and adapt in the modern context (Tran, Phan, & Nguyen, 2024).

The results suggest that “feminine sacredness” may be interpreted not as a static attribute, but as a dynamic practical architecture sustained through symbols, ritual aesthetics, sacred spaces, pilgrimage networks, and shared cognitive schemas within the community.

4.2. The “mediumship ceremony” and its performance elements in strengthening identity, maintaining cultural continuity

The research results show that “*hầu đồng*” (mediumship ceremony) operates as a comprehensive ritual performance: “*chầu văn*” (ritual singing) music (melodic system, beat), dance set, costumes - color palette and ceremonial symbols combine to form a “sensory apparatus” that brings the community from everyday space to sacred space, while simultaneously creating a common set of symbols for recognition and empathy (Thinh, 1992; Khanh, 2020). On the structural level, the order of the price and the rules of changing costumes–props organize the process of “descending-ascending” the deities according to a stable performance grammar, thereby encoding collective experience in easily recognizable and repetitive segments.

Regarding the transmission mechanism, "hầu đồng" (mediumship ceremony) provides a "script" for apprenticeship through mentoring between the master disciple and coordination with cung van; newcomers gradually acquire the rhythm, beat, ceremonial operations, and behavioral standards, thereby ensuring intergenerational continuity without depending entirely on cultural texts (Mai, 2017; Bach, 2010). The relative standardization of the price sequence, rhythm, and costumes helps the community identify the "correct" standard and monitor deviations, while still leaving a flexible margin for local variations.

In terms of therapy and social cohesion, "*hầu đồng*" (mediumship ceremony) is described as a therapeutic spiritual cultural activity, where physical expression associated with music and community interaction contributes to relieving tension, re-establishing emotional-relational balance, and strengthening the accepted moral order (Hien, 2004). The sympathetic effect in the ritual (giving gifts, gratitude, vows) thickens the network of gratitude, thereby enhancing the cohesion and self-organization capacity of the participating group.

At the spatial-network level, the "*điện*", "*phủ*" nodes and pilgrimage trajectories create the infrastructure for collective identity: the ritual cycle, the route to the "*phủ*" (palace) to the "điện" (temple) and the meritorious ritual form a "sacred map" that the community shares, taking the "mediumship ceremony" beyond the framework of a single event to become a mechanism for seasonal and life-cycle cultural reproduction (Taylor, 2004). The link between public space "*điện*" (temple), "*phủ*" (palace) and private space (family altar) helps maintain the continuity of practice in daily life, while expanding the circle of participation through interwoven layers of "audience and followers".

Thus, the "*hầu đồng*" (mediumship ceremony) consolidates identity and maintains cultural continuity through three organically linked axes: (i) A stable but flexible performance grammar - "*giá đồng*" - is the term used to refer to the one time when gods descend to earth, entering the body of a "*thanh đồng*" person to show the role and plot of that saint in the mediumship ceremony; "*diệu thức*" - are magical and attractive forms of performance in "spirit possession"; "*bộc sức*" - are spiritual state that the practitioner of the ritual experiences, allowing them to communicate and express the will of the "Mother Goddesses" through gestures, words and mannerisms characteristic of that deity; (ii) Ritual pedagogy based on mentoring and monitoring community norms and (iii) Therapeutic function cohesion linked to the pilgrimage infrastructure, the temple, and the palace. These three axes create the foundation for the ritual to both reaffirm identity and adapt sustainably to social change.

4.3. The impact of Globalization and digital media on the practice and perception of Mother Goddess Worship

Globalization is creating profound changes in folk religious practices in general and Mother Goddess Worship in particular. Heritage policies and mass media have significantly expanded the public sphere, contributing to the standardization of some aesthetic conventions of ritual performance, while positioning the practice as a form of living museum linked to cultural education and responsible tourism (N.M., 2016; Bai, 2023; Namdinh, 2022; Long, 2022).

At the same time, the diffusion through media creates additional market pressure on ritual practices and audience reception habits, thereby increasing the tension between performance aimed at a broad public and norms of sacredness within the practicing community. This context requires a community-proposed and monitored normative mechanism, in addition to the state-authorized heritage governance framework, to ensure a clear distinction between the space for performing rituals and the space for presenting art, as well as to preserve the authenticity of the ritual (Vui, 2023; Bai, 2023).

Interpretatively, the understanding of sacred ecology suggests connecting the image of the Mother Goddess, the experiences of inspiration, and the ethics of caring for life, thereby providing an effective language for dialogue with the public beyond the community of believers in the digital age, including young people and the Vietnamese community abroad (Jay McDanie, 2021; Taylor, 2004). Evidence in the digital space shows that videos of "*chầu văn*" (ritual singing) instruction, documented ritual symbols, and pilgrimage stories have become collective archives, both supporting vocational training and enriching community memory, although annotation and verification mechanisms are still needed to avoid shortening the ritual context.

