



Yin Illness

Its Diagnosis and Healing within *Lên Đồng* (Spirit Possession) Rituals of the Việt

This paper looks at a small dimension of the vast belief system of the Việt by exploring yin illness (*bệnh âm*) and a resort of its healing by examining an aspect of *lên đồng* ritual as therapy. The spiritual healing of *lên đồng* is seen as the good work of spirit mediums who save themselves, their families, and their patients from personal suffering and yin illness. Yin illness can be caused by a variety of cultural patterns of meaning such as sacrilege, ghost possession, or mediumship. Analyzing the causes and the cures of the yin illness, this article implies the deep sense of obligation many Việt people feel toward tending their dead and ancestors and serving the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion (Đạo Mẫu). Thus, the illness and healing are set within relationships between the living and the dead and between the adherents and the spirits, and are embodied in the folk belief system of the Việt.

KEYWORDS: Spirit possession ritual—yin and yang illness—healing—exorcism

THIS ARTICLE describes yin illness (*bệnh âm*), an affliction suffered by a number of Việt people who seek to be healed through *lên đồng* (spirit possession) rituals. I consider in particular the work of one spirit medium, Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Nga (hereafter referred to as Sister Nga). The yin illness is understood within a cultural milieu whereby patients cause their symptoms by committing acts of sacrilege toward spirits and the inappropriate veneration of ancestors and the dead, those destined to be mediums, or possession by the deceased (ghosts) including the war dead. The article shows how yin illness is interpreted in Sister Nga's own understanding of her calling to the spiritual order and her own work as a master medium. My analysis relies on her life story and my fieldwork data on the yin illness and healing in the past few years in Hung Yên province, thirty kilometers southeast of Hanoi.

EXAMPLES OF YIN ILLNESS

In the Việt conception of health, there are two kinds of illness—yin (*âm*) and yang (*dương*). Yin and yang are philosophical and cultural concepts that refer to primordial or natural binary oppositions. They also refer to certain kinds of illness: A yin illness is caused by supernatural forces and a yang illness is caused by physical or bodily disorders or viruses. Doctors of Western medicine diagnose the causes of yang illness, whereas diviners or mediums diagnose yin illness. This is a folk classification, similar to the dichotomy of “natural” and “supernatural” in Western discourse or, in LADERMAN's work, “usual” and “unusual” sickness (1991, 15). In Việt culture, the indications of yin illness vary. It can be an unexplainable change in character—insanity, the knotting of the hair, or what is known as a “false illness” (*ốm giả vờ*) where the patient is not really ill but does not feel well. This symptom lasts for a period of time and it is hard to diagnose. The classification fundamentally includes anything said to be caused by a supernatural force that can be cured only through a ritual.

There are two main themes in the literature on shamanism and mediumship. One concerns the psychological states of shamans and mediums themselves and the other the therapeutic value of ritual healing (ATKINSON 1992, 314). In medical anthropology in recent decades, scholars have studied specific illnesses as culturally unique patterns of meaning that are superimposed on biomedical diseases and other afflictions. In his influential work on patients and healers in Taiwan, KLEINMAN,

for example, writes, “Illness can only be understood in a specific context of norms, symbolic meanings, and social interaction” (1980, 77). This article is an attempt to understand the cultural perspectives of illness and healing within *lên đồng* rituals. It will demonstrate how yin illness is diagnosed and cured by a master medium, Sister Nga, through her creative mythical world (DOW 1986). This world is understood and accepted by both the medium and her patient and can be used to interpret the patient’s condition. The healer persuades the patient to accept this definition, and attaches the patient’s emotions to appropriate transactional symbols so that the patient can effect the transaction. Examining the cultural perspectives of ghost possession and exorcising, the article will explore the framework in which there are deep relationships between the living and the dead and the adherents of the Mother Goddess religion and their spirits. The diagnosis and healing occur in the context of belief systems that expect the living to have felicitous rituals dedicated to the dead and serve the spirits in order to be protected. Doing so brings about healing.

LÊN ĐỒNG RITUAL AS HEALING

Lên đồng spirit possession is the main practice of the Mother Goddess religion of the Việt, in which the word *lên* means “to rise” and *đồng* “might simply mean a possessed medium, that is a medium for some spirit or deity to enter him or her” (NGUYỄN Khắc Khâm 1983b, 27–28). *Lên đồng*, like spirit possession rituals elsewhere, is a complex religious and cultural performance that, as one scholar writes, causes “the supernatural” to be “accomplished through theatrical means and dramatic interactions” (CLAUS 1997, 193). More importantly, perhaps, *lên đồng* also enacts, in deliberate and intense ways, the Mother Goddess belief system and Việt culture and history. The spirit mediums perform the *lên đồng* ritual, making the spirits’ journeys into the here and now because they view it as their bodies being possessed; and they expect their practice to bring them worldly and spiritual benefits and healing. They perform this practice to cure illness, to enhance well-being, and to bring prosperity for themselves and for their clients. Mediums practice spirit possession first of all for spiritual healing, which in Western accounts of similar practices elsewhere in the world, is viewed as curative medical or psychiatric treatment (KLEINMAN 1980; LEWIS 1971). *Lên đồng* spirit possession can be seen as a mode of therapy, bringing to its performers and audience a state of happiness as well an expectation of healing. The mediums’ role as healers is “the most important,” as NGUYỄN Khắc Khâm states (1983a, 30). They engage in therapy in the broadest sense insofar as the central point of *lên đồng* spirit possession, in fact, is to “pray for good health, talent, and auspiciousness” (*cầu sức khỏe, cầu tài, cầu lộc*).

