

A Study of Integration of Buddhism and Vietnamese Folk Beliefs

(A Case Study of Thang Nghiem Buddhist Temple)

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Abstract: This paper explores the values of the integration of Vietnamese¹ folk beliefs with Buddhism that arrived to Vietnam around the third century BC. This integration is in particularly seen in the Buddhist temples in the Northern part of Vietnam, specifically in the worshipping of spirits and performing of rituals, festivals, and in making of offerings and in the Buddhist teaching. This integration contributes to the characteristics of what became known as Vietnamese popular Buddhism. Drawing on field research conducted at Thang Nghiem tantric Buddhist temple in 2012-2014, this paper examines how esoteric practices of tantric Buddhism in this temple interweave. This paper specifically examines the local worship of the Mother Goddess, the worship of the historical hero of Tran Hung Dao, and the folk belief in ghosts. One of the interesting beliefs in spirits is the story about Da Dai Ladies on the giant banyan tree at Thang Nghiem temple who control ghosts. The paper also demonstrates how the tantric Buddhist practices integrate with the folk beliefs in ghosts and create the novel religious syncretism.

Keywords: integration, Buddhism, folk beliefs, spirits, esoteric practices, tantra.

Introduction

Popular Vietnamese Buddhism has evolved due to the integration with folk practices when Buddhism arrived to Vietnam. Its philosophical ideas, however, were hard to understand by lay people. Thus, it found its own way to be closed to the mundane world in order to exist and develop among the folks. Because of this, the Buddhist religion gradually integrated into Vietnamese daily life [18]. Combined with folk beliefs, the imported Buddhism became indigenized over a period of thousand years [10]. The integration of

Buddhism and folk belief is expressed in a number of aspects such as the Buddhist teaching, the rituals, the architecture, the practitioners, the texts, and so on [2, 20]. The Vietnamese Buddhist temples also express “the folk knowledge” in their architecture, designs and patterns [20, 4, 9].

With the impacts of the folk beliefs, Buddhism has taken in it some folk rituals

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¹ In this paper, I use the word “Vietnamese” to refer to the Viet people.

such as the requiem ritual (*Lễ cầu siêu*), the destine star ritual for relieving people from bad luck (*Lễ dâng sao giải hạn*), spiritual cutting off of predestined affinity (*Lễ cắt giải tiền duyên*), the procession of tutelary gods to the Buddhist temple (*Lễ rước Thành hoàng đến chùa*) during some village festivals. Furthermore, the folk rituals adapt the Buddhist elements such as the Buddhist monks perform the folk rituals for the dead, or the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is worshipped at a temple dedicated to Mother Goddess religion. Sometimes, the folks name Buddhist temples by taking the names of the local spirits in which the folk rituals become performed in the Buddhist temples [13, 17, 20, 11, 14]. Some Buddhist Venerables passed away and were deified by the folks and were worshipped at some Buddhist temples such as the Venerable Tu Dao Hanh at Lang Buddhist temple; Minh Khong Venerable and Giac Hai Venerable at Ly Trieu Quoc Su Buddhist temple. One of the most interesting pieces of evidence of the integration is the system of the Four Buddhas (*Tứ Pháp*), including Thunder Buddha, Rain Buddha, Cloud Buddha, and Light Buddha that provide the vivid combination of Buddhism and folk beliefs in praying for rain of the Vietnamese people. In addition, at a Buddhist temple, the other folk beliefs such as the worship of stone, the earth, the five tigers, or the silk mulberry tree can be observed. Moreover, at the Buddhist temple complex in Northern Vietnam, there is a hall or shrine dedicated to Mother Goddesses, to Tran Hung Dao spirit (Saint Tran), to the Jade Emperor, to the constellation of the Southern and the Northern hemispheres (*Nam Tào Bắc Đẩu*), the shrine for the Buddhist ancestors, the

shrine for the dead (*nhà vong*) that do not belong to the Buddhist heritage. People go to visit a Buddhist temple to pray to the Buddha as well as to Mother Goddesses and local spirits. The Buddhist temple is not only practicing Buddhist teaching, but also its philosophical and spiritual doctrines reflect the historical, social and cultural milieu of Vietnam [2, 6]. As a result, the integration makes the Buddhist teachings and practices of the popular Buddhism closer to the mundane life of lay people than the doctrinal Buddhism [20, 17].

The integration of Buddhism into the folk beliefs system in Vietnam resembles with Chinese popular Buddhism. It has changed in the wording of sutras and in becoming a vehicle of salvation for all (also see Attmood 2015). In reality, however, its strict monastic form does not attract a large number of followers. The lay Buddhists both practice their indigenous beliefs and take part in the Buddhist teaching for salvation, for karma, and other precepts. A number of them even serve in the Buddhist temples to get merits for life. By taking refuge in Triratna (*Quy y Tam bảo*) at Buddhist temples, or serving at the temples, or any other devoted works, lay people experience a closer connection to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. As the ultimate purpose of paying a visit to a Buddhist temple for lay people, they go to pray to the Buddha and Buddhist sages for having a son, good luck, good business, good education for children, so on [25]. The integration of Vietnamese Buddhism can be seen in various lenses, for creating a favorable condition to spread out and develop, to attract more followers or in the process of acculturation, Buddhism must

adapt and integrate into the local culture and belief system. In the context of Vietnam, we can see the process of amalgamation of Buddhism and folk beliefs that evolved into a novel religious system. This invention is illustrated well in the case study of Thang Nghiem Buddhist temple.

