

Changes In The Spiritual Life Of Vietnamese People Through Traditional Festivals

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Summary: *Among Vietnam's unique folklore treasures, festivals (Vietnamese: lễ hội) are the most typical cultural area. A festival, which attracts a great deal of interest in social life, is an integrated form of activities including spiritual and material aspects, religious beliefs, arts and culture, the sacred and everyday life, and so on. Out of more than 9000 festivals in Vietnam, about 7000 traditional festivals are widely scattered across the country. Studying changes in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people through traditional festivals contributes to building spiritual life and building an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity. In order to ensure the effective organization and management of festivals, promote the cultural identity and diversity of national festivals, a scientific and comprehensive survey is needed, clarifying origins, characteristics, values, scale, and financial sources for organizing festivals; identifying viewpoints, criteria and classification methods on traditional festivals and modern festivals in our country, chaired by a specialized agency for scientific research. On the basis of the survey findings, the state authorities study and consider which types of festivals need planning, management decentralization, and elaboration of management regulations, mechanisms and policies consistent with the characteristics of traditional festivals and modern festivals.*

Keywords: *festivals, Vietnamese traditional, life, spiritual, Vietnamese people.*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the ancient Vietnamese people's culture, the word "lễ" (English: ceremony) means an offering made by human beings to their ancestors and gods, called *sacrifice*. As the social stratification becomes wider, its meaning has been expanded: it is a set of rules to distinguish between upper and lower, contemptible and admirable, senior and junior, intimate and distant. Its meaning has gradually been expanded and is a set of rules to distinguish between upper and lower, contemptible and admirable, senior and junior classes, intimacy and distance in society when divided into castes. In addition, "lễ" is increasingly used such as tutelary ceremony (*lễ thành hoàng*), ancestral ceremony (*lễ gia tiên*), reception ceremony upon graduation or promotion (*lễ khao vọng*), wedding ceremony (*lễ cưới*), praying ceremony for peace (*lễ cầu an*), praying ceremony for rain (*lễ cầu mưa*), prayers for rain to stop (*lễ cầu tạnh*). Therefore, the common understanding of the word "lễ" is a system of acts and behaviors aimed at expressing people's respect for supernatural forces in general and gods in particular. At the same time, "lễ" also reflects the legitimate aspirations and dreams of those who are facing difficulties in life that they cannot yet change. Thus, "lễ" is the way that humans behave in the natural world full of mysteries and challenges that are not easily

solved. Its spiritual and mystical rituals reflect people's desire for the blessing of their gods. Traditional festivals in Vietnam mainly focus on rituals and ceremonies related to praying for better crops, peace, wellbeing and prosperity.

"*Hội*" is a crowd of joyful people, held on the occasion of celebrating an important community event in a village, for example, to express the excitement and joy of attendees, bringing spiritual benefits to all members of the community.

Festivals have become a popular form of folklore in most of Vietnam's ethnic groups. *Festivals* have been around for a long time, and have been existing and developing over the ages. So far, in spite of different names and expressions, festivals can be defined as integrated forms of activities that attract large numbers of social phenomena, including spiritual and material aspects, religious beliefs, arts and culture, the sacred and everyday life, etc. If "*lễ*" is a religious aspect (referring to spiritual life), then "*hội*" is real life (daily life), the aspirations of every member of the community to reach for the good. These aspirations are often generalized, idealized or personified by specific, vivid and ordinary rituals or activities. Therefore, "*hội*" is usually longer than "*lễ*" and more exciting and fun.

Thus, a festival is constituted by two elements: *lễ* (spiritual, religious, belief, sacred) and *hội* (physical, cultural and artistic, daily life). These elements are independent but not separate from each other, they intertwine to represent a certain value of the community. A ceremony cannot become "*hội*" if it only consists of rituals. For example, regarding religious ceremonies, there are new year's eve ceremony (*lễ trừ tịch*), rain praying ceremony (*lễ cầu mưa*), rice harvest ceremony (*lễ cơm mới*), groundbreaking ceremony (*lễ động thổ*), etc. Although the rituals in these activities take place very seriously with a large number of participants, they are just "*lễ*", not yet "*hội*". Also, *hội* is a ceremonial activity or performance based on a stable scenario with the participation of many people. However, not every such activity is "*hội*" of "*lễ*". In other words, *hội* associated with "*lễ*" is a ritual activity or performance that complements the ceremony, completes the meaning and content of community activities in a certain place. Thus, "*festival*" is a concept to express the following contents:

First, the rituals reflect the thoughts and feelings of the subject for the object to be celebrated.

