

Magic in healing practice: a case study in Vietnam and its philosophical assessment

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Abstract

The use of magic and religion in healing practices in Vietnam is relatively popular. In the folklore and folk religion of Vietnam, it is often said that “In case of sickness, follow any feasible cures [cobenh thi vai tu phuong]” in the sense that all means, including using religious beliefs and rituals, will be used to get healing for oneself or one’s relatives. When people or their relatives get sick, besides going to medical facilities, they will look for a shaman, necromancer, monks, even priests, bishops, and pastors to cure the illness they or their relatives are suffering from. Based on Mircea Eliade’s theory published in *The Sacred and the Profane* (Eliade, 2016), the article has the ambition to offer a different perspective on the use of magic (sometimes considered as a religious ritual by the subject) to cure disease. We employ both the comparative and analytical methods of study as we explore concrete cases of treatment of patients with different religious beliefs (Ms. T’s case of treatment, following Buddhist practices in comparison with the healing cases of the Mother Goddess Worship and the Catholic Church). The authors propose that a uniquely Vietnamese philosophy of life (Life-philosophy) serves as a constitutive basis for the adaptation of magic in healing practices, being itself formed and influenced by these practices.

Key words: magic, religious healing, life-philosophy, healing practices

1 Introduction

Magic is a common phenomenon that appeared very early on in world cultures. Initially, magic was used as a term distinct from religion to refer to the beliefs of the remaining primitive people or the beliefs of non-Jews (and later those who did not practice Christianity). Magic was supposed to be a pagan practice representing prayers and practices aimed at influencing the great gods (Nguyen H.T., 2014a: 60). Along with profound societal changes came a modification in the perception of magic. Studies show that magic is commonly interpreted as the mysterious actions, words, or objects that a shaman (a person with special abilities and a distinctive religious role) adopted to communicate and dictate supernatural forces to achieve certain purposes. Magic is a phenomenon that caught the interest of anthropologists, cultural scholars, and scholars of religion a long time ago. S.A. Tokarev (1995: 41) interprets magic as “the supernatural impact of humans either directly or through objects, words or actions, on material objects; in those rituals, there is no presence of certain spiritual symbols; the man himself has achieved expected goal at first without the help of the gods.” According to James G. Frazer (2019: 22), in the early days of mankind, people desired to control nature for practical purposes, and by ceremonies and charms they forced windstorms, weather, animals and the season to comply with their wishes. Only when they discovered the limitations of magic a long time later, did they seek help from the supreme beings such as demons, ancestors, or gods in fear or hope, in pleading or challenge (Le, 2001). This desire to control and manipulate natural phenomena by magic is not much different from the current human aspirations to harness the forces of nature by science. “Magic relies on human beliefs that humans can directly dominate nature if they have the knowledge of the rules of magic that

control nature, which is somewhat similar to science.” (Vietnam Association of Historical Sciences [Hoi Khoa hoc Lich su Viet Nam], 2006: 148-149)

A critical yet not dismissive stance toward magic and its place in human society could be seen in Bronislaw Malinowski. He argued that magic “seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities. Even for those who do not share in that hankering after the occult, after the short-cuts into ‘esoteric truth,’ this morbid interest, nowadays so freely ministered to by stale revivals of half-understood ancient creeds and cults, dished up under the names of ‘theosophy,’ ‘spiritism’ or ‘spiritualism,’ and various pseudo-‘sciences,’ -ologies and -isms—even for the clear scientific mind the subject of magic has a special attraction.” (Malinowski, 1948: 50) Malinowski recognized that scholars who are dealing with the study of magic “hope to find in it the quintessence of primitive man’s longings and of his wisdom. Whatever it might be, is worth knowing. Partly because ‘magic’ seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man’s mysterious possibilities.” (Malinowski, 1948: 50-51)

Acts of magic are always conducted along with certain movements, rituals, and acts of worship oriented towards the physical representation of the divine or transcendent realities. Therefore, the relationship between magic and religion has been questioned by scientists early on. (Green, 2020) At first, magic was interpreted to be separate from religion. Accordingly, magic is not religion. It is something inferior to religion which itself is often considered superstition. Forms of worship among the population and their magic activities are usually perceived with loathing by most people due to being primitive, crude, absurd, vulgar, mechanical, and obscene. In other words, people involved in magic are considered bigoted, backward, less civilized, and representing the remnants of unenlightened people who are always contrary to established religion - a phenomenon that is considered to be civilized, cultural, pure, sacred, non-profit, rational and full of spiritual and social significance (Nguyen H.T., 2014a: 64).

