

PART II:
VARIETIES OF RELIGIOSITIES

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPIRITS YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR: SPIRIT POSSESSION IN THE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN DIASPORA

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In the detached garage behind a suburban house in Orange County, groups of Vietnamese gather on weekends to “serve the spirits” of imperial generals, mandarins, ladies of the court, highland princesses and playful children. Kneeling in front of a mirror, a spirit medium watches her face transform into that of a fierce warrior, a coquettish dancer, or a spoiled prince addicted to opium. Once she knows which spirit has descended upon her, she signals with a hand gesture to her attendants, dresses in the appropriate costume, and rises to feel her body shaking and her hands and arms moving in unfamiliar ways. Raising a sword or a lance, twirling scarves to choke her neck or entice a lover, she watches her hands and feet trace the characteristic gestures of a figure from Vietnamese history and legend. For two to four hours or more, she will incarnate two dozen spirits, offer gifts and blessings to her audience, and dance with both dignity and abandon. The last spirit is always that of the child prince, prone to tantrums and pratfalls, who impishly bows at the end of the ceremony as she collapses, both exhausted and energized, onto mats spread in front of the elaborate altar.

This chapter draws on recent fieldwork among Vietnamese Americans in California to ask what is really represented by the mirror that a spirit medium gazes into, and why that mirror is also a required object on all altars to “the mother goddesses,” whose worship has had a great resurgence in diasporic communities in California, as well as in the homeland. Many excellent ethnographic studies have examined spirit possession and the mother goddess cult in Vietnam and in overseas communities (Endres 2011, Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006, 2011, Norton 2008, Pham Quynh Phuong 2009), but none so far have focused on the significance of the mirror in these rituals. By looking at the role of a

material object, I hope to draw attention to religious ways of mediating displacement and re-forming an identity based on the reflected glory of the imperial past.



Figure 1. A spirit medium in front of the mirror on an altar in Huntington Beach. (Courtesy of Janet Hoskins 2010).

Mirrors are of great significance in psychological theories of identity formation (from Freud to Lacan); in post-colonial studies notions of “mimicry” (Homi Bhaba, Michael Taussig); in ritual theories (from Aristotle onwards) that oppose *mimesis* (imitation) to *diegesis* (narrative); and also in our daily lives and in routines of personal hygiene. When I asked participants in these rituals what role the mirror played in spirit possession, I got a wide range of answers, from those who said “goddesses

like mirrors just as you do, to look into,” to those who thought of the mirrors as representations for new levels of self-knowledge, self-consciousness, or even the primeval void.

I probe the significance of the mirror in a particular ritual context, and also in relation to wider questions about how rituals may serve to alter notions of identity, to imbue particular persons with a sense of connectedness to ancestral predecessors, and to reinforce ethnic identity in the context of displacement, marginalization and exile. Mirrors are placed on virtually every Vietnamese altar dedicated to a mother goddess, and may take the place of photographs of ancestors, tablets with Chinese characters, or statues in certain cases. The question of what is really reflected in the mirror (e.g., the person making an offering or “serving” the spirits, the invisible essence of the goddess herself, or the process of transformation) will be the central one explored through case studies of a number of different mediums, in both Vietnam and California, with whom I spoke over the past year.

Three themes will be developed:

- (1) the mirror as an emblem of displacement, and the fact that spirit possession is a modality of religious experience in which one’s body is the carrier of a sacred geography made present through the possession itself
- (2) the relation of mirrors to ethnic fluidity, and in particular to distinguishing Vietnamese spirits from Chinese ones, “black” goddesses from white ones, and “Asian” spirits from newly racialized alternatives in the California context
- (3) the relation of mirrors to gender identity, expressed through forms of cross dressing, which also cross borders of age, class and nationality

Spirit Possession as a Religion of Displacement: “Vietnam was dancing inside my body”

Half of the crowded one bedroom apartment of a relatively young male medium in Huntington Beach was devoted to his altar to the seventh princess (co loc), a goddess dressed in green who dances with especially rhythmic and vigorous swinging steps. He explained the reasons for his devotion to her this way:

When I first came here, I was very lonely and missed my home. Everything was different and hard. Even the Vietnamese community was

different from what I knew back at home. People were busy with other things; they didn't have time to talk. Everyone was working two or three jobs to get ahead. So I felt very isolated. Then I started going to ceremonies and serving the spirits. I did not do this in Vietnam, but my grandmother did. When the music began and I started to shake with its rhythm, I felt that Vietnam was dancing inside my body, that the spirits were speaking to me and helping me to move through my day even when there was no ceremony. I felt that the ancestors I prayed to when I burned incense had become real for me again.



Figure 2. "Vietnam was dancing inside me" Orange Country medium. (Courtesy of Janet Hoskins 2010).

This form of ritual practice is especially favored by those who have been displaced and dispossessed, since it forges connections through visual and bodily practices, rather than through doctrine or discipline. It is both empowering and liberating, a new way to affirm one's national origin and actualize its potency in a transnational space.

The religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith argues that spirit possession is a survival strategy developed by religious practitioners who suffered displacement, since it allows the deities of their lands of origins to move into the bodies of their disciples, and does not require that they actually

return to the cult house of origins (Smith 1993). The body of the possessed person becomes a new sacred space, the “seat” on which the spirits come to sit, and the platform through which they can come to teach. Spirit possession cults are famously developed among the displaced (the African slaves who formed Vodou, Candomble and Santeria (Brown 2001; Matory 2009), the rural to urban migrants of the West African Hauka cult (Rouch 2005; Stoller 1995), Sudanese *zar* (Boddy 1988, 1994), and Northern Thai villagers crowding into Chiang Mai (Morris 2000).