The Mother Goddess religion and *lên đồng* ritual meet a variety of people’s needs including the need to make requests and wishes for their children and other family members, and to “serve” the spirits who reside in the pantheon, speeding

their revival and popularity among various social strata, farmers, traders, officers, doctors, actors, the rich, and the poor in the post-Renovation era (*Đổi Mới*). The pantheon of the Mother Goddess religion gathers a large range of spirits that function to either assist good business or bestow healing power. However, this article emphasizes the healing and therapy dimensions relevant to the folk concept of yin disease.

LÊN Đ - NG'S RECENT HISTORY

Even though *lên đồng* is part of the spiritual life of adherents of the Mother Goddess religion, the ritual underwent restrictions imposed by the atheist government and then became popular in post-Renovation Vietnam. In Vietnam, the negative official attitude toward spirit mediumship and other folk practices and rituals has been codified in a series of legal documents on these practices. From 1946, when the first constitution affirmed “freedom of belief” (*tự do tín ngưỡng*), until Renovation in 1986, there was official opposition to religion, including a policy of atheism and an anti-superstition campaign. Furthermore, ritual practitioners and spirit mediums were described by the media as “liars and swindlers,” and as “uneducated, ignorant people” (NORTON 2000, 76). All rituals and practices that involved supernatural forces to “[deal] with human agonies and anxieties” were abandoned (ENDRES 2006, 77). Norton and Malarney have discussed the impact of these official policies on the mediums and other religious specialists. There were also a number of regulations restricting religious and folk cultural practices by reducing the scale of their activities and limiting the numbers of their adherents (NORTON 2000; MALARNEY 2002). However, these measures did not destroy religion or religious devotion among the Việt, and these beliefs have survived in various forms. As Norton has observed, they performed quietly with no music and with limited offerings (NORTON 2000). They practiced in secret at night out of the public and official gaze. Thus, their rituals were less noticeable to the authorities, and they performed when “policemen went to sleep,” as one of my informants commented.

Since the 1980s when the state launched the reforms to move toward a market economy, Vietnam has witnessed the relaxation of restrictions and the development of a religious consciousness in the form of traditional folk practices, including village festivals, local and family religious rituals, ceremonies, and folk musical and performing arts. Among the diverse folk traditions, *lên đồng* has become a “widely-accepted, widespread, and very popular practice” (PHAN Đăng Nhật and SALEMINK 2004, 6). However, when *Đổi Mới* began, the state still exercised tight control over groups of Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and folk practitioners. A number of prominent folk practitioners and individuals from various institutionalized religions were arrested. The tremendous change in folk rituals and practices actually occurred when the veneration of spirits was granted equal rights with the worship of historical figures in the newly issued ordinance on folk beliefs and

religion. A document pertaining to this was passed by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly on 18 June 2004 and took effect in mid-November. This document, Item 1 of Article 3, recognizes folk belief activities, including ancestor worship, the commemoration of historical figures, and the veneration of spirits.¹ By observing people who go to worship at the Mother Goddess temples, Salemink reaffirms the depth and breadth of the belief in spirit possession after the “decades-long domination of a secular, explicitly atheist ideology” (PHAN Đăng Nhật and SALEMINK 2004, II; NGUYỄN 2007).

MASTER MEDIUMS (*ĐÔNG THÁY*)

Mediums who are blessed by the spirits with considerable spiritual skills can become master mediums. In fact, one need not be a master medium to be a healer. Every medium can heal and, at the very least, they can heal themselves. The initiation rituals [when a person is initiated to be a medium], obligatory rituals [when spirit mediums are obligated to perform rituals once or twice a year], and occasional rituals [when they sometimes perform on a certain occasion relevant to a spirits' day or for certain purposes] are the means by which they heal or give therapy to themselves as well as participant-believers. The initiation ritual is to heal the prospective mediums themselves. As young mediums see it, this first healing strengthens them, and strengthens their faith in the mythic world that they create for themselves (or their masters create for them) and in the rituals they perform.

Master mediums have powerful connections to their spirits and are experienced and knowledgeable ritual performers (LARSSON and ENDRES 2006). Depending on the spirits who work with them, master mediums can divine, exorcise, heal illness, and initiate other mediums, and they will be paid for these services. They are given a sum of money for preparing the ritual and other expenses. The most important compensation is the gratitude of their initiated novices. The young mediums gather around their masters and serve as assistants whenever the masters perform rituals. Master mediums frequently perform *lên đồng* for their own spirits, saying that they will feel ill for no otherwise explicable reason if they do not regularly “sit” for the incarnating spirits by performing *lên đồng*. The big difference between the master mediums and the novices is in their spiritual power and their experiences in healing and initiation rituals.