Nowadays, it is mostly suggested that religion and magic have a close relationship, even to the point where magic is used as a term linked to religious rituals (Nguyen H.T., 2014a: 66). According to O’Connor, “magic should be considered as a part of religion or a special kind of religious experience. Magic cannot be fully understood when the magic-religion relationship is not the basis of the definition.” (O’Connor, 1997: 521-523) In other words, magic is always religious, but religion is not always imbued with magic (Nguyen H.T., 2014a: 65). Tokarev suggested that magic should be seen as an apparent attribute of religion, but not strictly as a religious form. Between religion and magic, there is always a similarity and difference because, as Tokarev points out:

“[t]he externality of the concept of ‘magic’ is almost as wide as the externality of the concept of ‘animism.’ It is not certain that if there is a religion without magic, except for a few exceptions. Equally important, magic rituals and beliefs (as well as animism) cannot be attributed to a common origin: they have different origins, associated with different aspects of human activity. The use of healing magic associates with traditional medicine and derives from traditional medicine. While black magic stems from the enmity between tribes, and love magic comes from instinct of charm, hunting magic, rooted in hunting techniques ... It can be seen that it is impossible to use the word ‘magic’ as well as the word ‘spirit’ to denote a certain form of religion.” (Tokarev, 1995: 42)

Malinowski argued that in religion, people embrace “beliefs in ghosts, spirits, the primitive forebodings of providence, the guardians of tribal mysteries; in magic, the primeval force and virtue of magic. Both magic and religion are based strictly on mythological tradition, and they also both exist in the atmosphere of the miraculous,

in a constant revelation of their wonder-working power. They both are surrounded by taboos and observances which mark off their acts from those of the profane world.” (Malinowski, 1948: 67-71) According to Malinowski, magic and religion can always be distinguished. Accordingly, magic as a practical art consists of acts that “are only means to a definite end expected to follow later on; religion as a body of self-contained acts being themselves the fulfillment of their purpose” (Malinowski, 1948: 68). Besides, one can identify “the play of black and white in witchcraft, while religion in its primitive stages has but little of the contrast between good and evil, between the benevolent and malevolent powers. While early religion, though essentially moral, has to deal with fateful, irremediable happenings and supernatural forces and beings, so that the undoing of things done by man does not enter into it.” (Malinowski, 1948: 69) In Vietnam, the action of magic and religion is often intertwined, sometimes mixed together. This is true especially of rituals related to the exorcism, healing of Buddhism, Catholicism, or worship of Mother Goddess (Nguyen, T.T. et al., 2020).

2 The Underlying Research Theory in our Study of Magic

This paper is conducted on the basis of Mircea Eliade’s theory expounded in *The Sacred and Profane* (Eliade, 2016). In this work, Eliade argued that in the experiences of religious people (i.e., people with subjective religious beliefs), one can always find references to “sacred spaces,” “sacred times,” and “divine imitations.” Performance of “divine imitation” can be delivered in a “sacred space” at “sacred times” with a divine responsibility and mystery that is linked to the divine realm. According to Eliade, human living space is divided into sacred space and non-sacred space. People can cross these spaces through religious means and symbolic elements. In other words, in the “sacred areas” where there is interference between ordinary space and sacred space, people can communicate with the gods to interact and experience the sacred space. Similar to the concept of space, Mircea Eliade suggested that, for religious people, there are sacred times and profane times “in which acts without religious meaning have their setting. Between these two kinds of time, there is, of course, a solution of continuity; but by means of rites, religious man can pass without danger from ordinary temporal duration to sacred time” (Eliade, 2016: 69). Sacred time, in its nature, is reversible in the sense that it is a primordial mythical time made present (Eliade, 2016: 69).

