

From an Indigenous Water Deity to the Third Holy Lady: The “Mother–Goddessization” of Belief at Cô Bơ Temple, Thanh Hóa Province

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ABSTRACT: *Cô Bơ Temple (Thanh Hóa) is one of the representative centres of the Mother Goddess belief in the North-Central region of Vietnam and, at the same time, preserves many layers of memory of the water-deity belief associated with the confluence of the Mã and Lèn rivers. On the basis of analysing textual sources, field surveys and in-depth interviews, this article clarifies the process of transformation from the worship of an indigenous water goddess into the worship of the Third Holy Lady (Thánh Cô Đệ Tam) within the Three-Palace and Four-Palace (Tam phủ, Tứ phủ) system. The findings indicate that the “Mother-Goddessization” at Cô Bơ Temple (Tống Sơn commune, Thanh Hóa province) operates as a two-way interactive mechanism between the state’s policy of orthopraxy and the local pseudo-standardization, thereby vividly reflecting the “unity in diversity” of the Mother Goddess religion (Đạo Mẫu). From this case, the article proposes approaching “Mother-Goddessization” as a mode of constructing adaptive/recovery capacity (resilience) that enables the belief ecosystem both to standardize according to the national pantheon and to sustainably preserve the indigenous riverine ecological memory amid historical and social change. This approach contributes to the theoretical foundations of research on folk beliefs and suggests possible applications to other indigenous beliefs in Vietnam.*

KEYWORDS: *Cô Bơ Temple; water deity; Mother-Goddessization; belief ecosystem; resilience.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mother Goddess belief (Đạo Mẫu) in Vietnam is an open belief system in which many indigenous deities have been integrated into the Three-Palace and Four-Palace (Tam phủ, Tứ phủ) pantheon through processes of transformation that took place in different historical and cultural contexts. Notably, in 2016 UNESCO inscribed the “Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [1], affirming the cultural significance of this tradition. The worship of water deities is one of the early indigenous belief layers of the Việt people, associated with the riverine environment and with livelihoods based on wet-rice agriculture and waterway trade. Over the course of history, many local water deities did not persist as isolated religious entities but were gradually incorporated into larger-scale belief systems, especially the Mother Goddess worship of the Three and Four Palaces. This process reflects the internal dynamics of folk culture in adapting to changes in the social environment and religious life [2], [3], [4], [5]. Cô Bơ Temple (Thanh Hóa) is a representative case of this process. Although Cô Bơ is today widely

venerated as the Third Holy Lady (Thánh Cô Đệ Tam) of the Water Palace (Thoải phủ), many historical sources, hagiographies and ritual practices still reflect the imprint of a water goddess linked to the confluence of the Mã and Lèn rivers. The coexistence of these two layers of meaning raises questions about the mechanism of the belief's transformation and about the capacity to sustain the continuity of tradition amid social change.

In recent years, studies of Đạo Mẫu, of Mother Goddess worship and of water-deity beliefs have achieved many important results [4], [6], [7]; Vietnamese folk religion and belief have likewise been examined through broader scholarship [8]. However, most works focus on history, ritual, performance or the structure of the pantheon, whereas the mechanism of transformation from an indigenous water-deity belief into the Three- and Four-Palace system has not yet been explained as a process of movement within a belief system. In particular, there is still a lack of studies that examine this transformation in relation to cultural memory, ecological conditions and the adaptive capacity of the practising community.

On this basis, the article focuses on analysing the process of the “Mother-Goddessization” of belief at Cô Bơ Temple from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining symbolic anthropology, cultural memory and ecological religious studies. From this case study, the article proposes approaching “Mother-Goddessization” as a mechanism for creating and sustaining the resilience of the belief ecosystem, thereby helping to explain why an indigenous water-deity belief can absorb changes in the natural and social environment while still preserving its symbolic structure, social function and core cultural identity.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines Religious Studies and Cultural Studies, while drawing on the approaches of symbolic anthropology, ritual theory, cultural memory and ecological religious studies in order to analyse the transformation from an indigenous water-deity belief into the Mother Goddess worship of the Three and Four Palaces [9], [10], [11]. On this basis, the article employs the concept of resilience [12], [13] as an analytical tool to examine the adaptive capacity of the belief ecosystem in the face of changes in the natural and social environment. Alongside the ecological-religious approach, the study draws on James Watson's theory of “orthopraxy” [14] and the theoretical developments of Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ concerning the interaction between the state and the community in ritual practice. This theoretical framework makes it possible to analyse the process of “Mother-Goddessization” and “Four-Palace-ization” of Cô Bơ Temple not merely as a spontaneous ecological adaptation, but also as a politically inflected process of cultural standardization. Accordingly, the concept of “pseudo-standardization” is used as an intermediary analytical tool to clarify how the local community and indigenous lineages accepted, at the surface, the national symbolic structures imposed by the feudal state, while at a deeper level continuing to embed and preserve their distinctive riverine and kinship memories. From this perspective, “Mother-Goddessization” is approached not only as a process of symbolic restructuring and reorganization of the practising community, but also as a mechanism enabling the belief ecosystem to maintain its continuity under conditions of change.