I have written this paper relying on my data collected from my field research since 2012 when the Nom Na Foundation funded my project on the popular religion of Thang Nghiem. With my research experiences on the religious practices on the Mother Goddess religion and the Buddhist life, I shall emphasize the important perspective in the anthropology of religion from the religious practices, not from the religious tenet or dogmas. From the perspectives of the practitioners, the lay Buddhists, my paper will present some insightful issues of the tantric Buddhism such as the transformation of the Da Dai Ladies into a Buddhist sage, and the connection between the mundane life with the spiritual exorcising ritual.

Furthermore, some language terms that I use in my paper bear the spiritual and magical meaning from my informants such as “taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha for ghosts” (*Thụ lễ Tam bảo cho các vong*), “healing ghosts” (*chữa bệnh cho vong*), “ghost possession” (*nhập hồn*), “capture ghosts” (*bắt vong*), soul calling (*gọi hồn*), “the other world,” (*cảnh giới khác*) or “manifestation.” (*ma/vong/thánh hiện về*). By applying the relativist perspective in anthropology, I will not judge what I have seen, listened, and heard about the manifestation of the ghosts and the exorcising, instead I respect the spiritual experiences of my informants. From this conceptual framework, I am able

to identify the spiritual connection between the religious practice and the mundane life and between the other world and the social and cultural reflections of the life.

Tantric Buddhism and Thang Nghiem Buddhist Temple

Thang Nghiem Buddhist temple is the particular case study on the reciprocal relationship between Tantric Buddhism and folk beliefs. Besides the philosophical heart sutra (*Prajñāpāramitā - Bát nhã Ba la mật*) and the Huayan or Flower Garland school of Buddhism (*Vatamsaka Buddhism-Hoa Nghiêm*) and only mind (*vijñāptimātratā-Duy thức học*), the integration of the supernatural experiences with use of tantric techniques (*nghi quỹ*), incarnation, mandala and mantra is the particular combination of the tantric Buddhism. The tantric objects, signs and symbols, and the tantric techniques express the association between the spirit and material, people and universe with the infinite energy. As the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh at Thang Nghiem has experienced, “It is the other world (*cảnh giới khác*) that only people who witness are able to understand and know about it.”² In this spirit and philosophy, the tantric practices are easily integrated in the folk traditions when they are imported in Vietnam. In addition to the tantric secrecy (*huyền mật*), the tantric Buddhism accepted some local spirits and inserted the tantric practices with the local rituals that has created the amalgamated religious activities. The new created tantric Buddhism occupies the controlling role upon the local practices due to taking refuge in Triratna in order to get the infinity of the mind and escape from sufferings.

² Interview with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh at Thang Nghiem temple, 2013.

Tantric Buddhism was present in Vietnam as early time as in the 10th century, the esoteric elements of Tantric Buddhism were integrated in the folk beliefs, in order to meet the spiritual demands of the large population. Its development and spiritual satisfaction have reflected partly the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. Tantric Buddhism has mantra and incantation for the rituals for rains, healing, exorcising, and warding off ghosts [16, pp.291-293]. The tantric practices in Northern Part of Vietnam comprise of the great Buddhist ritual (*đại pháp đàn*), the transmission of the power (Abhisheka-quán đĩnh) of mind from guru to disciples, the ritual for the peaceful country and the peace of mind for the people, the requiem rituals, the vindicating ritual (giải oan cắt kết), and the ritual for a new house. All of these rituals became popular, not only for the Buddhist people, but for all lay people in general. These practices can be performed using the text of Cundi and the Cundi Dharani (*Chuẩn đề*), a sutra centered around the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara that introduced the popular mantra of Om Manipadme Hum, or the text of the Mother of Liberation of the tantric Buddhist Dharma (*Lục Bộ Mẫu*). The tantric Buddhist Dharma on the Buddhist sages such as the Medicine Buddha (*Bhaisajyaguru - Phật Dược Sư*) with the tantric techniques have the power of healing, particularly, hysteric and possessed people that I will talk more about in the next part of this paper. In the tantric Dharma, there are some writings about the healing by reading the text from the Cundi. Some texts also encourage people to read the mantra while they are traveling in forest, on trains or boats in order to avoid the incidents [7, pp.171-172].