Second, performances to express the thoughts, feelings, aspirations and attitudes of a social community.

Third, there is a great deal of community participation in one place, passed down from generation to generation.

In Vietnam, festivals take place in every part of the country with different types. However, they were collected and studied late. According to "*Kho tàng lễ hội cổ truyền Việt Nam*" (*Treasure of Vietnamese traditional festivals*), from the tenth century to 1858, Confucian scholars paid much attention to recording legends and myths about gods rather than worshipping them.

During the French colonial period, the earliest studies on festivals were conducted by G.Dumoutier about the Phu Dong village festival, printed on *Revue d'histoire des religions* in 1893. In the early twentieth century, the French conducted further research on festivals to "better rule over their colonial nations", as the governor-general of Indochina, P.Doumer said. Therefore, studies on festivals in Vietnam, especially in Hue, were promoted.

In 1915, in his book entitled "*Việt Nam phong tục*" (*Vietnamese customs*), Phan Ke Binh wrote a lot about worshipping, sacrifice, naturalization, congress, praying ceremony for peace, and made very appropriate comments. However, the person who had in-depth study and gained a lot of French academic experience is Nguyen Van Huyen. His works that contribute to the study of Vietnamese culture or the articles introducing festivals published in newspapers such as *Phong hóa*, *Trung Bắc Chủ nhật*, *Ngày nay*, etc. showed that he had deeply studied about festivals, especially *Gia festival* (Hoai Duc, Hanoi) and *Phu Dong*

festival (Gia Lam, Hanoi). In 1938, in his book entitled “*Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương*” (*Concise history of Vietnamese culture*), Dao Duy Anh mentioned traditional festivals in *Beliefs and sacrifices*.

During the period from 1945 to 1954, due to the influence of the resistance war against the French colonialists, festivals could not take place, then the study of festivals was rarely mentioned. From 1954 to 1975, the country was temporarily divided, there were differences in the study of festivals in the two regions.

In Southern Vietnam, the articles written by Nguyen Dang Thuc and Toan Anh were still published in journals such as *Văn hóa nguyệt san*, *Bách khoa*, *Phổ thông*, *Tư tưởng*, and *so on*. Nguyen Dang Thuc used traditional festivals to analyze Vietnamese popular ideas as an approach to the history of Vietnamese ideology, whereas Toan Anh considered festivals to be the purpose of approach and the object of his description and research. In addition, after 1954, Nguyen Dong Chi, Nguyen Hong Phong and Cao Huy Dinh continued to contribute to the study of traditional festivals in Northern Vietnam.

After 1975, there were studies conducted by Le Thi Nham Tuyet, Dang Van Lung, Hong Thao, Tran Linh Quy, To Nguyen and Trinh Nguyen, Thu Linh and Dang Van Lung, Dinh Gia Khanh, Le Trung Vu, Ngo Duc Thinh, Phan Dang Nhat, Nguyen Xuan Kinh and Le Van Ky in the project *Vietnamese traditional festivals in Northern Vietnam*, or Phan Huu Dat, Le Ngoc Thang, Le Si Giao, Lam Ba Nam, Bui Thiet, Thach Phuong, Le Trung Vu, Ho Hoang Hoa, Tran Dang Sinh, Pham Van Xay and Ta Ngoc Tan, etc. The above studies considered festivals to be an integrated form of folklore activities, unique and plentiful; a miniature image of folklore, with literary genres (legend, mythology, theogony, funeral oration, epitaph, folk poem, chanty, folk song, etc.); performing arts (performance, theater, folk song, folk dance, folk music, etc.); religions, customs and beliefs (rituals, games, folk performances, customs, worship, faith, etc.). Festivals are associated with villages, places and lands as an indispensable element to satisfy spiritual needs and enhance community awareness. Many cultural and spiritual elements are preserved and passed down from generation to generation, becoming an invaluable cultural heritage of the nation. Festivals play the role of a bridge between the past and the present, helping today's generations to understand the merits of previous generations and to be proud of their national traditions. A festival that contains and reflects many aspects of economic, cultural and social life is a spiritual support for each person to turn towards ancestors, clans, the spiritual world and nature, thereby sublimating even more in an atmosphere of joy, solemnity, worldliness and holiness. Obviously, a festival is a community activity in which everyone can play and socialize with one another, prepare offerings and performances, enjoy tangible and intangible cultural values. It responds in a practical and effective way to people's spiritual and cultural life through organizing ceremonies and enjoying the activities of “*hội*”, preserving and promoting regional cultural values, giving thanks for the merits of national heroes, cultural celebrities, and predecessors who have built and defended the country. Through festivities, people can enjoy and create cultural values.