The source materials comprise two groups. The first is secondary material, including Hán-Nôm texts, hagiographies, local gazetteers and research works on water-deity beliefs, Đạo Mẫu and the culture of the Thanh region [15], [16], [4], [17], [7]. The second group is field material directly collected by the author during continuous research on water-deity beliefs in Thanh Hóa in the period 2021–2026, focusing on the years 2024–2026, through surveys at Mẫu Hàn Sơn Temple, Cô Bơ Temple and several related water-deity sites. This research series covers many types of belief, from the worship of flood-controlling deities, sea deities and fish deities, to the Four Palace Holy Ladies (Tứ vị Thánh Nương), Mother of the Waters (Mẫu Thoải) and Cô Bơ, thereby identifying the diversity as well as the patterns of formation, transformation and integration of water-deity beliefs across different cultural spaces [18], [19], [20], [21], [5]. This also serves as a comparative basis for determining the specific features of the Cô Bơ Temple case within the general trajectory of water-deity beliefs in Vietnam.

The research methods used include: document analysis and criticism, to determine the process of formation and transformation of the belief; field surveys combined with participant observation, to record the space of worship, the rituals and the activities of the practising community; in-depth interviews with spirit mediums (thanh đồng), temple keepers (thủ nhang), ritual singers (cung văn), pilgrims and heritage-management officials, to clarify how the community interprets the origin, hagiography and status of Cô Bơ in contemporary life; and, at the same time, symbolic analysis and case comparison, to interpret the mechanism of “Mother-Goddessization” in relation to ecological conditions, cultural memory and the dynamics of the practising community.

Combining historical sources with a series of field data accumulated over many years makes it possible to approach Cô Bơ Temple not as an isolated case but as a link in the trajectory of transformation of water-deity beliefs in Vietnam. On this basis, the article focuses on clarifying the dialectical interaction between the mechanism of orthopraxy and that of pseudo-standardization in the process of “Mother-Goddessization” at Cô Bơ Temple, thereby proposing to treat the object as a belief ecosystem endowed with a flexible adaptive/recovery capacity (resilience) in the face of the transformations of the political institution and of the contemporary socio-ecological environment.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The confluence ecological space and the formation of water-deity belief at Cô Bơ Temple

Water-deity belief in Vietnam arose from the long-standing relationship between people and the riverine environment. For wet-rice agricultural communities, the river system provided water, aquatic resources and transport routes, but also harboured risks from flooding, erosion and natural fluctuations. In that context, the sacralization of rivers, wharves and the forces believed to govern water became a mode of cultural response aimed at establishing a balance between people and their living environment [2], [3], [22]. Hence, the emergence of water-deity worship centres cannot be separated from the ecological conditions and settlement history of each cultural region.

Thanh Hóa is one of the representative areas of the water-deity belief system in Vietnam. With the network of the Mã, Chu and Lèn rivers, together with many estuaries and confluences, this locality early on formed a space of exchange among the mountains, the midlands and the coastal plain. Historically, the waterways were both arteries of transport and trade and spaces of livelihood for many communities, yet they were also fraught with uncertainty caused by floods, currents and waterway accidents. Precisely this interweaving of benefit and risk prompted communities to create forms of water-deity worship as a means of expressing belief, praying for protection and establishing a spiritual order in the face of the power of nature. Thus, confluence areas often became places where many belief layers associated with river deities, sea deities and water goddesses converged [15], [7], [23], [24], [25]. From a cultural-studies perspective, the confluence is not merely a geographical entity but also a space in which community memory accumulates, where ecological conditions, trading activities and ritual practice interact, creating the premises for the formation and development of water-deity worship centres.