The meditation, the incantation, the opening up of the Chakra (*mở luân xa*), tantra techniques all together with mantra, assist the guru and disciples exposed to the relations between the spiritual and material world, between the people and cosmos with the infinite power in order to liberalize. At the same time it served to solve health problems, as therapy, and to perform exorcise. In addition to the powerful tantric guru, there is tantric Buddha which can manage some positions and roles such as Ranasambhava (*Bảo Sinh Phật*) who may satisfy the wishes by lay people, Amoghasiddhi (*Phật Bất Không Thành Tựu Như Lai*), who can assist people to have satisfaction of their career, or Akasagarbha (*Hư Không Tạng Bồ Tát*) who can control mind, merit, talent and prosperity, and so on [1, p.151]. The tantra techniques are also given to the local spirits so the gurus have their ability to intercede in the other world, creating the tantric way of Buddhist practices.

The Thang Nghiem Buddhist temple, or its folk nickname as Khuc Thuy,³ is located in the holy complex of Khuc Thuy⁴, where the Superior Monk Linh Thong Hoa

³ Buddhist Thang Nghiem temple has a number of names such as chua Vua (King temple), chua Phap Vuong (Imperial Buddhist temple), chua Ba Chua Hen (Queen Hen temple) at Dinh dynasty; Thang Nghiem temple at Ly dynasty; Tri Long and Tri Bong temples at Tran dynasty; Lien Tri temple at Le dynasty; Phuc temple at Nguyen dynasty.

⁴ The holy Khuc Thuy complex includes Khuc Thuy communal hall, Linh Quang temple, Thang Nghiem temple, Dau temple, other temples and shrines, temples of Confucianism where the highly ranking Venerables, great generals at Ly dynasty (1010-1225), Tran dynasty (1255-1400) stayed and led their Buddhist lives such as Khuong Viet Dai Su, Van Hanh Quoc Su, Trung Lien Bao Tich Quoc Su, Dao Huyen Quoc Su, Hung Dao Dai Vuong, Huyen Thong Quoc Su, i.e. Linh Thong Hoa Thuong Dai Vuong.

Thuong at the Tran dynasty resided and taught Buddhist precepts. The local people venerated the Superior Monk and considered him as the living Buddha. After his death, he was deified as the tutelary god and was worshipped both in the communal hall and at the temple. Today, annually, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth of the second lunar month, the villagers of Khuc Thuy hold the village traditional festival to commemorate the Superior Monk as the tutelary god. They take the procession from the Communal Hall to Thang Nghiem temple and then from the temple to the Communal Hall to perform the ritual dedicated to him.

Thang Nghiem is one of the tantric Buddhist temples in Hanoi together with the other temples of Long Dau (Quoc Oai district) and Van Nien (Tay Ho district) that are characterized with their tantric architecture, art, images, and statues as well as the tantra techniques. As Venerable Thich Minh Thanh told, he was one of the disciples of the guru Thich Vien Thanh⁵. He came to the Huong Tantric Buddhist temple and was ordained as a Buddhist monk at the age of 21. Huong temple is famous for the tantric Buddhism from the Drukpa School of Vajradhara (*Kim Cương Trì*) with its tantric techniques and incantation. As the Venerable Thich Vien Thanh said, he was able to experience the supernatural manifestation for divining, healing, and exorcising.⁶

The statues at the temple are arranged in the mixture of Pure Land Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism. Thus, the Venerable practices in the way of Pure Land -Tantric Buddhism (*Tịnh - Mật song tu*). At the temple, visitors can see the secrecy of the tantric Buddhism with Buddhist statues of

Imperial Buddhist Tran Nhân Tông, Đản Kim Cương, Đản Tứ Trấn, Sarira (Buddhist relics - Xá lợi from Myanmar, Thailand, and India), the tantric objects, and tantric images on the walls inside the temple. All the statues of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama and other statues are put on with a yellow band of “transmission signs” (*truyền ấn*) made of textile from the Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. In addition to this, there are a number of paintings of the Siddhartha Gautama, Tantric Buddha, and guru on the walls outside of temple around the temple complex. According the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh, he and the painter, Ms. Thi, have their dreams on the Buddhist images and their positions. The painter must be a vegetarian, pray to the Buddha, sit in meditation and follow up the Buddhist precepts. The Buddha sages take manifestation in their dreams. From the dreams, the painter is able to draw their bodies with the Buddhist position.⁷ In addition of all of the amazing tantric objects, visitors can observe the garden of 1,000 yellow Buddhist statues that were donated to the temple on the occasion of the One-thousandth Anniversary of Thang Long-

⁵ As a source wrote, Superior Monk Thich Vien Thanh at Huong Buddhist temple was a disciple of the school of Drukpa Tantric Buddhism. This school came up from Vajradhara (Kim Cương Trì) (see more Pham Doan, 2008. “Gioi thieu Mat Tong Viet Nam.” (Introduction to Vietnamese Tantric Buddhism) <https://bsphamdoan.wordpress.com/cac-bai-vi%E1%BA%Bft-cu/gi%E1%BB%9Bi-thi%E1%BB%87u-m%E1%BA%ADt-tong-vi%E1%BB%87t-nam/>).

