Andrea Lauser

STAGING THE SPIRITS: LÊN ĐỒNG - CULT - CULTURE - SPECTACLE

PERFORMATIVE CONTEXTS OF A VIETNAMESE RITUAL FROM CONTROLLED POSSESSION TO STAGED PERFORMANCE

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Title page image: A *lên đồng* medium during a ritual performance. Andrea Lauser, 2007

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STAGING THE SPIRITS: LÊN ĐỒNG - CULT - CULTURE - SPECTACLE

PERFORMATIVE CONTEXTS OF A VIETNAMESE RITUAL FROM CONTROLLED POSSESSION TO STAGED PERFORMANCE*

* This is a modified and extended version of a book chapter published in German, titled „Lên Đồng - Kult - Kulturerbe – Spektakel. Ein vietnamesisches Ritual: Von der kontrollierten Besessenheit zur Bühnenperformance“ In: Ulrike Bieker, Michael Kraus u.a. (2018, eds): Ich durfte den Jaguar am Waldrand sprechen. Marburg/Lahn: curupira, S. 179-207. Multimedia elements have been added.

ABSTRACT

Vietnamese mediumship known as *lên đồng*, a central ritual practice in the context of the so-called Religion of the Mother Goddesses (*Đạo Mẫu*, also referred to as “the way of the four palaces”, *Đạo Tứ Phủ*), can be described as a vital religious practice which has proved its resilience and adaptability throughout its history despite persistent criticism in the name of modernity and progress. In this paper I trace the dynamics of the transformation of this practice from a forbidden possession ritual at the centre of the Four Palace Cult (*Đạo Tứ Phủ*) to its toleration and appreciation as an expression of “authentic” Vietnamese culture and collective national identity. I outline this path from national shame to national fame through different stages and ‘spaces of articulation’, such as folklorization, the experimental art spectacle, and heritagization and theatricalization as propaganda spectacle. The question of whether mediumship is accepted as a religious ritual, or even as a religion at all, is of political significance and relevance in a country like Vietnam, where the state judges the legitimacy of religion.

Vietnamesische Geistbesessenheit, bekannt als lên đồng *und als zentrale rituelle Praxis innerhalb der sogenannten Religion der Muttergottheiten (*Đạo Mẫu *oder auch „Weg der vier Paläste“ -* Đạo Tứ Phủ *genannt) kann als vitale religiöse und rituelle Praxis beschrieben werden, die im Laufe ihrer Geschichte und trotz heftiger Kritik und Verurteilung im Namen von Modernität und Fortschritt ihre Anpassungsfähigkeit, ja Resilienz, unter Beweis gestellt hat. In meinem Beitrag möchte ich die Transformations-Dynamiken von einem verbotenen Besessenheitsritual zu seiner Tolerierung bis hin zu seiner Wertschätzung als Ausdruck „authentischer“ vietnamesischer Kultur und kollektiver nationaler Identität nachzeichnen. Den Weg from national shame to national fame skizziere ich über verschiedene Etappen und ‚Artikulationsräume‘ der Folklorifizierung, des experimentellen Kunst-Spektakels und der Heritagisierung und Theatralisierung als Propaganda-Spektakel. Dabei ist die Frage, ob Geistbesessenheit als religiöses Ritual oder gar eine Religion akzeptiert wird, in einem Land wie Vietnam, wo der Staat entscheidet, was eine legitime und erlaubte Religion ist, von politischer Brisanz und Relevanz.*

APPROACHING *LÊN ĐỒNG*

When I arrived in Hanoi in October 2006 with the intention of doing research on pilgrimage and ancestor worship, I was invited in an almost conspiratorial manner to a 'going into a trance' ritual (trance ritual) in a private temple. Here, I experienced my first *lên đồng*. The ritual was mainly sponsored by a *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) woman, who had 'returned home' to Hanoi burdened with personal problems which she intended to address through a set of efficacious rituals. Her hope of being 'healed' both physically and mentally was linked to her faith in the effectiveness of an "ancient Vietnamese tradition".[1]

My usual experience of pilgrimages[2] during my fieldwork in 2006/7 was that we travelled many hours on winding roads to temples high in the mountains or in remote areas; we quickly realized that we were not the only ones but that there were other "pilgrims" travelling as well in buses and minivans. Affluent but also less well off Vietnamese from Hanoi, and even people from overseas seeking out their rural/cultural roots, sponsor these pilgrimages, which are usually combined with elaborate *lên đồng* ceremonies: possession rituals in which devotees ask, through a medium, the goddesses of the Four Palaces (*Đạo Tứ Phủ*), heaven (*Thiên Phủ*), earth (*Địa Phủ*), water (*Thủy Phủ*), and mountains and forests (*Nhạc Phủ)*, as well as their wide-ranging pantheon of spirit helpers, to bless them so that they may be more prosperous in their enterprises and undertakings.

BOOMING *LÊN ĐỒNG*

Lên đồng rituals or *hầu bóng*[3] (the currently preferred term) are central to a complex belief system (*hệ thống tín ngưỡng*) called the religion of the Four Palaces (*Đạo Tứ Phủ*) or the religion of the Mother Goddesses (*Đạo Mẫu*). *Đạo Mẫu,* which literally means "The Way of the Mother Goddesses", has been described as a traditional religious tradition of Vietnam interspersed with Taoist elements (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996, 2006). The spirit possession ceremonies that are the center point of the rituals may last for several hours; a medium is possessed by an array of different spirits, deities, and a hierarchically ordered sequence of divine 'spirit-assistants', dances to music called *chầu văn*, sometimes speaks messages, distributes blessed gifts – *lộc* – (and money), and offers advice and healing. The pantheon of gods and spirits forms the 'skeleton' or foundational structure of the religious worldview within which exists a certain amount of flexibility for improvisation and innovation. In a kind of nostalgic reminiscence of the great imperial past, spirits, culture heroes and ancestral heroes such as General Trần Hưng Đạo[4] (and some of his family members) appear in hierarchical order. Each deity (*Mẫu*) of the palaces of the universe has a number

[1] For the current discussion of Vietnamese indigenous religions in the diaspora, see Hoskins 2014, 2015, 2017.
[2] See also Lauser 2015, 2016.
[3] In trance and possession rituals *lên đồng* (literally mounting / riding a medium), the medium 'serves' (*hầu*) the spirits and gods (*bóng* literally 'shadow') to receive and pass on advice and healing as 'vehicle'. Regarding aspects of therapeutic healing in *lên đồng*, see also Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2008.
[4] He was a general who defeated the Mongols in the 13th century. A well-known saying refers to the close connection between military and deification: *Sinh vi danh tướng, tử vi thần* — a general during his lifetime, a deity after death. Taylor (2004:194) glosses these heroic figures because of their connection to military, scientific and administrative realms as "warrior-scholar-official spirits (*thần võ-văn-quan*)", see also Lauser 2008.