It can be said that the festivals in Vietnam mentioned in the above works are traditional festivals (long-standing, associated with the formation and development of residential communities), distinguished from new festivals, (associated with contemporary and revolutionary historical events)...

A traditional festival has 3 basic characteristics:

First, a traditional festival is associated with spiritual life and religious beliefs; it is spiritual, so it belongs to the divine and sacred world, in contrast to the worldly and mundane life. Spirituality and sacredness are manifested through its rituals and performances that transcend the real and mundane world of everyday life; As a result, human power is personified to enable mundane aspirations to soar. For example, the performance of three battles against the

An invaders in the Giong Festival (Gia Lam district, Hanoi city), the performance of reed flag for military exercises in the Hoa Lu Ancient Capital Festival (Ninh Binh province), etc.

Second, a traditional festival is a systematic cultural activity, an integrated folklore phenomenon, covering almost all different aspects of human social life: religious activities, rituals, customs, social interaction and cohesion, folk performing arts (singing, dancing, games, theater...), competitions, entertainment, cuisine, trading, etc. No traditional cultural activities in Vietnam stand out more than traditional festivals.

Third, the subject of traditional festivals is community, which may be village community, professional community, religious community, urban community and, above all, national community. It is the community that creates, acts and and enjoys the cultural values of festivals.

The above three characteristics define cultural properties and nuances, organization, attitudes, behaviors and emotions of festival participants, distinguished from other types of festivals such as new festivals, event festivals, etc.

In the spiritual life of Vietnamese people, traditional festivals play a role of strengthening and praising the strength of community, balancing the spiritual life, which is the source of creativity and nourishment of soul, ideology, lifestyle, personality of a certain person and human community.

With a variety of cultures, beliefs, religions, customs, festivals in Vietnam show the common characteristics of community activities. A festival is of complexity and spiritual significance. Through *rituals* and *performances*, Vietnamese people express their profound perceptions of spiritual life, human philosophy and life. These have been clearly showed by perceptions of worship and tribute to national heroes, to the village's tutelary gods, to parents; perceptions of life, spirituality, beliefs; human desires in life, labor, production, aspirations for reproduction, praying for favorable weather conditions and a life full of happiness and prosperity.

Vietnamese traditional festivals are divided into the following basic types::

First, historical festivals that reflect the struggle to defend the country and villages, commemorate heroes, kings of dynasties and celebrities, such as Giong festival (in Hanoi city - associated with Thanh Giong, a prominent figure in Vietnamese legends); Tran Temple festival (in Nam Dinh province - associated with the relics of Tran Hung Dao, a national hero, and Tran kings); Co Loa Temple festival (Hanoi city - associated with the legend of An Duong Vuong, the king of Au Lac, the second state in Vietnamese history); Hai Ba Trung festival (Dong Nhan temple, Hanoi city), and so on. The festivals of this type are to commemorate and celebrate the heroic deeds of those who have made great contributions to the nation.

Second, festivals that reflect the customs, beliefs, religions and spiritual lives of the people, such as Phu Giay festival (Vu Ban district, Nam Dinh province), Thay Pagoda festival (Thach That district, Hanoi city), etc.

Third, festivals that reflect the labor and production activities (festivals of hunting, cultivating, breeding, trading, etc.), such as La Ca Village festival (Duong Noi Ward, Ha Dong district, Hanoi city).

Festivals, like any other social and cultural phenomenon, are influenced by the contemporary socio-economic factors and also also transformed by that impact. These changes, whether in characteristics, values or forms of expression, will have a great impact on the awareness, attitudes, emotions and lifestyles of the community because festivals are basic and integrated spiritual activities of the communities in a certain region or country.

In recent years, due to the impact of socio-economic factors, the development of science and technology, expansion and cultural exchange... the spiritual life of Vietnamese people expressed through festivals has changed in both positive and negative directions.

Positive changes in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people through festivals

First, positive changes in the perception of worship and commemoration.

Historical festivals reflecting the struggle to defend the country and villages in commemoration of heroes, celebrities and people with merits such as Giong Village festival, Tran Temple festival, Co Loa Temple festival, Hai Ba Trung festival, Dinh King Temple festival, etc. have contributed to preserving and promoting the tradition of "when you eat a fruit, think of the man who planted the tree", education of ideology, morality and lifestyle, arousing patriotism and national pride with the glorious history made by previous generations who have made tremendous sacrifices, building a solidarity in the community and society.