⁶ Interview with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh on 19 January, 2013.

⁷ My private talks with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh and Ms. Thi, the painter at Thang Nghiem temple in January, 2013.

Hanoi by Buddhist followers in accordance of the incarnations of the Buddha.

In the Thang Nghiem complex, there are small temples dedicated to the Mother Goddess religion, Tran Hung Dao, the shrine for the dead, and a giant banyan tree in which the two Da Dai Ladies reside. Their names are taken after the giant banyan tree with the tree belt that wraps up around the tree trunk. Thus, in accordance to the worshipping space and building at the Thang Nghiem temple complex, in this paper, I will talk more about the amalgamation, the syncretism of tantric Buddhism and the folk belief in this temple including the belief in the Mother Goddess religion, the worship of Tran Hung Dao, the exorcising of ghosts, possession and the story about Da Dai Ladies. This mixing and incorporating are in line with the statement by Levitt that “One thing that people of all religious varieties shared, although much less among the strict faithful, was their willingness to mix and match form different traditions. Syncretism, both within and between faiths, was the norm rather than the outlier. In fact, in some case, syncretism is something of a misnomer because the original practice and what is being incorporated become indistinguishable over time.” [22, p.109].

Mother Goddess Religion [8]

The indigenous Mother Goddess religion and Buddhism have, in many ways, borrowed from one another and each has given the other space to exist. For example: the phrase, “First is the Buddha, second, the Mother Goddess” (*Tiền Phật hậu Mẫu*), refers to the notion that firstly people pray to the Buddha and after to Mother Goddesses at a Buddhist temple in which,

especially in the North of Vietnam, there is always an altar dedicated to the Mother Goddesses. In a Mother Goddess temple, especially one dedicated to a specific spirit, there is usually no Buddhist statue, however a separate altar dedicated to Quan Âm (the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara) is always nearby. In private shrines a statue or picture of the Bodhisattva is placed highest, in the most revered place.

At Thang Nghiem, there is a separate temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess religion. This religion has developed from indigenous, localized spirits and ancestor veneration into a coherent, still diverse, religious system of the Vietnamese. The Viet have many forms of religion, and most Viet reject an exclusive allegiance to anyone. Rather, the Vietnamese have compromised, over time, by adapting new religious ways into their own popular religion. The Mother Goddess pantheon, like the Viet spirit pantheon in general, is not a fixed belief system. The Vietnamese will adopt new ones over time and in different institutionalized systems because of their “gratitude” and “reverence,” as in the case of Tran Hung Dao.

The number of spirits is not fixed in the pantheon of the Mother Goddess religion. The number may depend upon region, the master medium’s own background, or other factors. Generally, there are nine hierarchical ranks of spirits containing four Mother Goddesses, one Saint Father with his three royal Damsels and a Young Boy, ten Mandarins, twelve Dames, ten Princes, twelve Damsels, ten or twelve boy-attendants, and two animal spirits. There is, thus, a possible total of seventy or seventy-two spirits, including the Jade Emperor and two Star Spirits, the Buddha, and the

Bodhisattva. According to my data, however, only about half of them have active principal temples and as many as thirty-nine spirits actually descend or possess mediums). The spirits vary not only by their place in the hierarchy, but also in their origins, which may be either celestial or earthly. Though the religion is primarily a religion of the Vietnamese majority, many spirits have been borrowed from local ethnic groups in the north such as the Tày, the Mường, the Yao, the Mán, and the Nùng.

In *len dong*, only the spirits of the religion are supposed to take possession in spirit mediums. This ritual is a complex religious and cultural performance. *Len dong* is widespread not only among the less educated and underprivileged population in rural Vietnam, but also among wealthy businessmen and intellectuals, doctors, administrative workers, and even monks and nuns in Buddhist temples. Until the mid-1980s, it was regarded as a superstitious (*mê tín dị đoan*) practice and was prohibited. Even though it has now got more popular, it remains controversial. *Len dong* as a folk practice is not officially banned anymore, however mediums are not allowed to practice in public or in temples in the daytime during a festival before the year of 2000. Today, the practice became very popular and is even considered art performance and performed on the stages of theatres.

A *len dong* performance is composed of a number of *giá đồng* (descents and incarnations), depending upon how many spirits come down and take possession in the spirit mediums. There are several different types of contact between mediums and spirits. An incarnation (*nhập đồng*) can last from five to fifteen minutes, and

occasionally up to an hour. It begins when the *chau van* (religious folksongs) singer invites the spirits to come down and possess the mediums and lasts until the singer sings farewell to the spirits. The spirits have their own distinct personalities when they possess mediums. During their incarnations, they admire themselves in their costumes, listen to the songs dedicated to them, dance, have conversations with the audience, drink tea, smoke cigarettes, distribute gifts, and prophesy future occurrences to the participants. During a *len dong* ritual, approximately fifteen to thirty-nine spirits are said to descend or be incarnated in mediums.