of 'spirit helpers', such as mandarins (*Quan*), court ladies (*Chầu*), princes (*Ông Hoàng*), princesses (*Cô*), and young princes (*Cậu Bé*), who become embodied during the possession ritual and are identified by splendid colored clothes and paraphernalia according to the assignment to the four palaces – red color symbolizes the palace of the sky, yellow the earth, white stands for the palace of the water, and green and blue for the mountains and forests. Practitioners of *lên đồng* are familiar with this more or less standardized pantheon and a list of principal temples, rituals, and festivals.[5] However, there is no codified set of religious texts, and there is to date no overarching institutionalized organization that makes decisions concerning religion practice or doctrine. The loose structure allows great flexibility among practitioners in terms of liturgy and interpretation – although disagreements about these are also common.

Fig. 1-6: Lên đồng *in a private temple, Hanoi 2007 (Photo: Lauser)(click for video)*

When a spirit "mounts" the medium, the ever-present and indispensable assistants (*hầu dâng*) throw a red cloth over the head of the medium and then dress him or her with characteristic robes. The mediums say that when they put on the red scarf, they release control over their bodies and allow a spirit to "ride" them, referring to themselves as the "seat" for the spirit. At most ceremonies, which may last up to eight hours, they may be mounted by several dozen different spirits. Male and female mediums perform both as princesses – who range from coquettish or cheeky to compassionate, caring and highly feminine, and who dance, hand out flowers, scarves, jewelry, money and other previously sacrificed items (*phát lộc*) – as well as fierce, weapon-wielding generals, or thoughtful art- and poetry-loving mandarins and princes. The usual order of possession is that after

[5] On the pantheon and topography see Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011:47ff; Norton 2009:57ff, 225ff.

generals, mandarins (*Quan Lớn*) and princes (*Ông Hoàng*), there is a series of ladies (*Chầu Bà*) and princesses (*Cô*). The ritual ends with light, cheerful dances of a couple of younger princesses of the Palace of the Mountains and Forests and the young child-prince spirits (*Cậu*). *Chầu văn* musicians, composed of moon lute, zither, and bamboo flute players as well as percussionists, continuously accompany the *lên đồng* ritual with their lively and catchy rhythms, melodies, and songs, creating a specific sound and song landscape for each spirit (Norton 2009).

Fig. 7: Being in the field, Hà Tây, 2007 (Photo: Quốc Anh)

From my participant observation, I remember popular incarnations that fascinated me too. For example, the Tenth Prince (*Ông Hoàng Mười*), dressed in a yellow robe, with a noble bearing and the habitus of a significant scholar, who after long deliberations wrote messages on his fan and offered bundles of incense at the altar. According to the legend, he served as a man of letters and belligerent general under the *Lê* dynasty. He is worshiped in *lên đồng* primarily because of his intellectual and fighting talents, especially before examinations, graduations, and tests. Quite different is the performance of the equally popular and revered *Ông Hoàng Bảy Bảo Hà*, the Seventh Prince of *Bảo Hà* from *Lào Cai* province, who as a legendary Mandarin defended the northern region of Vietnam from Chinese attacks. According to the legend, he loved poetry and the beautiful aspects of life, such as opium, green tea, and gambling. The *chầu văn* music underlined his rather melancholic performance. To match his blue robe, he distributed blue Pepsi Cola cans as *lộc* (blessed offerings) which, in addition to the aesthetics of their color also illustrated his 'appetite' for modern consumer goods. Nervous and sensitive individuals who are susceptible to stress feel a fateful attachment to the Seventh Prince and ask him for support against addiction, desire, and fixation, but also for luck at cards and other forms of gambling (including betting on the stock market). Similar is the Third Princess, dressed in white (*Cô Bơ Thoải Cung*) and associated with the Palace of Water. Of pure heart but saddened by the hardships of existence, she rowed over churning water to the sounds of soulful and melancholic music. She is worshiped because of her beauty and compassion, especially in times of adversity or while far from home, as well as for her healing abilities. A very different mood and identification, however, accompanied the youngest princess from the mountains and forests (*Cô Bé Thong Ngàn*), who danced to thrilling music and generously threw *lộc* into the ritual gathering. These included green fruits, betel nuts, cucumbers, sweets, and bundles of money, reflecting verses of the songs, according to

which good and fresh *lộc* from the mountains will multiply through generosity – "give nine and get ten back, sell fresh and you will become rich" (*cô cho đi chín về mười buôn may bán dắt ở trên đời mọi sự an khang)*[6]. Thus, *lên đồng* is a performance of different options for identity, sometimes gendered options, sometimes age related, and sometimes reflecting common experiences and emotions like anger, depression, or frustration (Norton 2013).

Fig. 8: Đạo Mẫu *altar in* Phủ Tây Hồ *temple, Hanoi 2011 (Photo: Lauser)*

In contrast to today, when I first became involved with *lên đồng* a decade ago it was popular but not yet publicly recognized. With the exception of a few publications by Vietnamese scholars of folk culture (such as Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992, 1996, 2006, and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2002), there was relatively little published research on the subject. Even though *lên đồng* rituals had been conducted more and more publicly since the late 1980s, the stigma of being a wasteful superstitious practice which should be condemned was still widespread. But at the same time, and in spite of the anti-superstition discourse in both public media and official contexts, *lên đồng* seemed to be on the way to becoming quite popular.

Today, one can speak of a veritable *lên đồng* boom that testifies to a vitality that goes well beyond its ritual context. Rather, *lên đồng* is present in a wide range of practices and discourses related to Vietnamese identity and cultural heritage. It is prominent in the media, the tourist sector, as well as in the academic sector, as a number of recent academic publications prove (Dror 2007; Norton 2009; Phương 2009; Endres 2011; Fielstad/ Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011). A permanent exhibition in the Vietnamese Women's Museum in Hanoi, "Worshipping Mother Goddess: Pure Heart – Beauty – Joy" (*Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu: Tâm-Đẹp-Vui*) since 2011[7] attests to *lên đồng*'s officially acknowledged role in Vietnamese social and cultural life. It is also very visible online: for example, a Google search for *lên đồng / hầu bóng* produces results in the 6-digit range, including YouTube and tourist sites, as well as on official Vietnamese news sites, social media, and individual blogs.