The physical, emotional, and economic demands of mediumship are one reason why they resist the calling of the spirits. Accepting a divine calling requires a total life commitment, and mediums who break their relationship with their spirits risk illness and serious misfortune, afflicting both themselves and their families. The mediums maintain shrines to their spirits which they keep clean and replenish with fresh offerings, purify their bodies before performing *lên đồng*, are willing to sponsor expensive periodic rituals for the benefit of their own spirits, and happily make pilgrimages to sacred sites and famous temples to secure the spirits' favor and thereby enhance their own powers.

The following is a typical example of yin illness, found in the reported experience of one of my high school classmates, who is now a project manager of an import/export technology company in Vietnam. During his life, he suffered three times from insanity; the first time was when he was studying in Russia. He had had an aunt who died young, and having been told about her often, he had come to venerate her. She became sacred to him, loved him very much, and was his spiritual helper. Even when he was living abroad, he had an altar with an incense bowl dedicated to her in which he burned a great deal of incense. Once, when the front of the bowl became full with the butts of incense sticks, he just swiveled it around. He disregarded an important custom, according to which people dealing with a sacred thing or place must ask permission from spirits by lighting incense and praying before they act.

The simplest way to ask a spirit's permission is to light three incense sticks, put them on an incense bowl on the altar, and then remaining with hands clasped together, murmur a prayer asking the spirit that the altar be dedicated to whatever it is that you want to do. In this case, my classmate should have done just that and asked his dead aunt, who was said to be very sacred, to become his spiritual helper. In the larger context, when the Việt build a house, they always make a ritual dedicating it to the spirit of the land on which the house is located. They also have a ritual performed when they have a new altar installed or move a tomb from an "inauspicious lot of land" to an "auspicious" one on the advice of a geomancer. In *lên đồng*, mediums always cast coins to ask the spirits' permission to do something. They do this on a daily basis and also during their rituals. When they throw the coins, if the two coins are heads down, it is a sign that the spirits accept their requests. If one is up and one down the spirits are said to "laugh," which means everything's okay. If two are up, it is a sign that the spirits do not accept the request and they have to throw the two coins over again. Many times, the two coins are up and the mediums are disappointed that things are not expected to go well.

In my classmate's case, he had moved the incense bowl without asking permission. His aunt, who appeared to him in a dream, punished him by saying that he would not eat for three days and would only drink water, and that eventually he would lose his wealth, because he had not asked her for permission. Upon awakening he remained in bed and could not speak or eat for three days and only drank water. A week later, the police came to his house to confiscate his money and jewelry, because he was involved in currency exchange on the black market.

Illness struck him a second time when he suddenly went insane back in Vietnam visiting his parents on a summer holiday. He began to refer to himself by the name of his family's ancestor and scolded his parents and relatives for not venerating that ancestor properly and not having a proper altar and incense bowls. His parents invited a religious master to come over to perform a ritual and to place a new altar and incense bowls in the house. Following this, he was cured of his insanity immediately.

My classmate again became insane in 1998 when he had a large house built. After moving in, he went insane again, uncontrollably scolding people around him and speaking to them harshly. His family again called in a religious specialist, who performed a ritual to placate the spirits, and told them that the reason he had gone insane was that although he could afford to build a big house, he had not held the proper rituals to dedicate his house to the spirits of the land on which it was built, and as a result, these spirits had punished him. After the rituals, his insanity disappeared and he went on with his work as usual.

He and his family acknowledged all along that his repeated insanity was a case of yin illness, caused by supernatural powers and curable only through the performance of rites of dedication to spirits, and not by taking him to a hospital. This kind of yin illness can be cured by having a ritual performed by either a highly competent master or a medium. My classmate was treated with rituals performed by Mr. Chi, who lives in a neighboring village. Mr. Chi practices divination and performs different rituals, including *lên đồng*, at the request of his clients. The rituals aim to resolve the illness by honoring spirits who are divined to be the cause. If these rituals do not help, a patient may have an initiation ritual to be transformed into a medium. When I told Sister Nga of my friend's symptoms, she explained to me that people who have symptoms of hysteria should be initiated into a spiritual order or have a healing ritual in order to cool them down (*mát mẽ*) and make them less hot-tempered. Only after such rituals would their psychological state improve permanently. Their insanity would then leave them forever, and life would be smoother.

The yin illness can be understood as a “mythic model” in the sense meant by Dow who uses the word “mythic” to “imply that there are cultural experiential truths in this model” and the truths “may be more salient than scientific truths because they represent solutions to personal human problems” (DOW 1986, 59). The mythic model of a yin illness, including its causes and cures, is the means by which Việt diviners and master mediums reassure themselves and their clients. Healing is based on a restructuring of a disorder, modeled in a mythic world, and so depends on the explanatory model that mediums use to diagnose the cause of the illness and cure the illness with rituals. Such models are shaped by folk beliefs in supernatural causes and the effectiveness of magical healing. Mediums import these beliefs into their practice. Thus, the mythic model is more or less a well-known cultural pattern for a layperson or a medium. The forms of a mythic world are different in every society. In Burma, persistent crying of children is dealt with as a problem of ghosts and in Mesoamerica, as a problem with night witches (DOW 1986, 59–60). Among the Tày of Vietnam, people are sick or have health problems because their souls have left their bodies. If the souls come back, they recover from the sickness; if not, they will die (NGUYỄN Thị Hiền 1998). As mentioned before, for the Việt the mythic world for the causes of yin illness includes the destiny to be a medium, sacrilege, the inappropriate veneration of ancestors, placing houses or cattle sheds on graves, or possession by the dead.