People want to live in a sacred space, interact with the divine world, or in other words, they want to be able to live as close as possible to the gods. It means that people who reintegrate the sacred time are transposed to a transcendent time frame, which enables them to experience divine presence in a hidden, intuitive way. Eliade also argues that besides experiencing sacred times and sacred spaces, humans also tend to practice the patterns of behavior attributed to the gods. “The more religious man is, the more paradigmatic models does he possess to guide his attitudes and actions. In other words, the more religious he is, the more does he enter into *the real*, and the less is he in danger of becoming lost in actions that, being non-paradigmatic, ‘subjective,’ are, finally, aberrant.” (Eliade, 2016: 98) Such emulation of divine patterns has the following consequences: (1) “by imitating the gods, man remains in the sacred, hence in reality; (2) by the continuous re-actualization of paradigmatic divine gestures, the world is sanctified.” (Eliade, 2016: 101) Humans’ religious behavior contributes to maintaining the sanctity of the world. In addition, Eliade also maintained that the “*imitatio dei* is not conceived idyllically, that, on the contrary, it implies an awesome human responsibility.” (Eliade, 2016: 106)

What is important for us to notice here is that what we see in Eliade’s approach is an objective view of the “sacred” and “profane” elements through the religious prism. “We propose to present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity, and not only in so far as it is *irrational*,” writes Eliade. He further adds that “what will

concern us is not the relation between the rational and non rational elements of religion but the sacred in its entirety.” (Eliade, 2016: 13) Underscoring the importance of religious experience, he famously exclaimed:

“The important thing for our purpose is to bring out the specific characteristics of the religious experience, rather than to show its numerous variations and the differences caused by history. It is somewhat as if, in order to obtain a better grasp of the poetic phenomenon, we should have recourse to a mass of heterogeneous examples, and, side by side with Homer and Dante, quote Hindu, Chinese, and Mexican poems; that is, should take into consideration not only poetics possessing a historical common denominator (Homer, Vergil, Dante) but also creations that are dependent upon other aesthetics. From the-point of view of literary history, such juxtapositions are to be viewed with suspicion; but they are valid if our object is to describe the poetic phenomenon as such, if we propose to show the essential difference between poetic language and the utilitarian language of everyday life.” (Eliade, 2016: 18)

3 Selected Case Studies of Healing with Magic and Religion in Vietnam

The use of magic and religion in healing in Vietnam is relatively widespread. Given the common acceptance of the notion that “in case of sickness/diseases, follow any feasible cures,” the use of religion and magical practices in healing for oneself and one’s relatives is warranted. This has been documented rather extensively by religious scholars and sociologists not only in Vietnam but also in China (Cline, 2010). We have closely examined the treatment case of Ms. T (a follower of Buddhism) compared to the healing practices among the Mother Goddess religious cult members and the Vietnamese Catholic believers. Our goal was to identify specific overlapping traits as well as differences among adherents of different religious traditions/cultic practices. Subsequently, we attempted to analyze the philosophical underpinnings and potential implications for such practices’ life outcomes.

Case 1: Ms. T

Ms. T is a 46-year-old married Vietnamese woman, a follower of Buddhism. According to Ms. T, she became ill about ten years ago. She received treatment in many places and several hospitals but her illness had not abated. She then decided to visit the shamans (monks, magicians, and necromancers) to cure her illness, but the results were not better. However, one year after trying out all possible remedies, her illness was spontaneously (naturally) cured. After she had recovered from her sickness, she found that her life was no longer the same as before. She drank and smoked a lot and found herself able to see everyone’s future. According to her, she was the one chosen by the Superiors to help people. The Superiors, in Ms. T’s explanation, comprise the “Bodhisattva Council.” She received orders from the “Bodhisattva Council” to use her power to assist people without money or anything. The Superiors granted her the ability of ghost-seeing, and she also has the power to separate ghosts from the human body. During the healing process and while answering the researcher’s questions, she emphasized compassion, self-sacrifice for others without seeking the benefits of Bodhisattva—the god who gave her power. Therefore, all patients who come to receive her treatment do so without any economic requirement—what Eliade calls the “*responsibility*” in the “*divine imitations*,” which is expected from the religious people.