For the native religionist, homeplace, the place to which one belongs, was *the* central religious category. One’s self-definition, one’s reality was the place into which one had been born—understood as both geographical and social place. To the new immigrant in the diaspora, nostalgia for homeplace and cultic substitutes for the old, sacred center were central religious values.... Diasporic religion, in contrast to native, locative religion, was utopian in the strictest sense of the word, a religion of “nowhere,” of transcendence. (Jonathan Z. Smith 1993: xiv, emphasis in original)

Smith’s (1993: xiv) account of religion of Late Antiquity posits: “Rather than a god who dwelt in his temple or would regularly manifest himself in a cult house, the diaspora evolved complicated techniques for achieving visions, epiphanies or heavenly journeys. That is to say, they evolved modes of access to the deity which transcended any particular place.” Moving the locus of religious meaning from a sacred space to the body of the practitioner is one way to achieve this transformation.

For those living far from their homeland, it is necessary to create new sacred spaces, and also to acknowledge that these are only “shadows” or “reflections” of the original spaces once inhabited by the ancestors. The Vietnamese practice of spirit possession may have developed as a response to dispersion, the dispersion of rural villagers as they moved into urban centers, the dispersion of northerners who traveled to the south of Vietnam in the 1930s seeking economic opportunity, or in the 1950s fleeing the communist take-over in Hanoi.

The earliest descriptions we have are from urban practices, despite the fact that many of the most important temples are in isolated rural areas. The idea of pilgrimage and of the enhanced efficacy of a distant temple seems to be a long established principle, as evidenced by the Vietnamese proverb: “The statues in the local temple are not efficacious.” Only statues in faraway temples will really reward your wishes. My experiences doing fieldwork during the summer of 2010 were that my research assistant and I would travel many hours on winding roads to go to a temple high in the mountains or in a remote area, only to discover other minivans and even

video crews. We witnessed many elaborate ceremonies performed by people from Hanoi or Saigon. These rituals were performed by urban people seeking out their rural roots, people living far from the land, asking the goddesses of heaven, earth, water and mountains to bless them so that they could be more prosperous in city-bound enterprises.

What Jonathan Z. Smith calls “native” or “locative” religion could also be termed “indigenous religion,” since the most basic definition of an indigenous religion is one that is practiced in the land where it originated. In this sense, there is an implicit contradiction in terms in talking about “indigenous religions in the diaspora,” since if these rituals are practiced overseas, then the religion is no longer purely “indigenous”— even if the ritual practitioners are themselves displaced from their homeland and are evoking the spirits specifically to obtain guidance from their ancestors in a new world.

The mirror is a marker of absence, it holds an image which appears only fleetingly and then disappears, an image of displacement—a thing seen in one place and then suddenly visible in another. The testimony of California mediums reflects on this theme as recognition of cultural identity through bodily movement.

Transoceanic Ritual Practices: Spirits That Cross the Seas

Đạo Mẫu, “the way of the Mother Goddess,” became a transpacific religion after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, at end of the Vietnamese war. Its traditions and spirits crossed an ocean, much as Matory argues the Vodou or Candomble “Black Atlantic Religions” had done centuries before. The devotees or disciples of transoceanic religions have “understood themselves as the simultaneous inhabitants of multiple nations, some territorial and some transoceanic” (Matory 2009: 232). In terms more faithful to their own ontology, “they have understood that beings of multiple nations inhabit the worshipper and that adequate communication with both the distant heartlands... and the host nation of America is a precondition for the worshipper’s health, good fortune and personal integrity” (Matory 2009: 232).

For centuries, the Chinese spread their gods through imperial conquest of neighboring lands, and for roughly a thousand years they had dominion over Vietnam, conquering the once great Hindu empire of the Cham people. About 200 years ago, the Vietnamese began a march southward that eventually pushed Khmer kingdoms in the south aside, absorbing their gods into an imperial cosmology that blended Chinese characteristics with a more diverse pantheon of spirits associated with the ethnic minorities of

the mountains and forests. The Đạo Mẫu pantheon represents this history as a series of statues on an altar in which the three great mother goddesses sit highest, usually hidden behind veils, with rows of generals, mandarins and princes in front of them, and side altars dedicated to the spirits of local rivers, hills and rock formations.

Religions, as Matory (2009: 238) notes, are “among the most widespread and institutionalized ways in which people employ the images and reality of faraway places and times as models of underlying ideas, or super-powered realities.” The spirit possession religions of the African diaspora have been re-conceptualized not as “African survivals” (a retention of cultural traits), but as practices that have emerged in the context of transnational flows. Yet “these religions of the translocal self” have also proved highly useful in the projects of territorial nationalists—native folklorists, anthropologists, and others who have framed them as “indigenous traditions.”

In Vietnam, as in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti, intellectuals and cosmopolitans have defended these “folk traditions,” and argued that they should be respected by a once contemptuous Marxist state. One surprising element in a remote, but symbolically important temple, was a photograph of a scholarly conference. I could recognize anthropologists Laurel Kendall and Marjorie Balzer, who have studied shamanism in post-socialist Mongolia, meeting with Vietnamese scholars seeking to “legalize” spirit possession. International conferences validated the practice of spirit possession as a legitimate expression of “the original matriarchal Vietnamese culture,” and of egalitarian origins sacred to Marxist evolutionary theory.

Diasporic religion is not an atavistic “survival,” but a form that needs to be enacted by currently embattled communities in order to fill their needs in new locations. The selective reproduction and transformation of Vietnamese cultural dispositions in Vietnamese California communities allows old gods and goddesses to be refashioned to serve new purposes. Homeland, then, is not only a physical location, but is also a concept and a desire—a place to return to through the imagination—a simultaneous doubling of psychic space wherein one can live in the body and elsewhere in mind/imagination. Ritual is performed in order to collapse these spaces into one and thus transport distant homeland into the body that is located in California.