The worship of Mother Goddess, in Tay Ho palace (Hanoi city), Lanh Giang temple (Duy Tien district, Ha Nam province), Day palace (Nam Dinh province), Quang Cung palace (Y Yen district, Nam Dinh province), Dau temple, Quan Chao temple, Doi Ngang palace, Chau Son palace, Co Doi Thuong Ngan temple (Ninh Binh province)... has contributed to worshipping the Mother Goddess, who generated, created, protected and defended Vietnamese people. Also, the worship of Mother Goddess shows the patriotism and solidarity of Vietnamese people in a special way. It also contributes to strengthening patriotism, solidarity, a sense of national independence and self-reliance, improving initiative, creativity and social activeness, basically changing people's thoughts, ideas and spiritual life.

Second, positive changes in the perception of spiritual life and beliefs.

Most festivals in Vietnam clearly show people's perception of spiritual and religious life. Rituals, funeral orations and performances are all aimed at showing the respect, adoration and tribute of the alive to the dead. Attaching importance to spiritual life also means that moral and social values are respected, cultural and spiritual values are preserved and reserved. Vu Lan Celebration, which is highly appreciated by Vietnamese people, truly expresses their thoughts and ideas in order to bring good things to those who are living and to remember the alive and the dead.

Third, positive changes in the perception of people's desires in life, work, and production.

Through festivals, people's aspirations, desires and beliefs in life are expressed and promoted. The optimistic attitude and belief have partly promoted their enthusiasm in labor and production to enrich the homeland. Desire and determination to become richer, start a business and contribute to the homeland result from those positive changes. The worship of Mother Goddess also symbolizes a desire for fertility, reproduction, proliferation, and the longevity of lineage and of all things.

Negative changes in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people through festivals

During the process of construction and development of Vietnam, the Party and the Government have issued guidelines and policies on freedom of belief and religion in order to guide the building of a spiritual and cultural life that is healthy and advanced. However, besides positive aspects, negative aspects also appear in festivals, traditional fundamental. In several festivals, the merits of worshiped people have been sanctified to expand their scale, even the historical role of worshiped people has been changed. Ostentatious and wasteful organization of festivals remains. Some localities are racing to build temples, monuments, statues, etc., which stimulates human envy, jealousy, selfishness and desire for fame, even in the sacred field.

In addition, due to the rapid change in the material life of Vietnamese people, many etiquette rules have changed in a negative way. Several festivals have seen the hustle and bustle of life. The practices of "snatching" holy fortunes, "snatching" bamboo flowers, "snatching" *phét* have been corrupted and distorted, causing loss of sanctity and respect in worship, displaying personal greed and passion, resulting in moral and ethical degradation. For example, the seal

opening ceremony of Tran Temple festival (Nam Dinh province) was originally aimed at praying for peace, exorcism and support, but now it has turned into praying for promotion. Also, Ba Chua Kho Temple (in Bac Ninh province) has mystically become a Goddess to keep or lend money, and give fortune. Then various distorted thoughts and perceptions have been formed, misconceptions, losing the true meaning of worship and festivals.

The sanctity and solemnity at the place of worship have been ignored; impolite and unconscious behaviors appear, instead. Attaching importance to material values and comparison of offerings have appeared in most festivals, temples, pagodas and monuments. In some festivals, offensive charity boxes are everywhere, reflecting commercialization. In addition, advertising is also done even in spiritual spaces; As a result, traditional festivals tend to vary in terms of purpose, function and role. Since then, the degradation of moral values and lifestyle have also appeared. Jealousy, greed, desire for fame, power and wealth in social life have "invaded" spiritual places. Even sacred places have been tainted by the delusion of the mundane world. Psychologically, praying to gods for hiding sins and solving problems in life have also appeared. Therefore, their actions have become fanatic with the appearance of entrustment and expectation. The above ideas have resulted in frivolous and false lifestyles, creating fantasies and illusions about life, depending and relying on luck without working for economic development. Many people do not want to work, but instead seek luck and fortune, so when facing difficulties in their lives, they are likely to be stuck and unable to find a way out, even commit negative behaviors against themselves and society.