The signs or circumstances of Ms. T’s ability seem to share similarities to the case of a male and female necromancer in the worship of Mother Goddess (Nguyen, T.T., 2020). In Mother Goddess worship, health signs are very common to inform patients that they have been “chosen” by the Mother Goddess and her followers as the

disciples of the Mother (who are called destined people). There have also been many cases of patients (mainly neurological and internal medicine) that cannot be cured by modern medical methods but who have been cured after performing worship rituals of Mother Goddess (a specific trance ceremony) that the researcher himself has recorded. According to their explanation, their illness was caused by “Saints;” then, when they were accepted to become “holy children,” the Saints would “grant them fortune.” The motif that a natural, spontaneous recovery comes after first experiencing what appeared to be an incurable illness and that the recovery is accompanied with a sudden endowment by the gods (with rare spiritual abilities) can be found in many folk religion worshipers in North Vietnam or in Ong Dao in South Vietnam in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Le, 2001).

The “*sacred space*” that Ms. T conducts to “capture the disease” and carry out the treatment (“*divine imitations*”) is a small room of about 9m², with a very simple altar consisting of 3 incense bowls, lamps, candles, flowerpot, a fruit plate, a cup of water. There is no picture or any indication that she is using the power of Bodhisattvas to help patients. Ms. T is able to receive the energy and the powers that the Superiors grant her to cure people in the morning.

According to the researchers’ observation, all the cases that Ms. T conducted to “capture the disease” are explained by the same reason: the patients are possessed by ghosts who cause the patient to show external signs of disease. In Vietnamese’s conception, the term ghost is a way to call a person’s soul after death. Accordingly, living people are comprised of two parts, the body and the soul. When people die, the body will dissolve into the earth, while the soul remains in existence. This soul can return to the ancestral world if it is worshiped by offspring, while those who are not worshiped will turn into something else (trees, bushes, roadside...). More importantly, in the Vietnamese conception, death is not the end; the dead and the living can interact with each other. The dead can make a living person get a happy life and vice versa, they can turn his life into suffering and unhappiness. In order to change their current lives, Vietnamese people tend to influence the world of the dead by which the dead will bless and help change their current lives as their desire. Therefore, there will be many different types of ghosts depending on the influence of those ghosts on the living.

The concept of ghosts and the influence of ghosts on living people are also acknowledged in the treatment of Mother Goddess worship. Accordingly, the necromancers will use the powers given to them by the Holy Mother and her followers to banish or arrest the ghost, not allowing the ghost to return to the patient. Some cases of healing that had taken place within the Protestant or Catholic religious context (that the primary researcher attended) also followed this pattern, but instead of considering attributing the cause of the disease to the souls of the dead, the Pastor or Priest explained that the devil was torturing the sick.¹

¹ According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, demons are real and they have many extraordinary abilities that can affect people, including the body like: harassing, destroying, torturing, harming, haunting and possessing (Coriden, 2019). But God is stronger than the devils, therefore, Canon Law 1172 stipulates that “No one can perform exorcisms legitimately upon the possessed unless he has obtained special and express permission from the local ordinary. Local ordinary only gives evil exorcism to a moral, wise, and well-behaved priest. The signs which are considered as a possessed person implicate a patient with convulsions, making it possible to recognize a different intelligence from the patient’s, and sometimes the patient is normal, sometimes abnormal. There are lasting abnormal movements like: dancing, losing balance, crawling on the ground, smashing, hurting, falling without a clear cause, twisting their necks, twisting their necks, screaming like animals, being forced to shriek in a way unconsciously or telling whether events in the future or in secret or manifesting possibilities beyond their age or beyond their conditions, such as hovering in the air without sticking or relying anywhere, go

Despite the same cause of being possessed by ghosts, manifestations of illness in patients are different. According to Ms. T's explanation, the reason behind this difference is that each ghost has its own characteristics, gender, age, personality, death situation, etc.