Spirit Possession as a “Resistant Identity” with the Efficacy of Ethnicity

Sitting here, in front of the altar filled with fruit and flowers, is when I feel

most Vietnamese. I see the statues that I remember from my childhood, I smell the incense and the scent of roast pork from the kitchen, and I hear the spirit songs that shake our bodies and bring them down on the mat.

—An older woman medium in Garden Grove, California

Since spirit possession is often a religion of the displaced, it has a complex relationship to ethnicity. For most of the people we spoke to in Vietnam and in California, serving Vietnamese spirits was a way to affirm a Vietnamese identity and feel an intensified experience of belonging. But the spirits worshipped are often themselves of foreign origin: Two prominent goddesses worshipped in southern and central Vietnam (Ba Chua Xu and Thien Y A Na) were once Hindu deities, who were “Vietnamized” over time, and turned into local goddesses who are expected to protect and help the people of Vietnam. Many others are explicitly dressed as members of ethnic minorities, and are praised for their knowledge of herbal remedies and martial arts, so it is perhaps not surprising that ethnic transformation is also a key element of participation in these ceremonies, and that the American context has added new elements to the mix.

The Vietnamese American writer Tu Anh Vu describes Đạo Mẫu as forming a “resistance identity” (in the terms defined by Manuel Castells 1996), one that either resists or responds to Chinese influences, and which seeks to preserve an autonomous Vietnamese national identity. In making this argument, she relies on the work of Vietnamese folklorists and anthropologists (Ngo Duc Thinh 2010; Nguyen Thi Hien 2002; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009), who have struggled to raise the status of what used to be called “the Four Palaces cult” to that of a “religion” (*đạo*) on a par with Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism (*đạo Phật*, *đạo Nho*, *đạo Lão*), so that it could be “accepted as equal to other imported religions and given legitimacy” (Phuong 2009: 181). In 2004, when a new government ordinance concerning religion was released recognizing the worship of Vietnamese saints, heroes, and ancestors as “patriotic,” their victory was celebrated. It reversed an earlier 1975 ordinance (“Instruction on the Implementation of New Ways of Life in Weddings, Funerals, Death Anniversaries and Festivals”), which explicitly forbade “the consulting of fortune-tellers, the reading of horoscopes, the practice of physiognomy, the conjuring up of a dead person’s soul, spirit possession, the casting of lots, the production of amulets, the worshipping of ghosts, the burning of incense, the buying and selling of joss-paper objects, and the use of magic to cure diseases” (Dror 2007: 172). We have witnessed all of these practices in temples in California, as well as in Vietnam, but several local

Đạo Mẫu followers with whom we spoke after returning from our trip could not believe that all of these practices were once again “legal.”

The Communist state was not the first to condemn these practices as “superstition;” many were also condemned by the heavily Sinicized imperial court, which wished to conserve its monopoly on access to the divine through an officially sanctioned Ministry of Rites. After French colonial conquest in the late 19th century, the suppression of official Confucian rituals was accompanied by a flourishing of popular religion, as well as the birth new nationalist and millenarian religions. The great diversity of religious practices continued in Southern Vietnam until 1975, but after “reunification,” many religious leaders were forcefully “re-educated” in labor camps. There is much more nervousness about the veneration of saints and heroes in southern Vietnam today than in there is in the north. Tran Hung Dao is Vietnam’s most famous military hero nationwide, celebrated for defeating Mongol invaders in the 13th century, and his northern temple in Kiep Bac is so busy that when we visited, there were two competing spirit possession rituals being held simultaneously, with one set of drums, gongs and chants threatening to drown out another. But further south in Nha Trang, his temples were struggling to stay open. There was little official support, and their guardians (veterans who fought for the Saigon Republic) said they had not received permission to hold any rituals.

For the overseas community, this history of suppression has meant that people are suspicious that visiting anthropologists might report their ceremonies to the authorities, which could result in the loss of Social Security benefits, or even the banning of backyard rituals. The older woman whose temple we have visited most often wondered why I wrote down the names of the spirits incarnated in their ceremonies, since it seemed “like the FBI.” For these reasons, we were, paradoxically, made to feel much more welcome, even as complete strangers, at a number of ceremonies in Vietnam, where studies by academics had helped to legitimize the practices, as opposed to Orange County, where recent immigrants and refugees still feel vulnerable to state intervention.

The ethnic diversity of the Mekong includes substantial populations of Chinese, Muslim and Hindu Chams, and Khmer, who also play a role in Đạo Mẫu. Northern intellectuals presented the worship of heroes and heroines who defied foreign invaders as a fusion of the spirits of the natural landscape and a patriotic tradition of defending the homeland. But the Australian anthropologist Philip Taylor proposes a counter-reading of this history, in which he sees “the appropriation and positive evaluation of the accomplishments of other ethnic groups” (2002:85). Contrary to prevalent views of Vietnamese history as a saga of resistance to elitist



Figure 3. Lina's grandmother in a possession ceremony reaching for a candle. (Courtesy of Janet Hoskins 2010).

Chinese incursions and colonial subjugation, this view maps how “the powerful goddesses of the southern Vietnamese plain encode interpretations of the past with which orthodox cultural commentators have not been entirely comfortable, as they burst the bounds of ethnic Kinh <Vietnamese> cultural nationalism, giving efficacy a very different ethnicity, not always congruent with conventional Vietnamese myths of self” (2002: 102). In particular, he describes pilgrimages to the “Lady of the Realm” (Bà Chúa Xứ), whose very crowded temple we also visited in Chau Doc, noting that her extraordinary ability to bestow wealth and good fortune is linked to her Cambodian origins, since the Cambodians were the original owners of the land for all of the Mekong Delta. Taylor notes that the borderlands of Vietnam are conceived as having an usual spiritual potency, since they both funnel in foreign beliefs and practices and delineate the qualities of “Vietnamese-ness.” The efficacy of a pilgrimage stems from the amount of effort involved, the planning, expense and hours of travel, which are expected to yield much greater benefits to the pilgrim. People in Vietnam were especially welcoming to us since we had come from so far away to honor the goddess, and that may also explain why Orange County

followers were somewhat less impressed by our hour-long commute from Los Angeles.