Taking advantage of the beliefs of fanatics, the commercialization of festivals has also appeared in many different forms. "Booking a full-service ceremony" or "hiring prayers" also appears. In addition, the phenomena of divination, votive offerings (*lên đồng*), illegal gambling, card withdrawal, selling books, physiognomy, horoscopes, enticing pilgrims, scrambling to collect service fees, etc. remain in several festivals, which reduces the sanctity and cultural beauty in festivities. These acts go against the holiness and cultural values of festivals, turning them into the alienation of the mundane life. Burning votive papers in folk beliefs has been excessive and abused. Due to the perception of "the living and the dead do the same", votive burning is increasingly widespread in huge numbers, spending hundreds of billions of dong every year.

In several festivals, superstitions and talismans remain rampant, the circulation of materials regarding physiognomy, horoscopes, feng shui, etc. has a great influence on the thoughts and perceptions of many people in society. Some materials about festivals and historical sites have not been appraised yet, so their content and meaning are misunderstood, fanaticism is caused among visitors.

Since the 80s of the twentieth century, there have been many phenomena which are considered "new", "strange", "mysterious" to Vietnamese people, such as "souls", "spirits", "telepathy", etc. Acts of "fortune-telling", "soul-calling", "telepathy", "searching for tombs", "offering stars of resolution", "injustice against bondholders"... in festivals, offerings, death anniversaries, funerals, weddings... which are full of mysticism and idealism has negatively affected people's awareness, ideas and actions, disrupted the lives of many people, even many families fall into debt, bankruptcy. Therefore, the acts of taking advantage of festivals for personal benefits remain popular and increasingly complicated.

Besides, existing festivals are no longer activities that involve the whole community as before, the indifference and emotionlessness also appear, so festivals become poorer and more monotonous. Some festivals are no longer a place to nourish positive thoughts and souls.

These reflect the pragmatic and selfish lifestyle of a part of human society and also have a significant impact on the spiritual life of society in general, distorting positive traditional

conceptions and values of festivals in particular and the cultural and spiritual life in general of the society.

In recent years, it has been seen that moral values such as conscience, responsibility, morality, humanity, honesty, gratitude, humility, simplicity, patriotism; solidarity; diligence, thrift and creativity; humane spirit, love and esteem for people; courage, indomitability, humility, simplicity, honesty, loyalty, optimism... of Vietnamese people tend to be underestimated and lost. Instead, hypocrisy, lack of conscience, irresponsibility, indifference, insensitivity, blandness, coldness... alienation from Vietnam's traditional moral values are becoming more and more popular, distorting good traditional ethical standards and undermining social ethical structures.

Moral categories such as happiness; obligation; responsibility... have basically changed in terms of perception, representation and meaning. Happiness, obligation and responsibility are attributed to the attainment or fulfillment (contribution) of mere material values. It is less tied to conscience, honor, dignity and morality than before. In family relationships, the sharing, responsibility, love between parents and children, exemplarity, filial piety, gratitude for birth... have changed a lot. Today, in many families, the relationship between parents and children is just a duty, lack of cohesion, so individual members living in these families feel lonely. The responsibility between parents and children and among members is solely about nurturing without personal education and training.

In order to promote positive aspects and overcome limitations to build a healthy spiritual life for Vietnamese people, attention should be paid to the following solutions:

First, systematically and comprehensively studying all festivals to find positive values, as well as negative aspects to guide awareness, inherit and promote good conceptions from traditional festivals.

Second, propagandizing and disseminating to raise awareness about positive values and identify negative factors existing in festivals.

Third, improving material life and partly building a healthy spiritual life, eliminating negative perceptions among people.

Fourth, combining the promotion of positive conceptions in traditional festivals with building new conceptions in festivals to build an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity.

II. CONCLUSION

A festival is a cultural phenomenon formed and developed under certain geographical, historical, cultural and economic conditions associated with cultural characteristics of the community. In addition to preserving and promoting traditional cultural values, festivals have been creating new habits, new lifestyles, new behaviors in the context of contemporary historical events and imprints. Each type of festival has its own space, time and ritual requirements. A festival is a precious cultural heritage of the nation. However, in recent years, there have been distortions in organizing festivals that many researchers and the media have warned and reported. Taking advantage of festivals to practice superstition is a downside that makes festivals in Vietnam become more monotonous, mundane, localized and commercialized. There is no longer the sacredness or culturalness in society, but instead burning too many votive papers and objects; divination, illegal gambling; placing too many charity boxes arbitrarily, hiring prayers... A festival is a social activity that requires the State's management so that it can achieve the goal of promoting historical and cultural traditions, preserving cultural identity, community cohesion, safety and security. However, each festival has its own nature and scale, so the organization and management must also be flexible in

accordance with local conditions, it is difficult to have a common model for managing festivals in all localities.

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