For example, patient L (female, 49 years old, Catholic, having a husband and two children, living in Lam Dong province) got pain in her legs and could not stand and walk normally. According to the patient and her husband's words, she felt normal until early 2018. Then one morning, after getting up, she could not stand anymore and fell when trying to get out of bed. The patient also went to the hospital in Lam Dong, but there was no progress. Doctors also could not give any explanation for the cause of the disease. The patient then sought help from a local priest, but her feet still hurt and trembled, and she was unable to stand and walk. Her husband had to assist her in all her daily activities.² According to Ms. T's explanation, the ghost who possessed the patient L used to be a paralyzed person, so Mrs. L could not stand and walk.

Patient V (male, 52 years old, Catholic, married, living in Lam Dong) was sick, trembling, and very afraid of touching any water surface. He could not explain why. The patient's sleep was short and shallow. According to the patient, he went out with friends late in the evening (apparently having to go to the toilet on the street). The next morning the patient was tired, did not want to bathe, and did not want to change clothes. The patient became increasingly weak, stinky, and isolated from other people due to not bathing and dressing.³ As explained by Ms. T, the ghost who had entered Mr. V was a very old French man, so he trembled and was afraid of bathing, having a weak body, sleeping less, and getting up early.

Another revealing case is that of patient B (female, 40 years old, following Buddhism, already married, living in Lam Dong). Patient B suddenly suffered from pain, a blackened face, and black spots on her body without any cause. Like other patients before her, this patient was also treated in many places but did not recover.⁴ Ms. B's disease was that the soul of a burnt soldier possessed her; thus, the patient's face and body turned black.

This gives us the explanation why, according to Ms. T, the disease manifestations in the patients depend on the shape and characteristics of the body of the person (whose soul enters the patient) at death. In fact, the concept of the soul's characteristics that are closely related to the characteristics of its body before death is prevalent among Vietnamese and in many ethnic groups around the world. Therefore, one of the Vietnamese people's biggest fears before dying is that they would die with the incomplete body because they are afraid that their souls will remain incomplete after death. Hence the most terrible punishment that feudal Vietnamese kings often applied to dangerous criminals was *body braking* or *dissection*, *execution by elephant*, and *execution by horse* (Taylor, 2013). A further illustration of the belief in the soul's afterlife can be drawn from the North American environment. The anthropologists' records show that many black slaves, who could not stand the life away from their homeland and who suffered from hard labor, fled or committed suicide so that their souls could return to their homeland and reincarnate again (Snyder, 2010). However, their white masters ordered the servants to injure those who were captured, destroying the bodies of those who died before burial, such as cutting off their heads or limbs.

upside down on the roof or ceiling, still unmoving despite the push or pull efforts of stronger people..." (read more at: <https://tonggiaophanhanoi.org/tu-lieu/tai-lieu-khac/2476-quan-diem-cua-hoi-thanh-cong-giao.html>, accessed on 24/10/2020).

² The principal researcher's interview materials in October 2018.

³ The principal researcher's interview materials in October 2018.

⁴ The principal researcher's interview materials in October 2018.

Such punishment made the black slaves terrified. They would no longer flee or commit suicide because they believed that even if the soul returns to its homeland and reincarnates, it would be in the crippled and disable form (Nguyen, 2013: 80).