This public visibility of *lên đồng* is quite new and as such a result of an enormously swift and dynamic revitalization. *Lên đồng* and its societal position has changed rapidly and profoundly since the 1980s, when the reform policies of *đổi mới* were introduced by the socialist government. In fact, it has been a long journey from condemnation of the

[6] The strong attraction of l*ên đồng* among retailers and businesspeople is elaborated by Kirsten Endres (2011, 2015).
[7] Officially announced at the online newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam 2011.

Four Palace mediumship as a wasteful superstitious practice to its transformation and folklorization as a performing art of the people, and from there to its boom in popular culture and religiosity and its glorification and appropriation as a "living museum of Vietnamese culture" – *Bảo tàng sống của văn hóa Việt*.[8] From here, the step towards a reification as part of the national cultural heritage was not far off and eventually led to its nomination and registration on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH)[9] in late 2016, an event celebrated in the Vietnamese public with a large media presence and a spectacular official ceremony.[10] Thus, the "Vietnamese belief practices in the mother goddesses" (*Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu tam phủ của người Việt*) seem to be granted a permanent place in the globalized world of spectacle, public media, and tourism. This heritagization has tended to relegate the religious and healing components to the background – in other words the emphasis is now more on heritage than on religion. As Oscar Salemink has recently (2017) formulated it, "the heritagization of spirit possession is reinterpreted as a secular sacralization of the nation".

This reframing of *lên đồng* has not been univocal but, on the contrary, polyvocal and even controversial, including complex historical references. With Jean and John Comaroff (1993), this journey is to be understood as a social and discursive space of articulation in which the relationships between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and between local cultural orientations and global political economy is negotiated:

> The work of ritual – of the building and contesting of social realities by way of formally stylized, communicative action – is unceasing. Which is all the more reason to regard it as a pervasive aspect of ongoing activity, to perceive the ritual in all politics, and the politics in [all] rituals, to dispense with the old Eurocentric dichotomy between the sacred and the profane (1993:xviii).

And they continue to emphasize that

> Rites are not formulaic restatements of the mystical, sacred truth. Nor are they mechanistic invocations of conventional values that serve merely to regulate recalcitrant realities. Intricately situated performances with complex historical potential, they intensify and enrich meaningful communication among human beings by calling upon what Silverstein (1981) has termed the 'metaforces' of poetic form: the positioning, contrast, redundancy and tropic play of images (ibid. xxi)

What makes *lên đồng* so pervasive that it has risen from national 'shame' to national 'fame'? Before describing and discussing three different *lên đồng* performances – from cult, to culture, to spectacle – as three stages of this path, I will outline some historical and social references to contextualize its flexibility and complexity, whereby "one of its strengths is its capacity to accommodate the diverse concerns and aspirations of its followers and its popularity relies on appealing to a broad spectrum of the populace" (Norton 2009: 200).

[8] http://hanoigrapevine.com/2011/02/len-dong-vietnamese-religious-custom/,https://xuandienhannom.blogspot.com/2012/11/len-ong-bao-tang-song-cua-van-hoa-viet.html [30/08/2018].
[9] Under nomination file number 01064 „Practices related to the Viet Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms", https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/practices-related-to-the-viet-beliefs-in-the-mother-goddesses-of-three-realms-01064 [30/08/2018].
[10] Videos of the ceremony: http://vtv.vn/video/le-don-bang-unesco-ghi-danh-thuc-hanh-tin-nguong-tam-phu-cua-nguoi-viet-02-4-2017-213408.htm,http://vtv.vn/van-hoa-giai-tri/tin-nguong-tho-mau-tam-phu-20170403201416267.htm [30/08/2018].

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF *LÊN ĐỒNG* (AS PART OF THE CONTEMPORARY)

What first strikes the observer of *lên đồng* is the enormous proliferation of its contexts and forms. Today, *lên đồng* is performed in a broad range of contexts: in private and in public temples, some of which are part of major (Buddhist) pilgrimage sites, in privately sponsored rituals, as well as in temple festivals.[11] In all these contexts, *lên đồng* is performed as a religious ritual. However, it can be seen also in contexts not primarily defined as religious. It is part of performances of classical forms of Vietnamese theatre and opera and it is part of new forms of art performances. Popular *lên đồng* incarnations (such as the Third Princess, the Seventh Prince, and the Second Princess of the Mountains and Forests) were integrated in folkloristic performances at the Vietnamese Music Folk Theater, *Hát Chèo*, as well as at the puppet theater under the label '*Ba Giá Hầu Đồng* – Three Trance Incarnations' and reached a diverse audience through the *chầu văn* music beyond the nation's borders (Đỗ 2013).[12] All in all, *lên đồng* performances have inspired classical folk theater, opera, experimental art spectacles and the like, and they are commonly found in tourist contexts.[13]

Against this background, it becomes clear that the boom of *lên đồng* is not only a matter of quantity – of the numbers of performances and of people getting involved in the rituals as practitioners, adherents, or spectators. Rather, its development illustrates how Vietnamese religious and cultural policies of the last thirty years have functioned. It is not the first time that illegitimate superstitious practices have been 'culturalized' as national culture and authentic Vietnamese identity, and have been finally legitimized and at the same time 'domesticated' and controlled as 'profane' national religion (vgl. Lauser 2008a, 2008b; Roszko 2012). Although terms such as cultural heritage or heritagization (*di sản văn hóa*) are relatively new in the context of Vietnam, the associated political agenda looks back on a much longer genealogy of reinterpretation of superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*) to 'beautiful national customs' – *thuần phong mỹ tục or truyền thống tốt đẹp của dân tộc* (Endres 2002).

The boom of *lên đồng* is an expression of crucial changes and transformations that its societal and cultural role and positions have undergone in the past three decades. It is also a transition which has involved a broad range of actors from fields well beyond ritual contexts. The actors in the ritual context are mainly ritual experts[14], adherents, and the custodians of the temples. Beyond this, actors from the economic field are involved

[11] Thus, in 2006 the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Art Studies (VICAS) choreographed a large *lên đồng - chầu văn* festival to celebrate the annual temple festival at *Đền Kiếp Bạc*, dedicated to the deified General Trần Hưng Đạo. Public media commented to the effect that this event signified that the Ministry for Culture, Sport and Tourism had thereby given the "official red stamp" (sổ đỏ) of approval for the public performance of *lên đồng.* Further large festivals at *Kiếp Bạc* Temple followed in 2009, 2012, and 2014 (see Endres 2011: 158ff.).

[12] Already in the late 1990s, but especially since 2011, *lên đồng* spirits achieved a permanent place in popular theater (see Norton 2009: 206ff). Since 2013, their inclusion in puppet theater in international puppet theater festivals in, among other places, Thailand, Japan and China brought them to international visibility (Đỗ 2013).