For Vietnamese immigrants, the move to a new country meant a confrontation with a new variety of ethnicities. Their own nationality was converted into a hybrid ethnic identity (“Vietnamese American”), a fact that many associated with feeling culturally and historically unanchored. Andrew Pham describes the great ambivalence he felt about his own identity in the memoir *Catfish and Mandala*: When he first traveled back to Vietnam, he thought his American self “was no thicker than his passport,” but he ended up discovering that it ran much deeper. He had internalized a racialized sense of inferiority, a sense that “beside these white Americans we look small, primitive, dark and weak,” and he wanted to feel more empowered by making contact again with his native land. But the feeling of empowerment proved elusive, and he ended up confronting the fact that his sense of selfhood would remain complex. He settles on the metaphor of the changeability of a chameleon, able to shift colors according to context, living in the present and renouncing any idea of an essential and unaltered self.

The younger Vietnamese Americans we interviewed told us stories of settling first in the poorest American neighborhoods, often filled with African American or Latino families, who they immediately learned to identify as members of an underclass that their parents did not want them to join. They learned what it meant to talk in a “ghetto” style, or identify with gangs, and these new lessons were intimately linked to the ways in which they came to process notions of race and ethnicity. So when spirit possession rituals verged into encounters with these new categories of difference, there was bound to be a volatile re-negotiation of ethnic identity.

Mediums in “Black Face”: Two Stories of Racial Transformation

The youngest member of one Orange County temple we attended is a lovely woman I will call Lina, who was initiated at the age of 12 after her hair suddenly turned kinky. Initiation to spirit mediumship is usually brought on by an affliction, a serious illness or an episode that we might describe as a nervous breakdown, or a spectacular form of misfortune. The affliction is a sign of *căn*—literally, a “spirit root” (Nguyen Thi Hien 2004), but sometimes also translated as a “destined aptitude” for the role of a spirit medium (Norton 2008). Other mediums we interviewed stressed the fact that spirit mediumship must come from the “heart soul” (*tam linh*),

but most people do not recognize this spirit calling, and only discover their real vocation through suffering.

In an ideal model of the possession experience, the spirit medium moves from an involuntary and uncontrolled state of confusion about her identity to a conscious and deliberate practice in which she assumes other identities and dances out the possibilities that they present to her, nourishing the fluidity and variability in her personality and turning it into a source of intuition and understanding.

Matted hair as a sign of “spirit selection” is common in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, where it has become the trademark of the Indian sadhu or “holy man.” Its psychological significance has been explored in Obeyesere’s *Medusa’s Hair* (1984), a well-known study of female spirit mediums in Sri Lanka who describe themselves as married to a “dark lord” who makes their hair kinky and unmanageable. This familiar way of marking a spirit medium’s calling was given a particular meaning in the California context. Lina’s grandmother told us the story of her conversion by describing her hair as “like the hair of Black Americans” (*nhu Mỹ đen*). With these words, the sign of spirit selection was also racialized and given a meaning quite specific to the experience of many new immigrants. Many Vietnamese parents told me that they worked hard to be able move out of “black neighborhoods” since they feared that their children would be “contaminated” by the rebellious unruliness of “ghetto kids” and lose the filial piety they saw as quintessentially Vietnamese. After she was initiated and began serving the spirits, Lina’s hair returned to normal, and is now smooth and black. Vietnamese spirits, in effect, were thanked for saving her from the dangerous possibility of racial cross-over.

This salvation came at the price of a heavy commitment: Lina was raised by her grandmother for a number of years, following a common custom in which a medium or even a temple may “adopt” a child who is seen to be in physical or mental danger. Once she becomes an adult, the child still owes a great debt to her savior, and Lina is now required not only to hold a yearly ceremony (as other initiated mediums must do), but also to take care of the temple after her grandmother dies. At the ceremonies we witnessed, Lina was accompanied by a friend her own age, who she was teaching the procedures to so that she, too, could eventually receive both the blessings and the responsibilities which come with serving Vietnamese spirits in the Đạo Mẫu tradition.

Perhaps the most dramatic story we heard about a spectacular transformation in appearance took place in front of the mirror in Orange County, where one woman’s ceremony was interrupted when the man responsible for the music went to the bathroom. This woman I will call

Kim. The music (performed live by a group of 4–6 musicians in Vietnam, but presented on CDs in the US), provides auditory guidance for the possession experience, and once a person is in the proper frame of mind, the movements that we might describe as dance movements are supposed to be automatic and even unconscious, as the “body moves on its own” and the medium simply allows it to do so. Each spirit has specific songs associated with them, and these songs must be played as soon as the medium has become possessed and indicates, with a hand signal, which spirit has come into her body when she sat under the red veil. Kim told us of her anger and confusion as she sat, uncertain what to do, in front of the altar. She felt completely abandoned by the man who was supposed to guide her throughout the possession experience, and she reported that when the red veil was removed, her face turned black with rage. Many others also said they saw it turn a charcoal color, as if smeared with ash. She yelled at the music player when he returned, and he simply decided to leave the scene.

Kim was very shaken by the experience, and had still not made peace with the musician who played the music at her ceremony, although he is one of the most respected and talented musicians within the community of those who serve Vietnamese spirits, and is also the owner of an important temple at his own house. She stared at her blackened face in the mirror on the altar and broke into tears, rushing off to the bathroom. There, she was finally able to scrub off the black color (perhaps caused by incense ash, since all spirits dance with high flaming incense sticks at an early stage in their incarnations).