In the sacred context of the Mother Goddess religion, the practice of *len dong* is the means of communicating with its spirits. Petition rites made to the Buddha and spirits (*thỉnh Phật thỉnh Thánh*) by religious masters before each performance convey a message to the spirits that a performance is to follow and praise the spirits' power. Afterwards, the *chau van* songs are dedicated to particular spirits. When spirits "hear" the songs addressed to them, they respond by possessing their mediums, putting on the appropriate clothes and accessories, and dancing and speaking with the audience. Shamans leave their souls to travel in invisible worlds, by means in part of drumming and chanting (Rouget 1985: 125). *Len dong* practitioners, however, as well as those of the other kinds of Viet spirit possession neither sing nor play musical instruments. *Len dong* mediums are possessed and perform with the assistance of *chau van* singers. The *chau van* songs with various tunes and rhythms and musical instruments are a special kind of Viet verbal art and religious folk music. The petition rites of *Thỉnh Phật*

thỉnh Thánh and the *chau van* songs serve as vehicles for facilitating the possession by establishing the necessary discourse between spirits and humans. Or as Norton writes, the songs “enable mediums to cross between the human and spirit worlds” [24, p.91]. The *len dong* is primarily performed by spirit mediums who view it as their destiny to serve the spirits. They expect their practice to bring them and their followers worldly and spiritual benefits. In this, mediums see their role as central - they are the “seats” (*ghế*) upon which the spirits “sit” (*ngồi*).

The temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess religion at Thang Nghiem is solemn and spacious. There is the stage in front of the altar where spirit mediums can perform the *len dong* rituals. In the past, the Buddhist monks and spirit mediums used to perform *len dong* and make offerings to the spirits. Some years after the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh came to reside in the temple, he has not encouraged the performance of the *len dong* rituals and *chau van* songs. According to him, the *len dong* rituals can make the monks and lay Buddhist followers neglect the Buddhist teachings and practices. Thus, when spirit mediums and lay people come to Buddhist temple, they only offer some offerings and pray to the spirits, and they do not perform *len dong* rituals. The spirit medium named Vinh said that she used to perform *len dong* there and persuaded the Venerable to allow her and the other spirit mediums to perform. Anyway, the Venerable insists that at Thang Nghiem monks must learn Buddhist precepts, sit in meditation, and practice the tantric mantra, incantations and texts; and lay Buddhist people take part in his teaching sessions, read the sutra, and follow

up Buddhist precepts if they are taken into the Triratna. Today, I may say that the tantric techniques, mantra, and incantation predominate over the indigenous performance of Mother Goddess religion rituals at Thang Nghiem.

The Worship of Tran Hung Dao Spirit (Saint Tran)

The worship of Tran Hung Dao comes from the traditional Vietnamese belief system. The Vietnamese worship the natural elements, legendary and historical figures. Tran Hung Dao is worshipped in a number of big temples throughout the country. The main temples dedicated to him are located in his mother land in Nam Dinh province and in the places where he and his army fought against the Chinese-Mongolian enemies in the 13th - 14th centuries in Hai Duong province. The most popular temples include the Bao Loc temple in Nam Dinh province, the Tran Thuong temple in Ha Nam province, and the Kiep Bac temple in Hai Duong province. After Tran Hung Dao defeated the invaders, he retreated in Kiep Bac (now in Hai Duong province), where he practiced herbal medicine, healing and helped people, especially women's diseases. After his death, his martial fame and reputation were mythologized and he is perceived as a powerful spirit that can do healing and exorcising in particular.

Tran Hung Dao is also said to be a spiritual father. The festival in honor of Saint Tran's in Hai Duong province takes place at the same time with the festival in the honor of the spiritual King Father (Đức Vua Cha) Bat Hai Dai Vuong whom people venerate in Dong Bang temple, Quynh Phu district, Thai Binh province. Tran Hung Dao is identified with the King Father, whose veneration comes back to the

ancestral veneration of the Vietnamese and who protects individuals, the community and the whole nation [19, p.63]. One of the interpretations on his veneration is the gratitude (*on*) and reverence (*kính*) from people to him. They revere and thank him because of his tremendous service to the nation in his triumph over the aggressive invaders. They only know that Tran Hung Dao is a spirit to whom they can pray, and who can spiritually cure patients and exorcise ghosts [15, p.93].

In the folk belief, Saint Tran is seen as the guru who can ward off evils and exorcise ghosts. Different from other spirits, Saint Tran is perceived as a powerful spirit to which people ask for an amulet, the spiritual seal for a new house, and for the exorcising to protect them from evils. Saint Tran is there to satisfy the local people's desire "to have a symbol against the bad and miasma." The spiritual need and the social diversity of the people's lives are what triggered the development of the worship of Tran Hung Dao [15]. Today, on the occasion of the spiritual seal contribution of the ritual of Saint Tran, it attracts a huge crowd of people that come to his main temple in Bao Loc, Nam Dinh province to get his the amulet and seal on the midnight of the fourteenth day of the first lunar month.