[13]http://www.vietnamtourism.com/en/index.php/news/items/12444,http://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/index.php/items/11497 [30/08/2018].

[14] Aside from the mediums, *thầy cúng* "ceremony masters" proficient in the Sino-Vietnamese script in which texts and prayers are written should also be mentioned here (Sorrentino 2010).

in producing the ritual objects and the offerings, providing the logistics for transport and pilgrimage, and marketing *lên đồng* as a tourist spectacle or a cultural event. Another important group of actors is scholars and cultural managers from research institutions exploring the value of *lên đồng* as part of the historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage of Vietnam and who are engaged in the processes of heritagization and religionization of *lên đồng*. Civil servants are also involved because the Vietnamese state still considers religious practices and religious places a matter of public interest, which means that the governmental authorities responsible for culture and religion are involved in *lên đồng* from the ministerial level of the central government responsible for the application for the status of the UNESCO cultural heritage all the way down to the People's Committees of the city wards responsible for the public temples and their renovation. And, finally, artists have become an important class of actors with regard to *lên đồng* as they have made it a part of various art performances (both in the context of classical art forms such as the *chèo* opera as well as in contemporary forms of performative art, see above).

Fig. 9: Altar in Women's Museum, Hanoi 2011 (Photo: Lauser)

This involvement of such a broad range of actors points to an issue crucial for our understanding of the contemporary *lên đồng*. It is not only that *lên đồng* is present in many different contexts of the socio-cultural praxis; contemporary *lên đồng* has taken shape in an extraordinary multidimensional way – it can be called a total societal phenomenon (in

the sense of Marcel Mauss). It combines spiritual, social, political, economic, cultural and aesthetic dimensions, and in doing so it connects the different contexts it is manifested in, and it is affected by all of these contexts. Thus, if we want to understand contemporary *lên đồng*, its form and content and its roles and functions in societal praxis, we have to consider the specific characteristic of these different dimensions.

SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

With regard to the spiritual dimension, at least five characteristic features are crucial for positioning *lên đồng* within the broader economy of spiritual well-being and salvation. First, *lên đồng* as a spiritual practice refers strongly to the needs and problems of the everyday lives of adherents: health and material well-being are the most prominent goals of the ritual activity and the offerings. Second, the Mother Goddesses are associated with acts of generous giving for which, in turn, the adherents feel deeply thankful. However, the spirits of the pantheon can also punish adherents' misdemeanors, a third important point. Fourth, becoming involved in *lên đồng* is not always a matter of free choice. Rather, spiritual predispositions – *căn*[15] – resulting from the entanglements of previous lives are in many cases the reason for being obliged or even compelled to take an active role as a medium in the *lên đồng* ritual. Finally, many adherents understand the pantheon and the associated spiritual practices to be iconic of an authentic Vietnameseness (Dror 2007).

AESTHETIC DIMENSION

Against this background, another dimension comes into focus: aesthetics, understood in a broad sense as the dimension of sensual experience. The *lên đồng* ritual unfolds as a multisensory (as well as multisemiotic) 'religious play'. As a ritual combining vivid dance, flamboyant costumes, colorful decorated altars, exciting rhythms and hilarious joyfulness, it is appealing to all senses. Opulently ornamented robes, costumes and attributes used to represent the spirits in the ritual, the behavior that is reenacted, and the stories told in the chants – all of these are powerful aesthetic and sensual forms of making present the historical past and the cultural meanings in every ritual performance. "Vietnam dances in and through the medium," they say. The great spirits of the past move, energize, and empower the bodies of the medium with grace, skill, and prowess, it is said.

A pure heart, beauty and joy – *tâm, đẹp, vui* – are named as characteristic criteria of a successful *lên đồng* atmosphere. Here, beauty (*đẹp*) is much more than just a superficial quality; it is very much a precondition for the efficacy of the ritual. Only if the medium is beautiful and only if the performance is beautiful can the spirits be pleased and the ritual be successful in achieving the favor of the spirits.[16] The emotional atmosphere is also more than just an expression of a ritual meeting the expectations of the participants. It is typical to hear comments such as "after each ritual I feel happy and spiritually refreshed and pleased in a way I can hardly put into words",[17] or "after a *lên đồng* I feel light, serene, peaceful, glad and happy" – even after hours of participation in a less than comfortable position. In other words, the dramaturgy of *lên đồng* transforms the space of ritual into a space of display, of sound, scent, and taste – a sensory space. Here, poetry, art and religion cannot be separated. It is a question of an ‚insight' produced through the senses:

[15] The term *căn* has various meanings and connotations in Vietnamese language and belief. "*Căn* has the sense of nature or basic character and also implies destiny. People whose character and fate impel them toward mediumship are said to have a spiritual destiny (*căn cao số đày*) that may be either heavy (*nặng*) or light (*nhẹ*) and they must be initiated to ‚cool their fate' (*mát mẻ*)" (Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011:83. See also Endres 2011: 30f).

[16] See also Kendall 2008, 2010.

[17] *"Thương xuyên đi dự hầu đồng, tôi thấy thoải mái về tinh thần, lòng thanh thản không thấy mệt mỏi mà còn khỏe ra. Mỗi lần đi về tôi thấy vui lắm, tâm hồn rất mát, hứng khởi không tả được".* See also the exhibition in the Vietnamese Women's Museum Hanoi (http://www.womenmuseum.org.vn/) [30/08/2018].

seeing, hearing, savoring, being touched or unsettled. Similarly, a complex communication dynamic unfolds through the (re)distribution of foodstuffs, goods and money between the medium, the spirits/gods and the ritual community.

Fig. 10: Vietnamese medium, Hanoi 2013 (Photo: Lauser)

Compared to Buddhist rituals or the rituals venerating tutelary gods, heroes or ancestors, the emotional atmosphere of *lên đồng* gives it a unique place in the Vietnamese ritual field; it thus offers forms of spirituality which cannot be found in the other ritual contexts. These spiritual, cultural and aesthetic dimensions are crucial for the current form of *lên đồng* as a ritual space open for dealing with material needs and problems related to a rapidly changing lifeworld, for expressing and experiencing cultural identity and relatedness to the past, and for aesthetic and emotional experiences which are different from most other spiritual practices in the religious spheres of contemporary Vietnam. However, to understand the contemporary forms, content, roles and functions of *lên đồng* in a rapidly modernizing world we must also consider the social, political and economic dimensions.