But afterwards, when she described this experience to us in a cafe in Little Saigon, she saw it as a moment of purification, since the blackish color washed off to reveal smooth, white skin that was almost glowing. Kim had been a devotee of a rather extreme form of spirit mediumship, practiced in her native Nha Trang, which involved fierce dancing while being possessed by male military figures (especially the national hero Tran Hung Dao), and even acts of self-strangulation: A long scarf is placed around the neck and pulled very tight, until the eyes bulge out and the features are distorted and swollen. This creates a “red face” (which we were able to witness in videos of ceremonies that she lent us from her trips back to Vietnam). The redness is seen as a positive feature, since in the Đạo Mẫu tradition, red is the color of celestial power, the color of the Jade Emperor and his heavenly court. By becoming very red she was channeling some of that hyper-masculine power into her own body. From a more critical perspective, there can be no more vivid image of a woman

choked by patriarchal authority than the usually lovely, feminine spirit medium strangling herself with the scarf of male domination.

Kim was a troubled woman; she had been abandoned by her husband, escaped Vietnam under dangerous conditions, and then found that her husband was not even willing to sponsor her immigration to the US. She had managed to make her own way over in spite of these many obstacles, and was the owner of a small shop. She was an attractive woman, usually very carefully made-up and fashionably dressed. But she told us that the spirits had told her that she would not be able to find permanent happiness with any mortal man. Her participation in these rituals, therefore, could be interpreted as a kind of consolation for loss in her private life, in which an intense experience of possession by domineering male spirits allows her to act out some of the frustrations she may have felt. While possessed, women mediums are also given license to drink hard liquor, smoke, and swagger about—behaviors that are not normally considered “feminine.”

Spirit mediumship is explicitly presented as a way to preserve youth and beauty, and its older female participants praise its anti-aging benefits. As researchers, we were often told that our appearances had improved after we visited the temples, and with regular practice, could also prove advantageous if we needed assistance in finding a husband or improving the harmony of family life. Dancing while possessed by a younger woman’s spirit is said to teach the body gracefulness and flexibility. It is certainly true that it was amazing to see the strength and resilience of women in the seventies when they were performing as the spirits of impish young boys or mountain princesses.

When Kim’s face suddenly turned black in the middle of the ritual, she may also have been invoking the power of the “dark goddess” who is worshipped in Nha Trang and also in Hue in Central Vietnam, the famous black-faced Thiên Y A Na. Scholars agree that her name is a transformation of the Cham goddess Yang Ino Po Nagar (herself a version of Uma, wife of Shiva), who is buried in splendid 8th century towers in the center of Nha Trang, once the capital of a vast Hindu empire. We interviewed many of her current followers, who see her as the exiled daughter of the Jade Emperor incarnated in a Cham area and who was married to a Chinese prince. She had returned to teach her people the arts of agriculture, weaving, and ancestor worship so they would become more “civilized” (which seems to have been equated with “Sinicized”). When her husband came back to claim her and their children, she drowned him and sunk his ships, asserting her independence and autonomy as a Vietnamese heroine who refused foreign domination.



Figure 4. Statue of the black faced goddess Thien Y A Na in Nha Trang, Vietnam. (Courtesy of Janet Hoskins 2010).

On one level, her worshippers adhere to the widespread idea of the foreign as divine: “Great rulers and royal dynasties originate from outside the society, and are not *of* the people that they rule” (Matory 2009: 246).

In a pattern described as the “stranger king” mythical paradigm (Sahlins 1985), the god or goddess arrives, makes a pact with someone from the community, and then leaves when the pact is somehow violated, turning into wind, lightning, or some extra-social force of nature in anger. We see this in the story of Thiên Y A Na, with the “feminist” twist that it is the woman who is the cultural hero, bringing skills that she learned in the kingdom of her Chinese husband, but then killing him when he comes looking for her and invades her homeland.

What is the significance of Thiên Y A Na’s black face? Inside the Po Nagar towers, there is a statue that has a dark skinned doll-like ceramic face, marking this goddess as racially different from other Vietnamese goddesses. She has ten arms, which are hidden under gold robes, but what we can see today is apparently only the “shadow” of the original contents of the tower: According to local historians, there was once a golden statue there that was stolen by the Khmer in the 10th century, followed by a black stone sculpture whose head was stolen by the French and which is now on display in Paris at the Guimet Museum of Asian art—a veritable repository of treasures looted from French colonies. This poor goddess has been beheaded and displaced. It is quite possible that her suffering has contributed to both her efficacy and her perceived responsiveness to requests from worshippers, since it is believed that those who have suffered themselves will be more sympathetic. She stands at the center of a pantheon that also includes a woman born with a twisted leg, whose tragic inability to walk gives her insight into other women who feel trapped in destinies they did not choose.

The exceptional attractiveness of goddesses in contrast to the male spirits of renowned historical personages (“warrior-scholar-official spirits”) seems mysterious, since often little is known about the goddess’s human existences and her identities are somewhat fluid. The tales that circulate give them a marginal existence and untimely death that left their potential largely unrealized. Philip Taylor (2004) argues that their extraordinary responsiveness to human requests is rooted in the popular conception that they are forever trapped in their karmic manifestations and depend on human bequests to sustain themselves. On a more theoretical level, their vague identities give them polyvalent qualities, which allows individual worshippers to substitute fill in aspects of their personalities in order to bring them closer to their own concerns.

The black face on other spiritual entities is usually associated with rage, but on this gentle goddess it seems to evoke a sense of a darkly shrouded past; perhaps as the survivor of a conquered people (since Central Vietnam is now overwhelmingly Vietnamese, and the Cham are a

small minority), or as a Vietnamese version of what a Hindu goddess might look like. For Kim, it seems that her temporary black face was both a signal of distress and something expressed in a religious idiom that could have positive as well as negative connotations.