At the level of meaning, cultural cognitive frameworks help explain why the process of reframing discourse through digital platforms often leads to re-conceptualization rather than the elimination of practice. Schemas such as protection and salvation, gratitude and revenge provide a framework for organizing experience, orienting ethical choices, and allowing adaptation to local conditions and different social groups (Hill & Cole, 1995; Strauss & Quinn, 1997; Tran, Phan & Nguyen, 2024).

Thus, the impact of globalization and digital media on Mother Goddess Worship is two-fold. On the one hand, it expands the space for reception and resources for development. On the other hand, it requires refining community norms and enhancing interpretive capacity to maintain sacredness, ensure cultural continuity, and improve the quality of teaching in a modern context.

4.4. Socio-cultural factors ensuring the vitality and adaptability of Mother Goddess Worship

The synthesis of documents indicates that the vitality and adaptability of Mother Goddess Worship are associated with an interwoven structure of community governance, moral economy, women's soft power, and institutional linkages. These factors do not operate separately but interact in a mutually reinforcing cycle, thereby preserving the sacredness, supporting ritual continuity, and expanding the space of reception in the context of globalization and digital media.

First, community governance. The system of on-site roles, including incense masters, mediums, and musicians, plays the role of setting standards, monitoring, and correcting deviations in practice. The cycle of apprenticeship, teaching rituals, and internal consensus mechanisms forms the self-regulating framework of the community of practice. Observations of rituals and customs show that professional standards and codes of conduct are gradually formed through repeated practice, thereby limiting the

tendency to simplify formalities or deviate from standards in the context of increasing commercialization and theatricalization (Bach, 2010; Hung, 2021).

Second, moral economy. The transparent merit structure and reinvestment in temple maintenance, training of musicians, preservation of rhythms, and social support activities create a cycle of trust between believers and sacred institutions. Research on pilgrimage and popular religion shows that the cycle of gratitude and reciprocation operates as a trust-based resource allocation mechanism, both nurturing ritual infrastructure and strengthening community bonds in the long term (Taylor, 2004; Namdinh, 2022).

Third, the soft power of women. Women are prominently present in ritual organization, administration of the palace network, and accumulation of prestige and social capital, thereby shaping a moral axis of authority based on gratitude and care. This is the secular dimension of the feminine sacred, which helps explain how the practice has the potential to sustain individuals and families, and re-engage communities in a context of rapid social change (Anh, 2016; Tho, 2022).

Fourth, institutional linkages. Heritage frameworks, local cultural education, and media are responsible for facilitating the recognition, documentation, and promotion of practices that respect community norms. Policies and communication messages emphasize the protection of sacredness, clearly delineate ceremonial spaces and spaces for art presentation, and support the capacity to pass on to the next generation, thereby easing tensions between public-oriented performances and sacred community norms (N.M., 2016; Bai, 2023; Nhat, 2023).

In summary, the four elements mentioned above form a cultural ecosystem that operates on the principle of co-governance between community and institution. Community governance ensures standards, an ethical economy provides sustainable resources, women's soft power maintains the axis of gratitude and care, and institutional linkages expand the space for promotion with mechanisms to preserve authenticity. This resonance explains the resilience of Mother Goddess Worship in the face of waves of change, and at the same time shows the priority direction in policy making for the preservation and development of living heritage.

5. Discussion

Based on the theoretical basis of cultural meaning and cognitive schema (Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Hill & Cole, 1995; Taylor, 2004), together with evidence of religious activities and the results of “Fieldwork” (practical penetration), the study proposes a four-dimensional matrix for cross-cultural comparison and to quantify the vitality of Mother Goddess Worship in a way that can be tested in cultural sociological experiments. The operational definitions, indicators, data sources, proposed scales, and interpretations of the four dimensions are presented in Table 1. Specifically:

• Dimension A: represents the density of symbols and rituals, i.e., the richness of the temple system, the system of relics, the system of colors, the ceremonial symbols, and the ritual cycle.

• Dimension B: records the intensity of sacred performance, expressed through the level of embodiment of the sacred, the depth of “chầu văn” music (ritual singing), dance, costumes, and the structure of the ritual space.

• Dimension C: reflects the level of community cohesion through the pilgrimage network, the density of the “temple” nodes, the level of participation, and the merit mechanism.

• Dimension D describes the interface with heritage, media, and markets, including the level of heritage institutionalization, media practices, and patterns of cultural value circulation in the creative economy.

The scoring interpretation for each dimension on a one-to-five scale is summarized in Table 2.