SOCIAL DIMENSION

Socially, it is remarkable that mediums are mostly women and transgender people (effeminate men and gay men) who use the ritual space as an articulatory space in which established gender roles and stereotypes, as well as notions of power, authority, and the ability to put up a fight (the national capacity to resist foreign power) are performatively

negotiated. Thus, the ritual space allows the expression of gender roles that are quite different from those practiced other realms of social and religious life in Vietnam. A second crucial aspect of the social dimension of *lên đồng* is the socio-economic composition of the adherents. The revitalization and the rapidly growing popularity of the Religion of the Mother Goddesses and *lên đồng* since the 1990s is closely related to women's economic activity in small trade businesses and to the emergence of a prosperous middle class (Leshkowich 2014). Rates of economic growth seem to correlate with the expansion of the religious market in Vietnam and especially with the growing popularity of the mother-deity religion.

ECONOMIC DIMENSION

Fig. 11-13: Different offerings and paraphernalia (Photos: Lauser)

The ritual praxis of *lên đồng* is economically structured in many ways. The ritual objects, costumes, offerings and gifts that must be provided, the ritual experts and assistants and musicians that must be paid, the temples that must be built, furnished and maintained, the transport of the adherents to temples all over Vietnam that must be organized – the cash-flow structures, the ritual praxis, and the modes of participation follow the logic of the monetarized market economy that has evolved in Vietnam since the 1980s. Adherents have to secure sufficient funds to sponsor rituals and to pay for transport and other associated costs, while ritual experts are much like entrepreneurs who compete within a highly competitive market for spiritual services, which means that they have to be able to manage their ritual practices financially and possess sufficient resources to successfully attract and convince adherents.[18]

POLITICAL DIMENSION - A SHORT CULTURAL HISTORY OF SPIRIT POSSESSION

Finally, the rise of *lên đồng* cannot be understood without reference to the political dimension. As already mentioned, the politics of religion and culture played a significant role in the efforts of the post-revolutionary regime to transform Vietnamese society. In this context, certain religious beliefs and ritual practices, among them *lên đồng*, were

[18] *Đạo Mẫu* and the trance dance *lên đồng* evince many similarities with other East- and Southeast Asian "prosperity religions" (see, for example, Jackson 1999; Kendall 2009; Kitiarsa 1999, 2008; Morris 2000; Yang 2008).

considered superstitious and feudal and therefore obstacles to the development of a new society (*xã hội mới*) based on socialist notions of personhood. Vietnamese mediumship has been marked by considerable controversy throughout its history and has proved resilient in the face of continued criticism in the name of modernity and progress.[19] Condemned by the French authorities in the colonial period and prohibited by the Vietnamese Communist Party in the late 1950s, rituals were forced underground, and mediumship and the accompanying music underwent a process of modernization and transfiguration (Norton 2009:21ff). As Norton argues, the fact that mediumship has repeatedly been subject to hegemonic forms of control is a measure of its potency as a cultural force. In this sense, spirit practices such as mediumship can be seen as a barometer of social, cultural, and political change in modern Vietnam (Norton 2009:22ff).

STATE EFFORTS AT SECULARIZATION – THE ANTI-SUPERSTITION CAMPAIGN

The condemnation of mediumship as superstition was one of a number of related campaigns promoted by the Vietnamese Communist Party, which sought to reform "backward customs and habits" in order to achieve a thorough "cultural and ideological revolution" (Vietnam Government 1962 cit. from Norton 2009:28) as a necessary condition for progress and the creation of a "new society" based on socialist principles (ibid.).

A distinction between superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*) and legitimate religious beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*) was central to the anti-superstition campaign. As Malarney has discussed, the use of the term *tín ngưỡng* "brought with it a strong sense of prestige and legitimacy, while superstition implied stigma" (2002:106). The campaign against superstition had the effect of greatly diminishing the number of *lên đồng* rituals that took place, but it did not eliminate them entirely. Many mediums continued to hold small-scale *lên đồng* in secret, referred to as *hầu vung*, "secretly serving [the spirits]", and arranged in remote places or late at night.

TRADITION, CULTURAL HERITAGE, NATION

Mediumship practices, far from being swept away by colonial and socialist exhortations to adopt modernity, have undergone a strong resurgence since the early 1990s and have gained a measure of legitimacy as they have become increasingly wedded to the construction of Vietnamese cultural identity and the continuing project of nation building.

At a time when rapid change and globalization is considered a threat to social cohesion, cultural activities are being promoted to foster traditional values, allowing practices once considered "superstition " (*mê tín dị đoan*) to become "folk culture" (*văn hóa dân gian*). No longer antithetical to the modern, 'tradition' (*truyền thuyết*) is now becoming a resource to bolster national identity (*bản sắc dân tộc*). Urban intellectuals, folklorists, anthropologists and scholars associated with the Institute of Folklore (renamed Institute of Cultural Studies in 2004), directed by Prof. Ngó Đức Thịnh, have begun to document the songs and dances of what was then known as the Four Palaces cult (for example, Ngó Đức Thịnh 1996; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2002; Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009). By asserting a kinship (relationship) between these practices and shamanism in other societies, these scholars presented *Đạo Mẫu* – the Mother Goddesses Religion – as an indigenous folk religion (*Đạo*) (Ngó Đức Thịnh 2004), a "living museum" of Vietnamese culture (*bảo tàng sống của văn hóa Việt*) and, more recently, as a religion of patriotism (*chủ nghĩa yêu nước*) and nationalism (*lên đồng và tinh thần hòa hợp dân tộc*).[20]

[19] As Lambek (1989) notes, possession rituals undermine 'modern', 'enlightened' 'comfort zones': "In many of its manifestations possession violates our own cultural distinctions and deeply held assumptions concerning the 'natural' differences between such pairs of opposites as self and others, seriousness and comedy, reality and illusion, and perhaps most critically art and life" (Lambek 1989:52-53). This is even more so in a country like Vietnam, with decades of restrictive socialist (communist) cultural and religious policies (Lauser 2008; Melarney 2002, 2003).

[20] http://www.chungta.com/nd/tu-lieu-tra-cuu/su_ton_tai_cua_vong_linh_thanh.html [30/08/2018].