The San Francisco-based Vietnamese American journalist Andrew Lam (2006: 44) argues that in both Vietnam and in California, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them,” and the images that spirit mediums come to see in the mirror may help to reveal some of that trapped history. A suddenly dark face or kinky hair can be both threatening and empowering in various ways, but the racial and ethnic landscape is already transformed for diasporic worshippers, and any interpretations we make of their experiences have to take this into account.

In California mediumship communities (cộng đồng lên đồng), “serving the spirits” is seen as a practice that affirms a transnational Vietnamese identity without “playing the games of the government,” since stories of government suppression of the practice are often told. At the same time, members of this community travel back to Vietnam often to buy ritual paraphernalia (costumes, statues, altar decorations) and participate in rituals at particularly potent temples. Their transnational travels implicitly affirm the idea that Vietnamese people are empowered by mythic figures from their past, and can use these figures to both understand and model their own behavior. In Geertz’ famous formulation, the spirits are both “models of” and “models for” human personalities.

Other studies of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants at a refugee camp in France (Simon and Simon-Barouch 1973), and in the Bay Area (Fjelstad and Hien 2006), indicate that the mirror ritual is practiced intensively in situations where Vietnamese identity might be seen as endangered, or threatened by being engulfed by other forces. In these circumstances, staring into the mirror seems to be a way of searching for an affirmation of an earlier self, but it is also part of a more generalized ritual pattern of mimetic practice. Placing these practices in the wider context of Vietnamese diasporic religion (Hoskins 2011, 2014, 2015), the use of the mirror is tied to evocations of goddesses of various kinds who can come to the assistance of displaced people.

The mirror in front of the altar was used in all the ceremonies we saw in California (both in Orange County and in San Jose), and in all the ceremonies we saw in Hanoi, Northern Vietnam, and Saigon. But in the central region (Hue and Nha Trang), many people practice without a mirror in front of the altar. The medium puts the red veil over their head while standing and swaying from side to side, so “the goddess does not see you change in front of her.” When a spirit comes to “sit” on her disciple,

then the body becomes rigid for a moment, and the veil is removed. The music starts and the medium begins to move with the rhythms of the new personality that speaks to the spectators through her gestures.

Ceremonies that we saw in this area use other ways of “mirroring” both the spirit medium and the entities that possess her. The most striking of these was the use of paper effigies (giant paper dolls) that can represent the subject of the ritual herself (in some ritual contexts, such as the ritual to “cut ties of affection or attraction” to a deceased former lover), or the servants, soldiers, horses and elephants of the highest-ranking spirits. In the first case, a nearly life-sized paper doll is dressed in the clothing of the ritual subject, who generally has difficulty “finding love”. Her troubles are diagnosed as being caused by a ghost who continues to hold onto her affections. She can be formally divorced from this ghost, receive a formal decree, and a piece of cloth cut in two. She finds her final release when the paper image of herself is carried off to a great bonfire behind the temple where it, along with all the other colorful paper offerings, will be burned to send its spirit off to the heavens. In the second case, human disciples buy elaborate gifts for the spirit of a great hero (including boats, houses, and sets of paper clothes and hats) that are “signed” by the spirit medium to show that the spirit has accepted them and then they are burned. The finery that reaches the hero in his celestial home will be repaid with good fortune for his benefactor in his earthly life.

In an initiation ceremony, or the woman’s ceremony for good health and a happy family life that we saw in Hue, the senior spirit medium mirrors the actions that his (or her) younger disciple should copy explicitly. He also performs several ritual acts that will tie her to the temple for life: He “cuts” a lock of her hair from the crown of her head by singeing it off with incense, cools the smoking site with water, then “washes” her hair, finally reforming it into a bun or pony tail. He works with the female altar mistress to place the younger disciple between their bodies, pressing her as they stand on either side, so that the heat of their skin passes into her and she feels the same spirit energy that they do. At the very end, she starts to shake with the sensation of a spirit coming into her own body, and he guides her gently with his gaze (and occasionally with his arms) to assume the proper postures.

Mirroring is thus both the form of instruction in spirit mediumship and a way of presenting an objectified image of the mimetic process. The younger disciple imitates their master for much of the time, but eventually is supposed to move without consciously deciding to do so, because the spirit has come into them and is now in command of their body. The master medium stands in front of, and transfers the red veil from his head

to the disciple's, serving as a "living reflection": The disciple sees the spirit in the master's body first, then feels it in theirs. For Lina, she sees herself transformed as the costume is placed on her, and her facial traits suddenly turn more masculine and commanding, or more youthful and childlike.



Figure 5. Paper effigies imported from Vietnam, displayed at a ceremony in Huntington Beach and then burned to go up the goddess. (Courtesy of Janet Hoskins 2010).

Other scholars have argued that mirror rituals highlight ideas of performance and spectatorship, since they exist in a "temporary world that players can create, elaborate and then leave behind" (Tucker 2005: 173). For some theorists, the spectral images in the mirror are a shadow self ("the dangerous, destructive part of the psyche"), a way of "confronting the specter of suicide," a theme noted in an analysis of American college students playfully telling ghost stories in front of mirrors lit by candlelight. Tucker sees the ghosts in the college dorm bathrooms as ways of briefly descending to the realm of the dead so "they can move on with lives, strengthened by a richer perception of life's boundaries" (2005: 197).

The ceremonies in Vietnamese garages and backyard temples draw on a very different cultural repertoire than the ritualized games played by college students, but in both cases the participants could be said to exploring “racial tensions that they are struggling to understand” (2005: 198). The usual explanation of the appeal of these rituals is that the “survival of playfully imagined danger has given them a pathway towards the future” (2005: 197). Folklorists who have collected stories about ghosts in mirrors argue that by telling them, the “college students undergo a quasi-initiatory experience that facilitates their development of a more complex sense of self” (Tucker 2005: 468). They also play with complex transformations of sexual and racial identity, as demonstrated by Michael Jackson’s song, *Man in the Mirror*, a reflective piece often played at memorials of his death.