Cô Bơ Temple is located in the Ba Bông area, at the confluence of the Mã and Lèn rivers. Historically, this was an important location on the waterway linking the upper reaches with the plain and the coastal estuaries of Thanh Hóa. The concentration of river wharves, the exchange of goods and the flow of people created a transitional economic and cultural space. According to Victor Turner [9], liminal spaces are often places that generate and reinforce symbols capable of connecting different communities. The case of Cô Bơ Temple shows that the symbol of the water goddess was formed from the interaction among ecological conditions, the protective needs of the riverine community and the accumulation of cultural memory across many generations. It is precisely this combination that laid the foundation for the local belief to continue to be received and transformed by the community in later historical contexts.

Local sources and legends all show that the image of Cô Bơ was initially closely tied to the element of water and to protective power over the river. In folk perception, she not only sheltered those crossing the river but also assisted trade, transport and long journeys. This reflects a common feature of Vietnamese water-deity belief: the deity represents not only the power of nature but also the protection of livelihoods dependent on the water environment. In-depth interviews likewise show that the practising community remains keenly aware of the connection between Cô Bơ and the Ba Bông confluence. One spirit medium shared: “To come to Cô Bơ Temple is to come to Ba Bông. Only when you stand before the three-river junction do you sense that she is a person of the rivers and waters, and not merely one possession-turn (giá hầu) within the Four Palaces” (In-depth interview, female, 52, spirit medium, Nam Định, 2025).

Field observations show that, although Cô Bơ Temple today attracts large numbers of pilgrims from many localities, the sacred space of the site is still interpreted by the community through symbols associated with the river, the wharf and the efficacy of a goddess who protects the water journey. It is precisely this layer of indigenous memory that provides the foundation for the belief to continue to be received by the community even after it has been integrated into the Mother Goddess system. In other words, the ecological conditions of the confluence not only explain the formation of the water-deity belief at Cô Bơ Temple but also create the layer of cultural memory that is preserved throughout the entire subsequent process of transformation.

Thus, the case of Cô Bơ Temple shows that ecological space is not a static background of belief but a component that participates directly in the process of symbol construction. It is precisely the combination of the confluence environment, the waterway trade network and community memory that created the premise for a local water goddess gradually to expand her sphere of influence and to take on new layers of meaning within the Three- and Four-Palace system. This is also the basis for analysing the mechanism of “Mother-Goddessization” presented in the following section.

3.2. The mechanism of “Mother-Goddessization”: from indigenous water deity to the Third Holy Lady

If the three-river junction explains the geo-ecological foundation, then the process of “Mother-Goddessization” is the key to understanding the movement and the symbolic restructuring of the deity at Cô Bơ Temple through history. This process is not the mechanical replacement of an indigenous belief by an exogenous system, but rather the continuous integration, layering and acculturation of four distinctive layers of water-deity belief:

First, the ancient indigenous water-deity layer (nature deities) serves as the original ecological-memory stratum. Before the image of Cô Bơ took shape within the Four-Palace pantheon, the Ba Bông confluence (Mã–Lèn rivers) had long been a sacred waterscape. The uncertainty of the currents, the dangerous whirlpools and a livelihood entirely dependent on the rivers prompted the ancient inhabitants to sacralize nature and to venerate riverine nature deities in order to pray for safety and to control risk. This archaic layer of nature deities is precisely the catalyst that shaped the fundamental attributes of the later Cô Bơ symbol: the white costume (a convention for pure water), the image of the oar and the dragon boat, and protective power over the water journey.

Second, the layer of human deities and local goddesses (historicization) is the link that shifted the belief from nature to history. In order to establish legitimacy and to bind the belief to the fate of the nation, the community carried out a “historicization” of the water nature-deity through a system of legends about assisting the king and saving the country in the early Lê period. At this layer, the image of the Ba Bông water deity was closely linked to the legend of rescuing Lê Lợi and of appearing in a dream to offer strategic advice that helped General Lê Thọ Vực defeat the enemy. Notably, lineage records connect the Nguyễn Gia Miêu clan with the Ba Bông confluence; the case of a Nguyễn branch that migrated from Thanh Hóa to settle in former Nam Định (sources at the Cô Bơ ancestral hall), which still preserves its genealogy and worships the Ancestral Lady Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Quận, should be seen as a typical case reflecting the symbiosis between local lineage tradition and a broader belief system. This lineage discourse acts as a spiritual anchor helping the migrant community maintain

a symbolic connection with the sacred land of origin, while at the same time expanding the inter-regional network of practice.