In daily practice, however, neither lay people nor spirit mediums call their religion *Đạo Mẫu* but only use this expression for the possession ritual – in northern Vietnam the terms *lên đồng* (mounting the medium) or *hầu bóng* (serving the spirits or shadows) are used.[21]

In fact, the term *Đạo Mẫu* was introduced by Prof. Ngó Đức Thịnh in recent times (Ngó Đức Thịnh 1996, 2004; Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009:180ff. See also Endres 2011:170ff) in an attempt to raise the status of what used to be called the Four Palaces cult to that of a "religion" (*đạo*) on a par with Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism (*đạo Phạt, đạo Nho, đạo Lão*) (Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009:181). Bound up with cultural nationalism and evolutionary theories concerning the development of indigenous beliefs, the female deities are portrayed as bearers of the "nation's traditions and of its cultural integrity" – a process Philipp Taylor has referred to as "mothering the nation" (Taylor 2004:50).[22] Thus the romanticization of rural traditions as survivals of indigenous culture also gives weight to the folklorists' call for the preservation and revitalization of traditional culture, which is seen as threatened by the force of globalization (Norton 2009:62).

In 2008, the passionate contribution of Professor Ngô Đức Thịnh led to the establishment of the "Center for the Study and Preservation of Vietnamese Religious Culture" under his patronage, as well as to the founding of numerous clubs dedicated to the preservation of the culture of the Mother Religion and *chầu văn* music. In addition, *chầu văn* und *lên đồng* clubs were established in several cities and provinces as was a type of professional association of spirit mediums and *chầu văn* musicians. *Lên đồng* performances are now being drawn upon to promote not only national identity but also cultural heritage through folklorized performances of rituals on the national and international stage (Hoskins 2011; Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011; Endres 2011:171).[23]

The path from "superstitious *lên đồng*" to "rational *lên đồng*" as a part of cultural heritage was facilitated and legitimated by a range of government decrees. At this point, only a few steps are mentioned, which, however, allow scope for interpretation.

- In September 2010, the Vietnamese government clarified the issue of recognition by promulgating 75/2010/NĐ-CP Decree to prohibit all superstitious forms of *lên đồng*. Anyone caught doing superstitious *lên đồng* practices would be required to pay a fine of 1,000,000 – 3,000,000 VND. The debate on what is superstitious *F* and what is non-superstitious *lên đồng*, however, is not clarified.

- Circular No. 15/2015 / TT-BVHTTDL of 22 December 2015, clarifies the issue of what is to be considered superstitious or not. According to this document, the invocation of spirits in the *lên đồng* rituals and other practices such as divination, throwing divination sticks, divination and prophecy, amulets, exorcisms and incantations are to be sanctioned as superstitious practices.[24]

[21] Lay Viet people worship spirits because they expect to receive spirit blessings. Quite often they do not know that these spirits belong to the Mother Goddess pantheon, but they do know they can bestow powerful blessings.

[22] Norton 2009, Endres 2011, Fjelstad / Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011. International conferences organized by Prof. Ngô Đức Thịnh have validated the status of spirit possession practices as a legitimate expression of "the original matriarchal Vietnamese culture", and so of a time of egalitarian origins sacred to Marxist evolutionary theory. (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996, 2001, 2004, 2010).

[23] In 2001, this was the subject of an international conference, and a foreign delegation was allowed to attend a festival at Phù Giày in Nam Định Province 2011. A *lên đồng* performance was organized at the French Cultural Center, Hanoi on February 23, with the participation of practitioners from Hanoi's neighboring provinces (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsBFlMaSqyo&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PL36AC9473C3C7FFA8) [30/08/2018] and in 2013 a *lên đồng* performance was staged at the Opera house in Hanoi.

[24]https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Thong-tu-15-2015-TT-BVHTTDL-to-chuc-le-hoi-299411.aspx [30/08/2018].

Fig. 14: In the foyer of the Opera House, Hanoi 2013 (Photo: Lauser)

Fig. 15: Performance on the Opera stage, Hanoi 2013 (Photo: Lauser)(click for video)

- The 2012 Decree 92/2012 / NĐ-CP regulates the implementation of the Ordinance on Faith and Religion, according to which *lên đồng* ritual practice is worthy of protection and support. In a way, this neutralizes the abovementioned circular, insofar as everyday life of *lên đồng* practice involves not only beautiful dances but (also) interactions with spirits.

- The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism added *chầu văn* music (Decision No. 5079 / QĐ-BVHTTDL, December 27, 2012) and the *Phủ Dầy* Festival (Decision No. 3084 / QĐ-BVHTTDL, September 9, 2013) to the national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[25]

Fig. 16: Chầu văn *musicians during a* lên đồng *ritual, Hanoi 2012 (Photo: Lauser)(click for audio)*[26]

The categories of 'religion' and 'heritage' now provide two paths to official state recognition of *lên đồng*. However, they do so by means of diametrically opposed ideas and strategies. While some follow a 'secular' strategy regarding cultural heritage recognition, others seek official recognition as a religion, which in the Vietnamese communist context necessarily results in a uniformizing institutionalization and hierarchization of liturgy and organization modeled on a so-called 'world religion' (Salemink 2015). The tension between ritual performance (and freedom of religion) and artistic spectacle (and heritagization) remains dynamic, with the state acting as the manager and patron of the ritual – but one that is engaged less in the preservation of religious content than in cleansing it (Salemink 2017).

In order to tease out different aspects, I will look at three different *lên đồng* performances. I argue that the extent to which a religious, folkloric or artistic performance may characterized as "sacred" (spiritual) or "secular" (profane) is dependent on the political-historical context, on the intention of the performers, the "rules of engagement", and the knowledge and background of the audience (Hagedorn 2001; Norton 2009:212).

[25] https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Quyet-dinh-5079-QD-BVHTTDL-nam-2012-cong-bo-Danh-muc-di-san-van-hoa-phi-vat-the-162868.aspx [30/08/2018].
[26]For further *chầu văn* music see for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDfE2at5G5c [29/08/2018].

RITUAL EFFICACY AND THEATRIC EFFECT

Efficacy and entertainment, like authenticity, culture and tradition, are notions that are difficult to define. But all these aspects (and many others) are invoked in negotiations over the question of whether a *lên đồng* performance is "good" or "bad".[27] Essential ideas and arguments regarding authenticity, culture and tradition, as well as efficacy, are then negotiated and contested. However, it must be noted that cultural phenomena such as *lên đồng* are always complex and heterogeneous; they cannot be essentialized and they do not remain forever carved in stone. Purity of culture, just like primordial identity, is an ideological and idealized construct. Thus, the search for authentic origins is always governed by ambiguous "politics of epistemologies", as Ann Laura Stoler (1997) has lucidly shown.

Similarly, Bendix suggests that the crucial question is not "what is really authentic?"; more important is "who needs authenticity and why?" as well as "how has authenticity been used by different groups?" (1997:21). She writes:

> The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and anti-modern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity (Bendix 1997:8).

The other crucial aspects of *lên đồng* performances (as efficacy and entertainment) need to be questioned in the light of similar detailed, process- and actor-centered contextualizations.