The typical Việt explanation of a yin illness results from sinning against one's ancestors or otherwise offending the dead. The ways that one can offend an ancestor are infinite. If a stream flows directly into an ancestor's tomb, then the tomb is not quiet and the ancestor cannot rest. If an individual's house is located over old tombs or in a place where restless ghosts wander, he or she may be similarly troubled. In other cases, the patients are possessed by ghosts that include the war dead. People who do not properly venerate their ancestors or place their ancestors' tombs in the proper location will bring misfortune upon themselves and their families. If someone does not worship their ancestors properly, he/she can be "punished" by them. That happened to my brother when he did not let his wife install the ancestor's altar in his house. He was aware of his behavior only when his older brother, who had died in the war, possessed his wife during the soul ritual for my mother three days after her death. The older brother said through his wife that the younger brother did not respect the ancestors by worshipping them and that he had been assisted by the dead brother, but that he did not recognize this help. He would become seriously ill and then he would understand the need to venerate his brother. The day after that ritual, the younger brother was very ill with a high temperature. He was in Bạch Mai hospital in Hanoi for two weeks, but the doctors could not understand what had happened to him. During his time in hospital, a woman who was taking care of her mother there pointed to him in a trance, saying that the brother was being punished by spirits (*thần*) and that the doctors would not diagnose any illness. Being disappointed with the unclear diagnosis and ineffective treatment, he returned home; a relative who was a doctor saw his hospital file and gave him a prescription and his illness was over a couple of days later. After this crisis, when I went to see him I saw a new altar in his house, and he also asked me to lend him a book on Vietnamese rituals and beliefs to read. Only after a series of failed Western treatments and spirit possession did my brother accept the terms of a mythical world where the untended dead could cause his yin illness.

To diagnose a yin illness, victims need to see a religious master or a diviner who can identify the cause and prescribe a ritual to correct the problem. This ritual, a kind of cultural healing, may itself be practiced in a variety of ways, one of which involves master mediums performing a healing ritual at the same time as an initiation ritual for their patients. The distinction between being "chosen by spirits" and being possessed by a ghost/dead person is that the chosen people are called to the spiritual order within the Mother Goddess religion and initiated to be spirit mediums. The ghost-possessed must undergo an exorcizing ritual and then eventually be ordained into the spirit mediums that sit for "spirits to sit upon" and thus be protected by the spirits.

Many mediums were originally the patients of other mediums and, in general, mediums see themselves as afflicted, in a sense, by spiritually generated illnesses, sometimes referred to as a yin illness. This illness is seen as indicative of being destined to be a medium. Patients may have terrible dreams of meeting with a spirit,

seeing a snake, a leech, or traveling to an invisible world. They may have knotted hair (*kết tóc*), their hair becoming tangled and dirty for no apparent reason. They may become hysterical and exhibit symptoms of “insanity” (*điên*), wandering around aimlessly, talking nonsense, and claiming to be spirits. As the victims of the yin illness they have obligations to the spirits. Mediums say that their happiness comes from serving the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion and they do so in many ways. They allow the spirits to possess them or, as they say, install themselves as the seat for spirits to sit upon (*bắc ghế cho các ngài ngự*) (NGUYỄN 2006). They must perform the *lên đồng* rituals at least twice a year, ideally at the beginning and the end of a lunar year. Great master mediums perform the rituals throughout the year for their own sake and also at the request of clients and patients.

Sister Nga provided me with compelling information about her vocation as a master medium to which she had devoted her life. “If I stopped practicing *lên đồng* rituals,” she said, “I would become the victim of a “false illness,” causing loss of appetite. I would drink only water and eat some fruit.” She was also afflicted with knotted hair. She described her yin illness and her transformation from patient to medium as follows:

Suddenly, I was ill, very ill. My hair was matted and uncombed, but I could not untangle it. I went to a hospital, but I was not cured. I took various Western medicines, but I didn’t recover. At that time people were not as religious as they are nowadays. My parents-in-law did not believe in magico-religious healing, and my husband’s family was very poor. Fortunately, my biological mother came to see me, and she took me to a prophet and it turned out that I had a burdensome spirit [in other words, was destined to become a medium]. The prophet predicted that if I did not go to a spirit medium for an initiation, I would die in water, in a river. He told me that I was punished by spirits (*bị hành*), but I didn’t understand what that meant at that time. Anyway, my mother borrowed money for sponsoring the initiation. After the ritual, I felt much better; I had a good appetite, slept well, and felt very happy. (NGUYỄN Thị Nga 1998)

EXORCISING POWER

Among about seventy spirits in the pantheon of the Mother Goddess religion,² Trần Hưng Đạo, the general who fought against Mongol invaders in the late thirteenth century, comes to the Mother Goddess pantheon as a protector and a guardian. During the festival dedicated to his temples in Hải Dương and Nam Định provinces, people crowd in the prohibition hall of the temples to ask for an amulet on which his seal, a symbol of his power, is printed. The amulet is hung on the wall of houses to protect people from devils and malevolent spirits. The incarnation of Trần Hưng Đạo and the petition to him is the most powerful method of treatment when mediums practice healing patients and exorcise ghosts (*trừ tà*). There is even a separate possession cult of Trần Hưng Đạo for exorcizing and healing. My writing will not go into depth regarding exorcising specialists

who are Trần Hưng Đạo's followers, and exorcise protected amulets and "bloody marks" (*cắt dấu máu*) (PHAM Quỳnh Phương 1998, 2005, and 2006).