Third, the Mother of the Waters (Mẫu Thoải) layer (“Mother-Goddessization”) elevated the symbol from the local level to a vast sacred realm. Under the impact of the rise of Đạo Mẫu from the sixteenth century, the symbol of the Ba Bông river goddess entered the process of “Mother-Goddessization.” The indigenous water deity was integrated and reinterpreted through a relationship of attendance upon, or partial identification with, the Third Mother of the Water Palace (Mẫu Đệ Tam Thoải Phủ). This shift enabled the deity's image to absorb the attributes of cosmic maternity (nurturing, tolerance, protection), turning a local river deity into the youthful, intimate embodiment of the “Mother of the Waters” who safeguards the flow of blessings for all people.

Fourth, the Four-Palace layer (“nationalization”) completed the unified structure of the pantheon. This was the result of the dialectical interaction between the policy of orthopraxy imposed by the feudal state institution (granting the title of Superior Deity, recording the hagiography in official history) and the mechanism of pseudo-standardization of the local practising community. The community actively accepted the national Four-Palace pantheon in order to position Cô Bơ as the Third Holy Lady and thereby to gain legitimacy, yet at a deeper level it still fully preserved the distinctive riverine memory of the Ba Bông three-river junction.

The skilful layering and fusion of these four belief strata enabled Cô Bơ Temple to express profoundly the principle of “unity in diversity” of Vietnamese Đạo Mẫu: standardizing according to the structure of the national pantheon while persistently preserving the sediments of indigenous riverine culture, thus constructing the outstanding adaptive/recovery capacity (resilience) of this belief ecosystem in the face of the vicissitudes of history.

3.3. The adaptation and re-creation of Cô Bơ Temple belief in contemporary life

If the process of “Mother-Goddessization” explains the transformation of Cô Bơ Temple belief in history, then the adaptive capacity of the practising community determines the vitality of the belief in contemporary life. This shows that the survival of a belief does not depend on preserving traditional elements intact, but on the capacity to receive new social needs while still maintaining the memory and the core values of the object of worship [11], [10]. Cultural memory is always sustained through the community's continuous reinterpretation of the past in new historical contexts; the case of Cô Bơ Temple shows that the memory of the Ba Bông water goddess is preserved through a system of symbols, rituals and ritual practices, even though the social function and the sphere of influence of the belief have changed considerably.

A clear manifestation of the process of adaptation is the expansion of the practising community. Whereas in the past the worship of Cô Bơ was mainly tied to the protective needs of the riverine population and to waterway trade, today the practitioners have expanded to many social groups with more diverse spiritual needs. Notably, the change in ritual needs has not altered the central image of the belief but has enriched the social meaning of that image in the contemporary context. It is precisely the expansion of the practising community that has enabled the belief to move beyond the local scope while still maintaining a symbolic connection with the Ba Bông confluence space.

Adaptation is also expressed in the continuous re-creation of ritual practices. According to Catherine Bell [10], ritual is not the repetition of tradition but a process through which the community ceaselessly constructs and reaffirms the meaning of sacred symbols in specific social contexts. The case of Cô Bơ Temple clearly reflects this characteristic. Although the basic structure of the spirit-possession ritual (hầu đồng), the ritual singing (chầu văn) and the festival is maintained, the content of the invocations and prayers, the manner of organization and the scope of participation have undergone many adjustments to suit contemporary life. Such changes do not diminish traditional value but help the ritual continue to meet the spiritual needs of the community under new social conditions. According to Laurajane Smith [26], heritage does not exist as an immutable entity but is formed and sustained through the community's continuous practice, interpretation and re-creation of the meaning of the past