According to performance theorists such as Turner (1987) and Schechner (1974, 2003), this should be done particularly in terms of the three dimensions of 1) efficacy and entertainment, 2) the role of the audience, and 3) the role of the performer, but without formally fixing them.

- What is the interplay between ritual behaviour and folklorized reenactment?
- What is the performers' intentionality and what is the interpretation of the audience?
- (How) do 'sacred' and 'secular' inform and use each other?
- Is the audience participating or watching? Is the audience active or passive? Is criticism discouraged or encouraged? Does the audience believe or appreciate? Is the creativity individual or collective?
- How is the boundary between observers and performer played with and negotiated?
- Is the performer possessed or in trance or is the performer acting and mannered?

[27] These days, such debates also take place on Facebook.

If we now consider the three different types of *lên đồng* performances – namely a) ritual, b) folk theatre and c) gendered art spectacle – which I will briefly present, we may ask such questions in the light of these criteria and their interplay.

RITUAL AS PERFORMANCE – PERFORMING THE DIVINE

Fig. 17: Lên đồng *ritual performance, Hanoi 2007 (Photo: Lauser)*[28] *(click for video)*

Lên đồng rituals are undoubtedly symphonic or polyvocal in character and do not follow any rigid pattern. They appeal impressively to all senses: the magnificently decorated temples and altars, the artistically arranged trays with colorful offerings, the intense aromas of smoke and flowers, the splendid clothes and accessories which change the medium into a god, the entrancing rhythms of the liturgical music in praise of the heroic deeds of the gods – all the complex "choreography" of dance, music, text and exchange of gifts (*lộc*) which ideally make up the virtuosity of a ritual performance. Good, effective and convincing rituals are characterized by beauty and truthfulness (true-hearted – *thật tâm* – and sincere – *thật đồng*). Beauty is a crucial criterion used by Four Palace mediums and devotees to appraise the success of a ritual: "You have to perform beautifully (*hầu đẹp*) for the spirits, otherwise you will never receive any divine favors (*lộc*) and the spirits will not pay attention to you (*thánh không để tâm*)".

Four Palace mediums claim that only a controlled medium (*tỉnh* or *tỉnh táo*) is possessed by the spirits (*đồng tỉnh là đồng thánh*), whereas uncontrolled possession is the sign of a ghost obsession (*đồng mê là đồng vong*).[29] During *lên đồng*, mediums remain aware of their surroundings, although they may not be able to control all of their actions due to the spirits taking possession of their bodies. The spirits' presence may be felt physically and emotionally by the mediums, who describe their sensations in such terms as feeling heavy,

[28] For further clips, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F1OMa49yz8 or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5DxovRnp4k [30/08/2018].

[29] "This emic perspective is consistent with the anthropological distinction between spirit mediumship as the legitimate, expected possession of a specialist by a spirit or deity, and spirit possession as an unexpected, unwanted intrusion of the supernatural into the lives of humans" (Endres 2011:76).

hot (*nóng*), sad, or out of balance (*mất cân bằng*) (see Norton 2009:76-78 and Endres 2011:76ff.). Mediums generally describe their state of consciousness as lucid and alert (*tỉnh, đồng tỉnh*). Furthermore, there is a dialectical relationship between the heart and spiritual forces: mediums have hearts for the spirits (*có tâm*) and are devoted with one heart (*nhất tâm*) to worship, and in return the spirits witness the hearts (*chứng tâm*) of the followers (Norton 2009:77).[30]

Finally, among the various performance skills that are required of an adept medium, the art of distributing blessed gifts – *nghệ thuật phát lộc* – is crucial to ritual mastery (Endres 2011:117).

RITUAL AS THEATRE – RITUAL AS FOLKLORE

Fig. 18: Folkloristic stage performance, Women's Museum Hanoi, 2011 (Photo: Lauser)[31] (click for video)

Whereas theatricality must indeed be seen as a necessary precondition for the efficacy of any ritual, supernatural efficacy is not considered a criterion for a good theater production (see Köpping 2004). I would argue with Richard Schechner that the question of whether a particular performance is called "theatre" or "ritual" largely depends on "where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances" (Schechner 2003:130). In fact, he sees the basic polarity not between ritual and theatre, but rather between efficacy and entertainment. Drawing on Turner's pioneering studies, Schechner attributes the efficacy of a ritual performance to its ability to effect (social, aesthetic as well as actual)

[30] The heart-soul (*tâm linh* or *tâm hồn*) is affected by being possessed by spirits. Talking about heart-soul (*tâm linh*) and heart-intellect *(tâm trí,* the heart thinks as well - *nghĩ*) refers to social/emotional categories (Gammeltoft 1999: 211).
[31] For further video clips see Barley Nortons book *Songs for the Spirits* (2009) or Hát văn hầu đồng „Cô Bé thượng ngàn" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTAiT2VbQ4Y.) [30/08/2018].

transformations, whereas a theatrical performance is supposed to entertain – though he hastens to add that no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.[32]
While a distinction between ritual and theatre may be helpful for comparing the different performances, it should be emphasized again – as elaborated above – that the designation of *lên đồng* as a festival *(lễ hội*) is itself a feature of the nationalist discourse on "national culture" and "tradition ".

Perhaps the most significant differences between theatrical staging and *lên đồng* are differences in context and the manner in which the theatrical actions are carried out. Whereas the ritual actions of mediums are orientated toward the temple altar, there is no altar – or just the hint of a symbolic altar – on the *chèo* (theatre) stage, and the actor playing the medium faces the audience and directs the performance towards it. The performative interactions between the medium and the followers/disciples are also quite different in *lên đồng* from the staged performance. The participants in *lên đồng* are integrated through dialogue, interaction and gift exchange, whereas the audience at a staged performance is relatively passive without verbal or material exchange. Rather, the interactive aspects are enacted between the performers, the assistants playing the role of followers. The assistants' role during the ('real') *lên đồng* ceremony is to help the medium carry out ritual actions and to facilitate interaction between the medium and the followers, but during the stage performance the assistants' actions and gestures are exaggerated (shouting, dancing, clapping) and choreographed to intensify the performance for the audience.

Fig. 19: Lên đồng *performed for tourists, Hanoi 2013 (Photo: Lauser) (click for video)*

[32] See also John Beattie 1977, Michel Leiris 1958 and Erika Bourguignon 1976:52: "Because it is a playing of roles before an audience, possession trance is indeed the prototype of theatre". Novice mediums of the Four Palace deities have to study and learn the different rules and roles of ritual performance (just as drama students have to attend stage rehearsals). However, the fluid and permeable boundaries between theatre and ritual leave space for creative expression and innovative interpretations in ritual enactment.