Spirit Possession and Gender-Bending, Activating a Fluid Identity

What happens in the practice of spirit possession is that the spirit medium herself performs or embodies a number of different spirits: fierce generals, dignified ladies, flirtatious princesses, and impish children. As she does so, she develops her own reflexive consciousness, and her awareness of multiple perspectives. She not only embodies the spirits in the moment of performance, as she dances to the *chau van* music, but also in her daily life as she becomes attuned to other voices and other perspectives. She comes to perceive them at other times as well: when she is preparing food, getting dressed, driving on the 405, or speaking to her children. They become invisible presences who hover around her and offer her advice, support, understanding and empathy. By looking at her own life from their perspectives, she may come to understand her aloof husband or rebellious son a bit better.

Looking in the mirror, she sees her own face transformed into the face of another. She is moved by that vision, and often a bit unnerved, but it becomes empowering when she feels that she has gained a certain control over these multiple perspectives. The early stages of a spirit medium’s calling resemble mental illness—the other voices are disembodied, they confuse her, she cannot put them in order or sort out the different messages they send. But as she gains mastery of her craft and comes to perform better, she realizes which spirits each of these different messages must be coming from, and she moves from moments of involuntary trance or disassociation to a deliberate transformation of her own personality to fuse it with that of one of the spirits.

The spirit medium does not travel up to heaven to witness the world of these celestial beings like the shaman does. Instead, she invites them into her own body. She allows them a place within her where they breathe through her breath, and shake with the same rhythms as her stomping feet. It is the body, not the sky that is the ground of spirit mediumship.

Mimesis has been discussed by Taussig as the capacity “to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (1993: xiii). For migrants who are far from their homeland, it is a way of taking spirits indigenous to Vietnam and inviting them into their bodies and into their consciousness, so that these spirits come to share their experiences, and offer their own thoughts about how to interpret them. The reflection that the spirit medium sees is both her and not her: It uses the landscape of her own features to highlight a different personality, a new set of gestures and facial expressions which interpret her physical form from a new perspective.

“I looked into my own eyes and saw someone else there,” is something that the spirit mediums say. “I stood up and felt a strength I had never had before, a youthfulness and an agility that I thought I had lost.” A man may feel that he has suddenly become light and graceful, moving with a smooth, feminine energy that flows through his body and caresses his skin. A woman may feel that she is infused with a new sense of power and accomplishment. Vietnamese anthropologist Pham Quynh Phuong argues that professional women in Hanoi (including college teachers) are drawn to the practice because they bump into the “glass ceiling” that prevents even accomplished women from reaching the highest ranks of most professions (Phuong 2009).

Spirit possession is an experience of fluidity in identity, of being drawn into moving as another being would move and feeling as another being might feel.

Recent theorists (Levitt 2008) have argued that second generation migrants are often working with multiple identities at the same time, a process which promotes flexibility and may have many advantages, but which can also prove confusing. The appeal of spirit possession is that it offers an immediate, intense experience of “being Vietnamese,” which can serve as an anchor for an identity that seems in danger of becoming unmoored.

Gender shifts in mirror images can represent what Judith Butler calls “de-formity” and a process of re-signification that can undermine gender roles. Summoning spectral lovers breaks boundaries of safe and acceptable

behavior, and cross-dressing and primping can draw social censure. The images that some condemn as “unreal” may seem more intensely real than everyday objects. Evanescent images of phantom lovers, frightening warriors, and the victims of injustice (the Hue spirit woman born with only one leg) evoke the thrill of pushing boundaries.

Spirit mediums are associated with unconventional, even transgressive forms of sexuality. In Vietnam, many of the most famous male mediums are openly gay. In California, congregations made up largely of older women found that most male mediums remained unmarried, something “typical” of those who served the gods, but the women did not seem to disapprove. When I took a young unmarried male graduate student with me to a ceremony, our 90-year-old grandmotherly guide insisted that she wanted to meet his mother to urge him to begin to practice himself. Barley Norton, an ethnomusicologist who studied Hanoi mediums and received sexual advances from some of them, notes that since it is supposedly the spirit who chose the mediums, “to suggest that the motivation for men to become mediums is dominated by a homoerotic drive would undermine spiritual efficacy, and it would also undermine the existence of the minority of male mediums who do not engage in homosexual activity” (2003: 72).

Mediumship ceremonies provide a space for both men and women to defy conventional gender roles. Women can dance like fierce warriors, miming an aggressive assertiveness that they could not display in their daily lives, even if most female mediums are known to be “hot-tempered” and “sharp tongued.” Men can move as a softly and gracefully as the imperial princesses, and the more effeminate they appear on the ritual stage, the more successful their ceremonies are supposed to be. Many male mediums make their livings running temples, while most female mediums are grandmothers and businesswomen who have a more private practice. The gender fluidity and flexibility played out in front of the altar during spirit possession also affects the daily lives of those who serve the spirits, but does not necessarily determine sexual orientation.

Mirrors between the Generations: Motivations and Ambivalence

When I was young I married, I had a child, and then my husband left and my child died. I was sick all the time, confined to my bed. And at night I couldn't sleep. I didn't yet know about serving the spirits, about getting to know them. Instead, I would lie in bed and see dozens of heads flying in front of me, swooping down to cover my face and stop me from breathing.

It was the ghosts of my child and my husband, coming in another body to teach me. They came with the bodies of generals and princes from imperial times. I had to learn to serve them, to let them come into me at the right time.... I have now served the spirits for over half a century, and now finally my daughter has come to join me in the practice.