The folk engage the saint Trần Hưng Đạo to have the exorcising power that comes from his life stories and his tremendous merits to people, including legendary ones. Before becoming a general, he was a Taoist disciple, as were a number of other royal family members when Taoism was dominant in the thirteenth century (NGÔ Đức Thịnh, 1996). These Taoists practice magic and at the same time use herbs to heal.³ According to a number of legends, during his lifetime, his magical abilities included vanquishing an undefeatable enemy. He is identified with Kuanwu, the Lord of War, who is extraordinarily brave and can repress enemies and malevolent forces. Sometimes he is identified with a very powerful and celestial Taoist who can exercise ascendancy over demons and malevolent spirits. Thus, in folk belief he is the most powerful saint who can protect people from ghosts and exorcise the possessed by having an amulet with his seal (*dấu*)⁴ and asking him for empowerment.

SISTER NGA AND HER CLIENTS: SUFFERING IN LIFE

Sister Nga dramatizes her mythic world with prayers and petitions to Saint Trần Hưng Đạo for being bestowed with his "seal" and healing power. She can create a mythical world with her experiences and her clients' stories, and she can use this model to attract and stimulate her clients. Sister Nga tells her clients stories of ghost possession and exorcisms in order to bring the possessed back to their normally social life. The following case illustrates how Sister Nga makes a diagnosis and reassures Mrs. May, a patient, to accept the diagnosis using well-known attributes of Việt folk belief. This involves the possession of a brother of Mrs. May's husband. In the dialogue between the medium and the patient, the brother utters that his family made the anniversary of his death not on the day he died, but on the day of the announcement of his death (*ngày báo tử*).

One day in 2000, I arranged a meeting between Sister Nga and Mrs. May, an insane woman in my apartment. Mrs. May has been insane since 1995 and has not been cured by Western medicine even though she saw some physicians in hospitals in Hanoi. She and her children moved from a village in the center of Vietnam to Hanoi to be with her husband who was a worker at a construction company. Mrs. May was a hard-working peasant who took care of her four children and one hectare rice paddy while her husband was working in Iran. Her problem became worse when there was a rumor that her husband had a mistress in Hanoi. The other suffering that was deeply embedded inside her was the wrong date of the anniversary of the death of her husband's brother.

When Mrs. May arrived at my apartment, she and Sister Nga started talking. Sister Nga said if Mrs. May came to her shrine, she would be able to tell what had caused her insanity and cure her by making a ritual. Sister Nga was very sure that the symptoms of Sister May's insanity, such as calling herself the Buddha or by the

name of a dead family member, were typical of a yin illness that she had cured in other patients. She recalled some stories for Mrs. May, telling her that some years before she had cured a haunted man. He had been brought to her shrine and during her exorcism ritual the ghost (in the man at that moment) revealed that he was the ghost of a hungry elder from Hải Phòng province. The ghost was hungry because his family did not offer food to him. The elder had been incarnated in the sick man in order to be fed. After the ritual, the haunted man ate up a whole chicken.

She continued by telling Mrs. May that one month before, one girl—a cake vendor at a former market close to her home, in Văn Giang district, Hưng Yên province—was haunted by a dead boy. When the girl was brought to her shrine, she exorcised the ghost (which was in the girl at that time), who revealed himself to be a boy who had drowned at a pond on the road the girl used to go to the market. This boy haunted her because his soul was in water and was wandering around. He could not go to heaven because his family had not had a ritual performed to lead his soul out of water to the realm of the dead. Sister Nga told Mrs. May to come to her shrine where she would divine the alien entity haunting her.

Mrs. May was not convinced because her own mythic world conflicted with that of Sister Nga's. She said that she knew that Sister Nga's destiny was compatible with the Seventh Prince. That meant that Sister Nga has the Seventh Prince spirit root. Mrs. May claimed that the Buddha was testing her with ordeals and that her spiritual skills were higher than Sister Nga's. She also knew that her insanity would be over after the ordeal. She would be a great spirit medium and diviner with the help of the Buddha. Their conversation kept going for a while. Then Sister Nga told Mrs. May to come up to my family's ancestor altar. She added that in front of my ancestors was an odd and inappropriate place to do her divinations. She said she would pray to the Mother Goddess religion's spirits from there but that she would also try it again for Mrs. May in her own shrine.

The two of them sat on the floor in front of the ancestor's altar. Sister Nga lit three incense sticks, put them on the incense bowl, and then asked permission of my ancestors and apologized for not performing this in the right place. Then she shuffled her cards and spread them on the floor. After looking at the cards, she pointed to one with a picture of a young man and said, "A man follows you and possesses you." At that moment, Mrs. May exclaimed, "He was the brother of my husband. He died during the war and my in-laws were informed about his death, but did not know the exact date when he died. They celebrated the anniversary of his death but not on the day he died."