The worship of Saint Tran in Vietnam is very popular at the Buddhist temples, the communal halls, the temples and shrines. At Thang Nghiem, there is a separate temple dedicated to him and his parents and the first princess Thuy Ba. As it is said, when he was around 4 or 5 years old, he used to stay at Thang Nghiem temple.⁸ At that time, his father, Tran Lieu was in prison, and the first princess Thuy Ba took him to

Thang Long capital. Then, she took him to Phat Quang temple (Thang Nghiem temple today). He was taken as refuge in Dharma, Buddha and Sangha with the Buddhist name as Dao Huyen and stayed at the temple until he was 10 years old. After his victory over the conquerors, Tran Hung Dao came back to visit Khuc Thuy village and had the feast to thank the heaven and earth and the local people. In his commemoration, the villagers of Khuc Thuy worshipped him as the tutelary spirit to protect them with good harvest, peaceful life and good health. Today, annually, the local people organize the village festival dedicated to both their tutelary gods Linh Thong Hoa Thuong and Tran Hung Dao on the 15th day of the second lunar month.

Today, people from Khuc Thuy village, as well from outside the village, (including other regions) come to his temple at Thang Nghiem complex to pray to Saint Tran. Like Mr. Hoang from Quoc Oai district, who came with his son to pray to the Saint Tran for the first time. He explained that he had a dream that Saint Tran told him to come to this temple, and not to go to his main temple in Kiep Bac, Hai Duong province, because it was far and costly. One of his prayers, "I pray to my Father. The Father with your heart, morality, and humanity, protects my family, village and country." [31] This temple dedicated to Tran Hung Dao and some of his family members again illustrates that the Thang Nghiem Buddhist temple has adapted the local folk beliefs in venerating the historical heroes who gained merits to serve the people and the country.

⁸ Interview with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh, Thang Nghiem temple 2013.

Soul Calling, Exorcising and the Story about Da Dai Ladies

At Thang Nghiem there are various religious and spiritual activities that have attracted people when they come to visit. The vivid activities I have observed are the soul calling, exorcising and the ritual performance dedicated to the Da Dai Ladies in front of a small shrine under the giant banyan tree at the temple complex. The Venerable as the tantric guru has his spiritual ability to read incantation and manipulate mantra to evoke the possession of the Anathapindika's soul (Duc Chua Ong)⁹, Buddhist ancestors (*sur tổ*) and other souls of the dead at Thang Nghiem and at other Buddhist temples. Anathapindika is a powerful Buddhist sage who serves as the giant guardian at the main hall of the Buddhist temple in the Northern part of Vietnam. He is well-known for protecting children from evils, for keeping them in good health and for growing them up healthy. During my observation I have learned that the main purpose of the soul calling of Anathapindika and the Buddhist ancestors is to do fortune telling at the temple, and for people who are present at the séance.

In this part of my paper, I will illustrate the interesting story about the Da Dai Ladies who reside on the giant banyan tree at Thang Nghiem and about the exorcising séance for the people who are haunted by ghosts. The famous French scholar, Leonard Cadière in the 1940s made a profound statement on the polytheistic folk beliefs of the Vietnamese people in spirits. He explained, that it is a belief "with no history, and it was emerged from the time of race coming out" [5, p.24]. Furthermore, he wrote: "The religious life of the Viet

people of all social classes is based on the belief imbued profoundly in the conscience that the spirits exist everywhere. They fly in the air and arrive with the wind. They move forward on a path or go downstream a river. They hide in the deep water, in the dangerous abysses as well as in the quiet ponds. They cherish the passes of Truong Son mountains and the darkness of forests. The high peaks and the rocks which block rivers, or a simple stone, can be the place for them to reside in...." (2010: 25). In the folk beliefs, the trees, especially the big ones, in villages, including the banyan tree or kapok tree, are the places for ghosts. The folk saying "the kapok tree has ghosts and the banyan tree has spirits" is goes on. Today in contemporary Vietnam, there are stories that people do not dare to cut down the big banyan tree when they construct a new road, or a building, and the tree obstructs their work. They find the way to avoid the tree and leave it alone.

From the anthropological relativist perspective to "keep one leg in and one leg out" when participating in these cultural expressions, I keep myself as an observer of the séances at Thang Nghiem. The souls who take possession of the people are called by the Venerable and the monk. The monk performs a ritual for the ghosts to

⁹ Anathapindika (Duc Chua Ong) was a colossus who was a rich man. He bought the garden from Jeta princess at Sravasti country to donate to the Buddha in order to build up a Buddhist monastery. He was honored by the Buddha when he was alive. Today, he served as one of the two colossuses who guard on the two sides of the main hall of a Buddhist temple in Northern part of Viet Nam. He is regarded as a spirit to protect children. At temple people may have a child selling ritual (*Lễ bán khoán*) in order to have his protection and with the expectation that the child would eat well, grow up quickly and healthy and be obedient.

take refuge in the Buddha and the Da Dai Ladies administer them, not letting them do harass and harm to people, or take possession back in the people.