When applying this framework, Mother Goddess Worship shows high value in the first three dimensions due to the density of symbols and rituals rich in meaning, the intensity of sacred performances, along the pilgrimage and merit network that creates community cohesion. Dimension D needs to be regulated by community norms and heritage frameworks to ensure authenticity and sacred depth in the context of rapidly expanding digital media and cultural tourism (Bai, 2023; Namdinh, 2022; Long, 2022). An illustrative cross-cultural comparison profile based on the proposed vector [A, B, C, D] is provided in Table 3.

A comparative reference to urban Catholic devotion to St. Jude reveals a similar logic of women’s moral space construction, where the flow of grace and prayer becomes a mechanism of spiritual support and social empowerment, despite the significantly different symbolic structures and intensity of sacred performance (Orsi, 1996). From this, a testable hypothesis can be formulated that cultural vitality is optimal when values A, B, and C are high and dimension D is regulated by community norms and heritage co-governance mechanisms.
The academic implication of the matrix is to provide a fulcrum for linking cognitive schema theory with observable indicators in ritual and in community institutions. The policy implication is the need for a set of measurement criteria compatible with the four dimensions mentioned above, including the index of symbolic and ritual density, the index of sacred performance intensity, the index of community and pilgrimage cohesion, and the index of heritage and communication interface. These indicators can be used to track measurement invariance across regions, across role groups, and to assess the impact of digital media and cultural tourism on the sanctity and continuity of traditions.

The study suggests that feminine sacredness in Mother Goddess Worship may be understood as simultaneously constructed through symbolic systems, embodied ritual aesthetics, community moral frameworks, and institutional heritage structures. “*Hầu đồng*” (mediumship ceremony) is both a mechanism of therapy and empathy, and a foundation for transmitting the profession, thereby strengthening collective identity and maintaining cultural continuity (Thinh, 1992; Hien, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Globalization and digital media expand the space for tradition to exist, but at the same time, they pose a demand for the protection of sacredness, a demand that needs to be met through institutional

linkages and self-regulation capacity of the practicing community based on agreed-upon norms and on-site monitoring mechanisms

6. Conclusion

The study suggests that “feminine sacredness” in Mother Goddess Worship may be interpreted as a multilayered cultural architecture connecting symbols, embodied ritual aesthetics, community governance, moral economy, and heritage frameworks. “*hầu đồng*” (mediumship ceremony) operates as a core mechanism that both creates collective empathy and transmits the profession, thereby strengthening identity and maintaining cultural continuity in the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary society. Globalization and digital media expand the space of reception, create more resources for preservation and promotion, and at the same time pose a demand for the protection of sacredness, clearly distinguishing the space of ritual and the space of art introduction, enhancing the capacity of interpretation and transmission. The academic contribution of the paper lies in proposing a four-dimensional interpretive matrix for cross-cultural comparison and for examining cultural vitality systematically through observable ritual and social indicators. The policy implications are to prioritize community-institutional co-governance, standardize the four-dimensional set of indicators, and implement monitoring of the impact of media and cultural tourism, thereby ensuring the preservation of authenticity, promoting the value of living heritage, and improving the quality of teaching to the next generation.

Declarations

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The authors acknowledge the use of Grammarly, Google, and Google Translate for the purposes of editing grammar, punctuation, fluency, searching for documents, and translating difficult terms to verify and compare with the translations of the author team. Although the authors acknowledge the use of AI, we still affirm that they are the sole authors of this article and take full responsibility for its content, as stated in the COPE recommendations.

Ethics Statement

This study involved human participants through semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, participant observation, and community-based qualitative inquiry. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM). Written

informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Informed Consent

Informed Consent: This study was conducted with the participants' informed consent. “Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty”; “Written consent was obtained from all participants”; “The study protocol was approved by the VNU-HCM, Vietnam National University, HoChiMinh City”.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Author Contribution

The author solely conceived and designed the study; conducted the literature review; developed the theoretical framework and research methodology; carried out participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic data collection; performed data analysis and interpretation; drafted, revised, and finalized the manuscript; and approved the final version submitted for publication. The author accepts full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and academic integrity of the article.

Data Availability

The supplementary materials provided for this study include the semi-structured interview guide, participant-observation protocol, focus-group discussion procedure, digital media-content coding framework, thematic codebook, analytical procedure, audit trail, and processed anonymized qualitative evidence log. Because this research involves human participants, sacred ritual practices, and culturally sensitive community-based activities, raw audio recordings, full interview transcripts, exact ritual-site identifiers, and unredacted field notes are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality and comply with ethical research obligations. Additional anonymized materials may be made available for scholarly verification upon reasonable request and under ethical restrictions.

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