When she heard this, Sister Nga became more determined and went on, now to the ghost: "It is not the Buddha who guides Mrs. May. You are a ghost; you lie to me; the Buddha never punishes people and makes them insane. The Buddha loves people. You lie to me to conceal the fact that you are a ghost." Now to Mrs. May she said: "He (the man haunting her) is a liar, he wants to be in you and does not leave you. Tell me the day you died. Your family will celebrate the

anniversary of your death on the day you died.” At that moment, I saw Mrs. May go pale. Sister Nga lowered her tone and said: “Okay, come to my shrine, I will exorcise the ghost for you, you will return to being a normal person, a good wife, a good mother, and will be able to continue your work.” After that, Mrs. May was somehow convinced and said, “I will tell my husband, and prepare money for the ritual and then we will go to your shrine.” Then Mrs. May left my apartment and headed home. In the following days, her husband told me that in her insanity she had revealed the day of his brother’s death and that she did not want to go to see Sister Nga because she again said that it was still not the time for her to have a ritual. She wanted to wait until the day the Buddha allowed her.

I was overwhelmed by their conversation. Now looking back, I see that Sister Nga had tried to convince Mrs. May by creating a mythic world with her own spiritual talent and about the insanity of other clients, most of which was caused by supernatural entities, and to persuade her that her illness could be cured by a ritual performance in her shrine. In the above story, Mrs. May has her own mythic world associated with the Buddha in which the almighty Buddha will be compassionate and help her. She has a rational resistance to the world that Sister Nga creates for her. In this case, Sister Nga was not successful in helping Mrs. May because a common understanding in a shared mythic world was lacking, and so she did not accept Sister Nga’s mythical world.

Through this mythical model Sister Nga implies the deeper belief of the Việt, the obligation toward their dead family members and ancestors. Sister Nga’s stories and the dialogue between her and Mrs. May bring to the surface the responsibilities of the living. The young man who died in the war has to be worshipped on the anniversary of his death with felicitous rituals the Việt perform to express their belief in their relationship with their ancestors. The constellation of the desires of the deceased emphasizes the obligations of the Việt in the care and worship of their family’s deceased and their ancestors. They tender to the graves of the deceased and perform rituals for expressing their piety and respect to them. Then they would be blessed and protected. In contrast, if they do not fulfill their obligations, they may be punished and become the victims of the yin illness that is caused by the dead.⁵

Today, Mrs. May still endures her illness, having problems with her insanity and ghost (sometimes spirit) possession, and is seen as having a heavy spirit root (in other words, she is being punished by the spirits) but does not know how to get out of her situation. From 2000 up to 2007, her husband has been very ill with cancer on his nose and she has broken her leg and gets weaker every day. Her first daughter has had to leave her husband’s home to assist her in her work as a cleaning lady for people who live near her apartment in a residential quarter in Hanoi. She did not go through all the ritual processes that Mrs. Nga recommended, including the exorcism of her brother-in-law out of her body, offering him what he needs, and finding out the correct date of his death. Afterwards, she would have an initiation ritual in order to be in the service of the Mother

Goddess' spirits. She would then be protected by the spirits from being attacked by ghosts and be blessed with good health.

Thus, by the terms of Sister Nga's mythic world, Mrs. May has not fulfilled her two obligations: finding out the appropriate way to respect and tender her husband's brother who died in the war, and being initiated to serve the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion. She has turned to popular Buddhist perceptions to endure her suffering and to wait for the Buddha's permission to convert to popular religion. The different interpretations offered by these two religions, Buddhism and the Mother Goddess religion, have prevented Mrs. May from having the healing rituals that Sister Nga recommended, and in Sister Nga's diagnosis, these are the only proper rituals. As a result, she has not been healed and blessed.

HAPPY ENDING

Sister Nga uses her explanatory and mythic models to exorcise and cure her patients. A young man named Tuấn was born in 1962 in a neighboring village. He was very ill and weak but without a clearly identified illness and treatment. He could not have injections because he always got an abscess. As a result, he could not be cured using Western medicine and was going to die. His family was talking about making a coffin and other funeral affairs. In this hopeless situation, his uncle thought of the last resort, to consult with a medium. Sister Nga was called up to his house to diagnose and heal him. To be empowered with spiritual energy, Sister Nga did not forget to pray to the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion and ask for healing power from Saint Trần. Sister Nga added that with this spiritual power, she was able to "talk to a ghost which would listen and threaten the ghost which would frighten."

Seeing Sister Nga, Tuấn was frightened and explained to her that he saw Trần's exorcizing power. At this point, the medium could see the sign of the exorcizing. Here's the dialogue between Sister Nga (Trần Hưng Đạo) and her patient:

SISTER NGA: What is your name? Who are you? Are you a man or a woman?

GHOST (Speaking through Mr. Tuấn): I am Nam.

SISTER NGA: Who are you?

GHOST: I am a soldier from Hải Phòng city. I was shot to death and buried there near the water tank in his yard.

SISTER NGA: Why do you possess him?