To interpret the symptom and the abduction as being haunted, Alfred Gell (1998) sees it as the cause of calamity, bad luck, or death that are abducted to the acts of sacrilege and by blaspheming spirits, in the other word to be abducted by agency. Gell states that “Agency is attributable to those persons (or things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events” [21, p.16]. Similar with the social and cultural induction, the spirit images, statues, the sacred objects and space are the causes of the happenings. Echoing other cultural and social anthropologists such as Malinowski [1925 (1954)] and Tambiah (1990) who studied the magic and science, Gell also emphasizes that “the idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent. When an event is believed to happen because of an “intention” lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is instance of ‘agency’” (2008:17). In this paper, I follow this notion of the agency to interpret the ghosts, the soul calling, and exorcising at Thang Nghiem temple.

This part of my paper focuses on the activities, experiences, and the practices of the exorcising by the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh, the seventeenth disciple of the super monk Thich Vien Thanh from the Huong Buddhist temple, as it occurred from

1997 until today. From that year, he has had his dreams in which he experienced dialogues between him and spirits from the other world (*cảnh giới khác*). This is a world that only can be seen by the awakened/enlightened guru.

The spiritual power and experiences of the tantra Buddhist monk in the exorcising, the taking refuge with Triratna for the ghosts are showing evidence that exoteric practices have integrated into the folk beliefs. This is seen in their position in the spiritual, religious life of the Vietnamese, although they still keep their esoteric features. The integration between the esoteric practices with the local beliefs shows the relationship between the religion and the daily life of lay people, thus it is not only the enlightenment and awakening of the monks. Through this, my paper shows that the tantric Buddhism has been transformed throughout history up to today in the open market economy in which it can be perceived as a Buddhist sect that is closely associated with the spiritual life of the local Vietnamese people. The spiritual experience of the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh has been enriched by his encounter with the spirits of the Da Dai Ladies of the giant banyan tree.

Da Dai Ladies are Taken Refuge to the Buddha

The giant banyan tree (as big as its trunk being for ten people to embrace) by the road in the Thang Nghiem temple complex is seen as a sacred tree with a number of stories. The shrine dedicated to the Ladies was built a long time ago and no one remembers when it was. Local villagers pass by, putting some flowers, candies, and fruits near the tree, make petitions, and pray

to the Ladies. The Venerable Thich Minh Thanh noted that “the local people mainly worship the banyan tree rather than coming in the temple to worship the Buddha.” Before the 1990s Thang Nghiem temple was in bad conditions, and the monks could not stay there for long time. The Venerable was experiencing in the observation of these problems and trying to solve them.

The banyan tree is more than 1,000 years old, as the Venerable said, and no one from the local people is sure how old it is precisely. They do know it has been there since their grand-grand-ancestors were born. It is perceived as sacred and local people believe the ghosts of the two princesses, who were daughters of Hung Kings, live in this tree. According to a legend, two sisters named Ngoc Hoa, 27 years old, and her sister Ngoc Chau, 16 years old drifted in troubled times to Khuc Thuy village. Everyone in the village was starving. However, they gave the little food left to local people. They died at the foot of the tree, after they deified and resided on the tree. They sometimes manifest on the tree in white clothes witnessed by a number of local people. For years, the root comes out and winds the tree trunk as a belt. For this reason, the local people call the tree as Da Dai (means banyan belt).

In the local beliefs, it is a very sacred tree with ghosts on it. Before 1997, the banyan tree was located by the road, outside of the temple complex. When the local people passed by the tree, they usually put incense and made offerings to the Da Dai Ladies, but did not enter in the temple. They worship the tree and their spiritual life has been attached to the tree for years.

The shrine for the Da Dai Ladies is built up and is identified in both this and in the spiritual other world. As a legend says, the Ladies’ palace is on the top of the tree, with the golden pillars. She also owns 5 mountains of gold and 3 mountains of silver, and a lot of treasures and properties. The worshipping shrine has built up and in which there is the statue of the Bodhisattva for her to adhere to Buddhism. The Venerable also has a painter who draws the pictures of the Ladies on the wall around the temple next to the banyan tree.¹⁰

The Da Dai Ladies have been assigned the task to administer the ghosts after they took refuge with Triratna in front of her shrine at the temple. At her shrine, together with her gold jewelry, chain, bracelet, there is a box of “diamond” rope, knife, dharma bell for her too use in the case with the stubborn ghosts. Since then they serve as the guardians of ghost management and administration. It is a vessel of the Law (Buddhist tools - *pháp khí*) for her to control the supernatural world and to govern the “stubborn” living beings. Since, each time when a ghost follows someone to come in the temple, or when haunted people come to the temple, the Venerable and the other monks do exorcising and call out the ghosts. After that they will perform a ceremony to the ghosts to be ordained and to the ghosts that are controlled by Da Dai Ladies.