—Older woman born in Nha Trang, Vietnam

When I decided to become a medium, my mother cried and could not understand. She refused to come to my ceremonies for many years. Now we have finally made peace, because she can see that it has helped me. But she thought that I was cursed, that I would never marry. She wanted me to be a Catholic, but I followed the way of my grandmother.

—Male medium born in Saigon, now in California

Spirit mediumship appears to bridge generations; it calls younger descendants back to the ways of their ancestors, but the pathway of reconciliation is often fraught with troubles.

For younger migrants born in Vietnam but growing up in California, these spirited encounters are appealing because they involve drama, bodily movement, and altered states of consciousness. For some of their parents, dabbling in this kind of activity is suspect; it can be dangerous and, if mismanaged, can threaten one's wellbeing. They are aware that these practices were condemned as superstitious and backward by the Hanoi government, although for anti-Hanoi refugees this official condemnation can be part of their appeal since the rituals are associated with struggles for individual freedom. Younger, inexperienced mediums often crave an intense, uncontrolled form of possession trance, which older mediums may see as exaggerated and inappropriate. For the ritual masters, learning to practice spirit possession is learning to control yourself, to enter into each incarnation with skill and deliberation, and to recognize that the spirits are best served with dignity and decorum, not flailing limbs and rolling eyes.

Vietnamese spirit possession ceremonies look, to an outsider, more like lively folk dance sequences than like the spasmodic movements associated with African diasporic spirit cults. They emphasize a stage of self-recognition and self-control, which I argue is tied to the use of the mirror, providing a moment of self-contemplation and self-recognition as part of the process of becoming a "servant of the gods" (*lam tôi ngài*). The medium is not simply lost in an involuntary series of movements, but comes to see herself moving under the influence of spirits that she considers her masters, teachers, and "lords" (*ngài*). Even the youngest and most impish of the spirits, the "Youngest Prince" Cậu Bé, is seen as "a child in heaven," and a "spiritual master" to his youthful devotees on earth.

The mirror is a ritual prop that focuses the practice on a reflective gaze. Devotees may bring small cosmetic mirrors and combs to the goddess as offerings, since they say that “the goddess likes them”. These trinkets are also often distributed by the princess spirits to spectators at a possession ceremony, as are scarves, earrings, and small pieces of costume jewelry. The medium is elaborately dressed for the ceremony, and she generously shares bits of her costume with those who serve and observe her. But she needs to “see herself” as the spirit in order to learn from the spirit: The mirror actualizes an identification that has to be visually experienced in order to be “real.”

Tensions that surround visual efficacy are highlighted in the many uses to which a mirror can be put: It can be a tool for introspection and self-cultivation, but also for vanity and self-absorption. On altars to the mother goddess, the mirror usually sits at the center, and devotees may explain its presence there as representing the “brightness” (*quang*) or glow of the goddess. At the same time, it is often at a height where those making offerings can see their own reflections, encouraging them to identify with the goddess, or to see an image of themselves on the altar. In the esoteric temple of Tam Tong Mieu (“The Three Great Traditions”) in Saigon, a mirror placed above the level of the viewing disciples is said to represent the primal void from which the Mother Goddess emerged to create humanity.

Imitation lies, of course, at the heart of pedagogy, as students and disciples are trained to mirror the speech and body postures of their masters, and also to come to identify with these words and gestures and make them their own. Mimesis is, as Taussig, says, both a copying and a “palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and perceived” (1993: 21). While mimesis depends on alterity, the existence of an Other, it also comments on it. Seeing one’s own ethnic group, material objects and personal traits in the images produced by others is the basis of allegory and quotation.

Studies of spirit possession can be divided into “instrumental” theories that emphasize the politics of possession as a result of “relative deprivation” and marginalization (Lewis 1971), and “expressive” theories others that pay more attention to sensory expression and performance (Boddy 1994). For instrumentalists, the pursuit of ecstatic states is divided into central possession cults, where possession involves spirits who uphold the moral order (ancestors, culture heroes) and tend to speak through men, and peripheral cults, where spirits are more amoral and unpredictable, and tend to speak through women. Lewis’ model treated possession itself as an affliction, a form of social or personal pathology, which was used

strategically by the oppressed to gain attention and struggle for social justice.

Recently, several studies have challenged this model (Boddy 1994; Hien 2003; Phuong 2009) by arguing that the supposedly marginalized women who practice as mediums are also accessing images of power that earn them respect in the outside world. Others have challenged the category of spirit possession by trying to locate its messages more deeply within a locally meaningful world, showing the consequences of beliefs in a self that is permeable from without on everyday issues of personhood and identity. “Technologies of modernity,” such as cameras and video recorders, can call up spectral presences and project them in front of us in the form of spectacle, so Vietnamese mediums who use the technology of the body to re-create an ancestral presence may no longer seem as strange as they once did.

For performance theorists, spirit possession is a creative act, an aesthetic reaction to the inadequacies of the world. The French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty wrote: “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings” (Merleau-Ponty 1964). It could also be said that it is by lending her body to the world that the spirit medium crosses a psychic ocean to unite her family and its members with the power of distant Vietnamese ancestors.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on fieldwork in both California and Vietnam from 2008–11, sponsored by the National Science Foundation, Grant # 0752511 *"Ethnic Resilience" and Indigenous Religion: A Transnational Perspective on Vietnamese Immigrant Congregations in California*. Thien-Huong Ninh shared all of the fieldwork and I am very grateful to her for her many insights into Vietnamese language, culture and social interactions. I am also grateful to Karen Fjelstad and Alison Truitt for providing me with helpful feedback on this paper, and to participants at the "Beyond Borders: Alternative Voices and Histories of the Vietnamese Diaspora" conference at the University of Washington, Seattle, on March 4–5, 2010.

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