GHOST: He passed by when I was standing next to the water tank. He and I are compatible (*hợp nhau*). His wife is a wonderful woman who can take care of me well.

SISTER NGA: No, she is not beautiful. She is ugly. I will marry you to a beautiful woman. Tell me what you need. Do you need a wife, clothes, and food?

GHOST: I am in love with his wife.

SISTER NGA: Please leave him alone and get out of him. I will marry you to a wonderful woman who is much better than his wife. And I will offer you what you need. Otherwise, I will use Saint Trần's power to kill you....

Besides her mythical world and convincing voice, Sister Nga used one more strategy: to force the ghost to leave the patient by signing a commitment. When the patient yielded Sister Nga's request and offer, Sister Nga asked him to sign a commitment paper including the ghost's name, the time of his possession in the patient, address, and then asked the ghost to sign it. In this case the ghost did not sign (it was so stubborn), so the medium forced it to sign by pressing his fingerprint onto the sheet. Before leaving the patient, the hungry ghost did not forget to eat up a kilogram of boiled pork and a dish of sticky rice and a bowl of water (a behavior common to ghosts).

After the exorcizing ritual, the medium had to fulfill her promise to the ghost by performing an offering rite in which she had to offer the ghost a beautiful female mannequin (a symbol of the ghost's wife), a chicken, a piece of pork meat, fruits, and other votive offerings. To protect the patient from being repossessed by the ghost and any other evil afflictions, Sister Nga advised her patient to be initiated to be a spirit medium to serve the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion. As she explained, once the patient became a disciple of the religion, the spirits would protect him from ghosts and devils and save him from suffering ill health, bestowing their divine favor (*lộc*) on him.

There is a cultural behavior that adoption is a sign of gratitude. The network of spiritually adopted children enhances the validity of the medium's interpretation of a mythical world. To thank Sister Nga for saving his son from death, Tuấn's father asked her to accept his son as an adopted child. As an adopted child, Mr. Tuấn comes to visit her during the New Year and when she has big rituals such as the ritual for her new shrine, as her other disciples do.

Exorcising and healing aim to return patients to their normal social lives. Tuấn, now healthy, enjoys a happy family with a thriving son and a big house, and sees his good fortune as a blessed gift he acquired by serving the Mother Goddess religion's spirits. The happy ending has reinforced Sister Nga's mastership of healing and the mythical world not for her current patient but also for her potential clients. In contrast, Mrs. May did not go to Sister Nga for an exorcizing and initiation ritual and as a result, she has endured her illness and misfortune for life.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores spiritual illness and healing by examining Sister Nga's mythical and explanatory models. It has looked at a tiny corner of the vast belief system of the Việt, with its wide range of practitioners: spirit mediums (*bà đồng/ông đồng*), soul caller mediums (*người gọi hồn*), ceremony-master mediums (*thầy cúng*), and geomancer mediums (*thầy địa lý*). Notions of health and illness

in Vietnam are complex, even within sacred medicine. Interpretations of yin illness and healing are multiple, depending on the diagnoses and on the ritual process that master mediums create for their patients. Yin illness can be caused by a variety of culturally understood phenomena such as sacrilege, ghost possession, or mediumship. The healing may not necessarily require an exorcism and an initiation ritual by a medium, as per the resolution in Mr. Tuấn's case. Sometimes, it is sufficient to identify the cause and then present a tray of offerings with petitions and prayers to the appropriate spirits.⁶

Analyzing the causes and the cures of the yin illness, my paper has revealed a deep obligation of the living Việt to pay respects to their deceased and ancestors, and serve the spirits of the Mother Goddess religion. The causes of yin illness can be seen as punishment for their lack of respect and inappropriate veneration, and the cures focus on fulfilling their obligations to satisfy the needs of the other world or to be seats for the spirits to sit upon. Thus, illness and healing are understood in the context of the relationships between the living and the dead, the adherents and the spirits, and are embodied in the folk belief system of the Việt.

The spiritual healing of *lén đồng* is seen in the goodwill of spirit mediums who save themselves, their families, and their patients from personal suffering and yin illness. Sufferings in life and happy endings have each been demonstrated in the ritual process set up by Sister Nga. Still in her creative world, she was happy to talk with me via telephone about how today the *lén đồng* ritual and other folk practices are no longer banned and the mediums can perform their rituals in accord with their own needs and desires. She laughingly adds that with the freedom of folk belief practices Vietnamese people will be more healthy and blessed. Her comment also reflects the prosperity and the better life regarding both the profane and spiritual dimensions in the post-Renovation era in Vietnam.

NOTES

1. Pháp lệnh tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo, Ủy ban thường vụ Quốc hội (The decree on Folk Beliefs and Religion, Standing Committee of the National Assembly), No 21/2004/PL-UBTVQHII, 18 June 2004. Item 1 of Article 3 states that “the activities of folk beliefs are activities representing the veneration of ancestors, commemoration, and honoring of those who had great merit towards the country and people; the veneration of spirits, traditional symbols, and other activities of folk beliefs that enrich history, culture and social ethics” (NGUYỄN 2007).