ART-PERFORMANCE-SPECTACLE AND LIMINALITY – "IMPROMTU OF *HẦU ĐỒNG*"

(OR: NEGOTIATING THE RULES OF PROPER PERFORMANCE)

Fig. 20: Body Art, Hanoi 2009 (Photo: Bùi Quang Thắng) (click for video)

In many respects, *lên đồng* as ritual and as art spectacle may be placed at different, not to say opposite, ends of the performative spectrum. What makes a good, "authentic", "effective" and "entertaining" *lên đồng* performance is open to dispute, and indeed is the subject of many different debates: both among the *lên đồng* practitioners themselves (see Endres 2011 & Fjelstadt and Hiền 2011) and between the different political, academic and artistic actors, who "fill with sound", negotiate, give meaning to, and instrumentalize the articulatory space of spirited modern, drawing on Knauft's concept of an articulatory space of alternative modernity (2002). The latter example of the "popular-ritual-turned-modern-arts-performance spectacle" (documented by Prof. Dr Bùi Quang Thắng – Impromtu of *Hầu Đồng*[33]) triggered a fervent controversy regarding its positive and negative implications, which was also documented in the media.[34]

"*Lên đồng* performing arts" (in the broadest sense as an umbrella term) are alive in different contexts and functions, with different performers and different audiences. But one question that often arises is how to pay proper attention to *lên đồng*? One such way of 'paying attention' could be through the process of 'heritagization', for example by inclusion on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This endeavor coincided with the experimental fusion of folk festival and modern art forms. *lên đồng* elements were performed on an open stage enhanced by art video projections, pop music sound effects, and body-painted dancers. The reinterpretation of the artists, who danced to pop music with their painted naked bodies and their movements that rather suggested an association with a "wild" transgender disco, stood at almost polemical

[33] Documentary by Bui Quang Thang: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmI3UZrxGGQ. [30/08/2018].
[34] http://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa-toan-canh/le-hoi-den-lanh-giang-khi-hoi-to-hon-le-n20090725070452 38.htm; http://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa-toan-canh/hau-dong-cang-map-mo-cang-bien-tuong-n20090807034425214.htm [30/08/2018].

odds with the parallel official agenda of joining forces to include *lên đồng* on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Four Palace mediumship – *lên đồng* – hybridization must be conceived as an entangled, interactive process. On the one hand, its fluid and multifaceted qualities allow for diverse (manifold) appropriations that constitute an important arena for the articulation of an alternative Vietnamese modernity (Knauft 2002). On the other hand, the openness of ritual practice has been subject to critical reflections and contestations by which divergent claims to ritual authority, proper ritual and moral conduct and interpretative authority are asserted.

If we consider for instance a central aspect of the ritual, the exchange of blessed gifts *(lộc)*, we can observe a striking range of transformations, interpretations and negotiations between tradition and modernity, between local cosmology and globalized economy. Modern consumer goods and money circulate (today) between gods and devotees in order to ensure health, happiness, success and prosperity, especially in new cross-border business activities. This can involve large sums, providing the grounds for political condemnation as "superstitious waste". The *lên đồng* ritual however functions as a kind of economic mechanism for creating prosperity and wealth in the new market economy.

On the one hand, the goddesses and their spirit helpers are treated like "pop idols" and venerated as spiritual agents with whom humans can enter into an exchange relationship (even bribery – *hối lộ*) in order to obtain economic success and prosperity. On the other hand, just like people, the spirits have also developed new tastes. The lavish distribution and circulation of modern consumer goods and consumerism is an important component of all *lên đồng* possession rituals, which no longer take place in secret, hidden from the authorities, but in renovated or newly built temples.

Lên đồng is an experience of fluidity of gender identity, of being drawn into moving as another being would move and feeling as another being might feel. Spirit mediums are associated with unconventional, even transgressive forms of sexuality.[35] This aspect of gender dynamics is particularly addressed in the gendered art-performance spectacle which appears to pick up, invoke and (subversively) play with the gender dynamics of the ritual. The ritual music (*chầu văn*) and the ritual performance accentuate and accompany the construction and staging of gendered identities and make gender traversing possible. On the one hand, the "mediums-individuals" (or perhaps I should say mediums-dividuals) in the *lên đồng* ritual move between the gender categories and transgress them, but at the same time the categories themselves are filled with very conservative gender images. Women can dance like fierce warriors, miming an aggressive assertiveness that which they cannot display in their daily lives, while men can move as softly and gracefully as an imperial princess, and the more beautiful they appear on the ritual stage, the more successful their ceremonies are considered to be.

The exceptional attractiveness of goddesses in contrast to the male spirits of renowned historical personages ("warrior-scholar-official spirits") seems mysterious, since often little is known about the goddesses' human existence and their identity. Philip Taylor (2004) argues that their extraordinary responsiveness to human requests is rooted in the popular conception that they are forever trapped in their karmic manifestation and depend on human bequest to sustain themselves. "On a more theoretical level, their vague identities lend them a polyvalent quality that allows individual worshippers to fill

[35] See also the film by Nguyen Trinh Thi "Love Man Love Woman", https://nguyentrinhthi.wordpress.com/2012/09/29/love-man-love-woman-2/ [30/08/2018].

in their personalities with details to make them closer to their own concerns" (Hoskins 2011:21). Seen in this light, the *lên đồng* ritual provides a space where established gender stereotypes, as well as notions of power, authority, and the (even national) ability to put up a fight can be negotiated performatively.

Fig. 21: A lên đồng *medium, from Nguyen Trinh Thi's film "Love Man Love Woman" (2007) (click for video)*

Mimesis as an act of incorporating the "other", of knowledge, of skill, of power, is both passive and active. In the ritual, "possessed mediums" thus transgress traditional gender hierarchies and at the same time preserve the traditional order. In the ritual space, as Victor Turner has shown, both structure and anti-structure are treated creatively, not through intellectual discourses, but by means of symbolic as well as physical and emotional processes.

Klaus-Peter Köpping et al. often speak of transgressions that can be performed in the context of rituals. And Mark Münzel (1998: 394) emphasized that the joy of playing and simultaneous seriousness are by no means opposites. Anthropologists must also engage in transgressions who deal with *lên đồng* – it is necessary to go beyond the well-defined concepts of theater and ritual, of play, seriousness and entertainment, of religion and culture and modernity. All of these demarcations are indispensable for an anthropology of performance, and at the same time very obstructive. How do we get the categories to dance? My journey through the articulation spaces of *lên đồng* may have provided an idea of this.

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