in the present. From this perspective, the movement of Cô Bơ Temple belief does not reflect the fading of tradition but shows that the ritual practices and the practising community are ceaselessly constructing and maintaining the value of the belief heritage.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the study employs the concept of resilience by Holling [12], later extended by Walker et al. [13] to social-ecological systems, to approach Cô Bơ Temple belief as a belief ecosystem. In this article, the term “belief ecosystem” designates the totality comprising the sacred space, the object of worship, the system of symbols, the rituals and the practising community in their interactive relationship with the natural and social environment; this is an analytical concept the author applies by combining the ecological-religious approach with resilience. According to this approach, resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances, self-adjust and still maintain its structure, function, identity and basic linkages. From the case of Cô Bơ Temple, it can be seen that the process of “Mother-Goddessization” is not only the transformation of an indigenous water-deity belief but also a mechanism for creating and reinforcing the resilience of the belief ecosystem. By integrating the water-deity belief into the Three- and Four-Palace system while still preserving the memory of the Ba Bông confluence space, the belief both maintains historical continuity and enhances its adaptive capacity in the face of changes in the ecological environment, social life and ritual needs in the contemporary context. In that sense, “Mother-Goddessization” not only enriches the Mother Goddess system but also helps ensure the long-lasting vitality of the belief ecosystem [5].

Notably, the process of belief re-creation today occurs not only within ritual space but also extends into the digital media environment. Spirit mediums, ritual singers, temple keepers, local residents and pilgrims are at once the subjects who sustain the rituals and those who disseminate and interpret the meaning of the belief through social networks and online media platforms [27], [28], [29], [30]. This contributes to expanding the sphere of influence of Cô Bơ Temple beyond the local space, while creating new forms of connection among practising communities. However, alongside the opportunity to spread cultural values, the digital environment also raises the requirement of ensuring the normative character of ritual, limiting the tendency towards commercialization and the extreme interpretation of sacred elements. Therefore, the adaptive capacity of the belief in the contemporary context is expressed not only in the degree of its diffusion but also in the capacity to maintain the authenticity of tradition during the process of development, an aim consonant with Vietnam's heritage-safeguarding policy [31].

From the case of Cô Bơ Temple, it can be seen that the adaptation of a belief is not arbitrary change but a process of selective re-creation on the foundation of the community's cultural memory [32], [33]. New layers of meaning are added to meet the needs of contemporary society, but they do not replace the core values associated with the image of the water goddess and the confluence space of the Mã and Lèn rivers (Ba Bông). From this perspective, “Mother-Goddessization” can be interpreted as a mechanism for creating and sustaining the resilience of the belief ecosystem, allowing this system to absorb the fluctuations of the natural and social environment and to self-adjust while still preserving its symbolic structure, social function and core cultural identity. The case of Cô Bơ Temple thus not only helps explain the vitality of a local water-deity belief but also opens up an approach that can be further tested against other indigenous beliefs in Vietnam.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the case of Cô Bơ Temple (Thanh Hóa), the article shows that the transformation from an indigenous water-deity belief into the worship of the Third Holy Lady is not a replacement of, or a rupture with, tradition, but rather the result of a process of “Mother-Goddessization” that took place on the foundation of preserving cultural memory and restructuring the symbolic system. In that process, the image of the water goddess of the Ba Bông confluence was maintained as the core memory layer, while at the same time being integrated into the Three- and Four-Palace system in order to expand the space of practice, the belief community and the social meaning. This shows that “Mother-Goddessization” is a cultural mechanism that both ensures the continuity of tradition and enables the belief to adapt to changes in social life. In that sense, the case of Cô Bơ Temple also

shows that belief heritage is not the immutable remainder of the past, but a process continuously re-created by the community through ritual practice, cultural memory and adaptation to the contemporary social context [26].

On the basis of combining textual sources, field surveys and the approaches of symbolic anthropology, cultural memory and ecological religious studies, the study proposes approaching “Mother-Goddessization” as a mechanism for creating and sustaining the resilience of the belief ecosystem. On this understanding, the belief ecosystem includes not only the object of worship but also the totality comprising the sacred space, the symbolic system, the rituals, the practising community and the socio-ecological environment. This resilience is expressed in the system's capacity to absorb disturbances, to self-adjust and to re-create itself in the process of change while still maintaining its structure, function and core cultural identity. The case of Cô Bơ Temple shows that it is precisely the process of “Mother-Goddessization” that enabled a local water-deity belief both to preserve the memory of its place of origin and to expand its sphere of influence and continue to develop in the contemporary context.

From a broader perspective, the study suggests an analytical framework that can be applied to explain the movement of indigenous beliefs in Vietnam under the present conditions of natural, social and cultural change. Rather than regarding change as a sign of the fading of tradition, this approach emphasizes the capacity for self-adjustment and re-creation of belief ecosystems as an important condition for ensuring the continuity and vitality of cultural heritage in contemporary society.

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