Tantric Buddhism and Ghosts

There is a close relationship between ghosts and Buddhism. As karma, after the

¹⁰ There are paintings at Thang Nghiem temple of the ancestors, the Tantra Buddhist figures on the wall around the temple. The venerable and the painter have been visualized the images of the figures.

death, a person may be reborn in the mundane world, or he/she may enter into the hell, or be reborn in heaven or in the Buddhist world. Some of them have a connection or take their revenge to the mundane people in this world, they could come back for some reasons, asking for life, or demand to be taken care off and so on.¹¹

In Taoist practices, the masters use amulets to connect or control the ghosts, or to turn them into their spiritual army/guards/soldiers, or to just capture them. In Buddhism, this occurs in a different way, according to the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh, monks use their hearts or minds to convert the ghosts and to let out their hatred. The ghosts remain free in the other world, they do not suffer anymore from their connection with the mundane world, and they take refuge in the Buddha. They turn to the Buddhist world because the Buddha has the threefold body, i.e. the Dharmakaya (*pháp thân*), Sambhogakaya (*báo thân*), Nirmanakaya (*ứng thân*).¹² Buddhism is a religion of compassion and knowledge of things and realization of the truth. Compassion is unlimited and knowledge is endless, which can convert the other forces, such as devils, spirits, ghosts, and according to the Venerable “the yin and the yang are close to each other, the Buddha and dharma are immense.”¹³

For the last years, I have observed some of the soul séances. The séances are hold in front of the Tu An hall (the hall for the dead people), next to the banyan tree. When the ghosts take possession in the patients, the monks call them to sit in front of the altar in the Tu An hall, or there are other people who can “rent out their bodies for the ghosts come in.” The Venerable or the

monk invites the ghosts to come out and to speak out their names and their locations. A monk took note all of this information down. The soul calling can be at 3 levels: *nhiếp phục* (to direct using the words); *chiết phục* (subdue the ghosts), and *thu phục* (win the ghosts). After that the monks hold a ritual to take the ghosts in the Buddha under the control of the Da Dai Ladies. Talking about the shared characteristics of the ghosts, a monk from Thang Nghiem explained that “the ghosts who are called out ask a lot of votive offerings, clothes, building and so on. We have offered the votive offerings to them, and then advised them to let out the hatred and delusion. The called out ghosts are the souls of the dead who died from diseases, or who were killed and they suffer from pains. The monks have to read the text of the healing mantra...The called out souls are taken refuge in the Buddha in order to transform their karma that had been created by them during their lives.”¹⁴ This Buddhist teaching is into some extent intermingled with the soul calling and the refuge into Buddha as common in the Buddhist practices. The belief, the hope, the compassion, and the kindness that the patients can receive from the Venerable and the monks at the temple are also motivating for the healing of the patients with the yin disease.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the integration of tantric Buddhism and folk beliefs in the

¹¹ At the séance on 29 September, 2013 for a woman in Da Si village, Thanh Oai district, she was possessed by an aunt of her family in law.

¹² Interview with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh at Thang Nghiem in September 2013.

¹³ Interview with the Venerable Thich Minh Thanh at Thang Nghiem in September 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with with the monk Trung at Thang Nghiem in August 2013.

spirits and ghosts. Within the Thang Nghiem temple complex, there are two prominent worshipping spaces dedicated to Mother Goddesses and other spirits, and Tran Hung Dao. The latter was associated with the Thang Nghiem temple, thus he and his family members were worshipped there. The rituals associated to the Mother Goddess religion such as the *len dong* spirit possession was not active and the ritual at the Tran Hung Dao shrine is only to make offerings and pray to him and his family members. Therefore, this paper focused its analysis more on the soul calling and exorcising of ghosts and related to the Da Dai Ladies. The story about the Ladies who administer the ghosts in this paper is the Vietnamese belief associated with the belief in the tree spirit. This paper has used this case to illustrate how these amalgamated practices at Thang Nghiem evolved in a vivid emergent syncretism of Buddhism and folk belief in the contemporary Vietnamese society and created the novel religious mixture. However, the paper also concludes that the tantric Buddhist practices of mantra and incantation on exorcising and taking refuge in the Triratna predominate over the local beliefs in spirits and make the practices of Mother Goddess religion and Tran Hung Dao cult be passive in the temple complex.

The tantric and esoteric practices for the monks and life issues such as health, disease, having children, all are integrated. This again reaffirms the integration of the tantra Buddhism with the spiritual life of the local people which attracts lay Buddhists to come to Thang Nghiem temple for various reasons. All of them direct toward the good deeds, cultivate happiness

and have a peaceful mind as the purpose of the members of the lay Buddhist family association at the temple.

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