2. There are nine hierarchical ranks of spirits containing four imported spirits, 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, or Quan Âm (the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, known in Chinese as Guanyin and in Japanese as Kannon (NGUYỄN 2002).

3. Today, there are still herb gardens on Dược Sơn mountains around the temple dedicated to him in Kiếp Bạc, Hải Dương province. Pilgrims can buy the herb medicine there when they visit his temple for healing.

4. There are four Trần Hưng Đạo's seals in Kiếp Bạc temples so that people can request to have his seal on a paper sheet or cloth for protection.

5. Tending the graves of historical and regional figures can bring good luck and prosperity to the whole community in the region. As a story spread widely in Nghê An province shows, since the grave of Hồ Chí Minh's mother was rebuilt on a magnificent pine mountain, this region has not been hit by as many storms as before. The storms hit places far away further toward the south.

6. This was the case with the story of a mother who was seeing a famous soul caller (a kind of spirit medium in Vietnam) when her daughter was very ill, but her illness was not diagnosed at all, even after the mother took her to several hospitals in Hanoi. As a last resort she went to see the soul caller and her dead young son came in and talked to her through the medium. The son said that there was a puddle near his grave and the water via an underground stream flowing toward her. His underworld body was in pain. He had a desire to inform his living parents about the water stream and to replace his tomb in order to avoid any consequences, but he would not possess them either in the form of a dream or spontaneous incarnation. The suffering of the dead affected the living, causing the sister to become ill. The solution, as the dead said, was to have a tray of offerings and petition the spirits and the dead for salvation and therapy. At the same time, the dead son would help the family and his sister by petitioning the spirits on behalf of his family.

REFERENCES

- ATKINSON, Jane Monnig
1992 Shamanism today. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21: 307–30.
- CLAUS, Peter J
1997 Ritual performances in India. In *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Stephen D. Glazier, 191–210. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- DOW, James
1986 Universal aspects of symbolic healing: A theoretical synthesis. *American Anthropologist* vol. 88: 56–69.
- DURAND, Maurice
1959 Technique et Pantheon des Mediums Vietnamiens. *Publications de l'Ecole Francaise d'extreme Orient*. Vol. XLV.
- ENDRES, Kirsten W
2006 Spirit performance and the ritual: Construction of personal identity in modern Vietnam. In FJELSTAD and NGUYEN, 77–93.
- FJELSTAD, Karen, and NGUYEN Thi Hien, eds.
2006 *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.
- KLEINMAN, Arthur
1980 *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine, and Psychiatry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- LADERMAN, Carol
1991 *Taming the Wind of Desire: Psychology, Medicine, and Aesthetics in Malay Shamanistic Performance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- LARSSON, Viveca, and Kirsten W. ENDRES
2006 “Children of the spirits, followers of a master”: Spirit mediums in post-Renovation Vietnam. In FJELSTAD and NGUYEN, 161–82.

- LEWIS, I. M.
 1971 *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- MALARNEY, Shaun K.
 2002 *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- NGÔ Đức Thịnh, ed.
 1996 *Đạo Mẫu ở Việt Nam* [Mother Goddess religion in Vietnam]. Hanoi: Nhà Xuất bản Văn hoá Thông tin.
 1992 *Hát văn* [Văn songs]. Hanoi: Nhà Xuất bản Văn hoá Dân tộc.
- NGUYỄN Khắc Khâm
 1983a Vietnamese mediums and their performances. *Asian Folklore Studies Newsletter* 1: 11–21. Berkeley: University of California.
 1983b Vietnamese spirit mediumship: A tentative reinterpretation of its basic terminology. *Việt Nam Forum* 1: 24–30.
- NGUYỄN Thị Hiền
 1998 *Then* in Tây Traditional Culture and Soul-Calling Ritual. MA thesis. Bloomington: Indiana University.
 2002 The Religion of the Four Palaces. PhD dissertation. Indiana University.
 2006 “A Bit of a Spirit Favor is Equal to a Load of Mundane Gifts”: Votive paper offerings of *Len dong* rituals in post-Renovation Vietnam. In FJELSTAD and NGUYEN, 127–42.
 2007 “Seats for Spirits to Sit Upon”: Becoming a spirit medium in contemporary Vietnam. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 38 (3): 553–50.
- NGUYỄN Thị Nga
 1998 Life experience story told by Sister Nga. Personal data recorded, transcribed, and translated by Nguyễn Thị Hiền. July.
- NORTON, Barley
 2000 Vietnamese mediumship rituals: The musical construction of the spirits. *The World of Music*, 42 (2): 75–97.
- PHAN Đăng Nhật and Oscar SALEMINK
 2004 Ritual transformations around a spirit medium in the northern highlands of Vietnam. Paper read at the Second International Conference on Vietnamese Studies, Ho Chi Minh City.
- PHAM Quỳnh Phương
 1998 Tìm hiểu tín ngưỡng đức thánh Trần [Study of the religious phenomenon of Saint Trần]. MA thesis, Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hoá (Institute of Cultural Studies), Hanoi.
 2005 Hero and Deity: Empowerment and Contestation in the Veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in Contemporary Vietnam. PhD dissertation. La Trobe University.
 2006 Tran Hung Dao and the Mother Goddess Religion. In FJELSTAD and NGUYEN, 31–54.