Returning to the case of Ms. T's healing, after having diagnosed the cause of the disease as being possessed, she used magical rituals to dismiss the ghost from the patient's body. She used burning incense sticks to flutter around her patient's body and especially the patient's face and chest. Along with that, she held the wine in her mouth and sprayed it on the sick person (in case the patient suffered from a severe disease). During the process of spraying alcohol and incense around the patient, she made loud sounds like the sound of a flute from her mouth. The treatment of Ms. T took place for about 4 hours every day in the morning. On average, each patient took about 15 to 20 minutes to treat, depending on their condition. At the end of each case, she did magical rituals during which she utilized fresh water bottles that patients had brought in so that they could take them home to drink daily. Normally, it took each patient about 3 to 10 days (depending on their own condition) to recover his/her health.

When asked about the origin of her power with which she could chase away the ghost from the patient's body, Ms. T only said that it was the power the Bodhisattva Council had given her. The problem here is whether "power" exists in her body or whether it only appears in the process of performing "the imitation of god" in her shrine space in the mornings. If it exists in her body, it belongs to her; in that case, why does she not perform healing in any space or at any time?

The answer is evident in the cases of the worship of Mother Goddess and Catholicism. The shamans are the ones whose bodies are borrowed by the Gods to do holy work in the profane world. Therefore, shamans themselves do not own any supernatural power but can only heal when the Gods enter their bodies. As for Catholicism, the Catechism of the Church (John Paul II, 1994: 1673) stipulates:

"The exorcism rite can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his Church. Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not an illness." (x. CD Nicaea 2: DS 601; 603; CD Trento: DS 1822)⁵

No official exorcism rite has been established for the current Vietnamese Catholic Church (Phan, 2014), so competent priests and bishops often use the exorcism formula in the Baptism Rite, mainly with holy objects (holy water, cross, etc.).⁶

There is a similar principle in these cases: for the sick person to recover his/her health, ghosts and demons must be expelled from his/her body. Of course, all three types of healing have a guarantee from the subject of healing that, thanks to the support of the sacred objects, the demon cannot re-infiltrate the patient's body again. However, there is a little difference with the case of Ms. T. According to her explanation, there will be two ways to cure the sickness of the patient. One is that she will use the power given by the Superiors to banish that ghost from the sick person's body, but there is a risk that the ghost will return to possess the sick person; Secondly, after chasing away the

⁵ Source available online at: <http://conggiao.info/ai-co-quyen-tru-ta-d-24046>, accessed on 24/10/2020.

⁶ Source available online at: <http://conggiao.info/ai-co-quyen-tru-ta-d-24046>, accessed on 24/10/2020

ghost from the sick person, she will take that ghost to the temple, let the ghost take refuge as a Buddhist, and then the ghost will be comforted or reincarnated into another life. In this way, it is more likely that the illness is completely removed. However, according to Ms. T, not every ghost wants or agrees to enter the temple as she offers because of the different religious backgrounds of the people. There are ghosts who – while still being live persons – followed Catholicism, so they do not expect to find refuge in Buddhist temples when they die. The example given by Ms. T is the case of Ms. L and Mr. V.

According to the researchers' observation and the patients' statements, most of the patients undergoing the treatment showed progress right from the first day, and many people have recovered after a period of 3 - 7 days. All three patients whom the researcher continued to observe and study told that they had seen positive progress on the first day of their treatment – something that they had not experienced after receiving treatment in hospitals or other places such as churches (for Mrs. L and Mr. V) or the temple for Ms. B. However, since all three cases were severe and lasted for long, it took longer for Ms. T to cure them. To our best knowledge, Mrs. L and Mr. V spent one month recovering from the disease, while Ms. B only recovered after the second month.

In his fieldwork, the principal researcher had access to the records of patients who were cured by Ms. T. These notes are hand-written (written by the patients themselves) and contain basic information such as: name, address, phone number, medical condition before meeting Ms. T and at the end of treatment. According to statistics in the book, about 23 patients were cured during the period from 2012 to early 2014. Like the above cases that the researchers directly examined, these patients also had an initial treatment period of 3-10 days, after which the treatment may last longer. According to this record, the longest treatment of a patient took nearly one year (patient no. 16), while the shortest recovery happened after the first meeting (patient no 19). The age of the patients was also diverse. The youngest was born in 2000, the oldest one was born in 1948. Among those 23 patients, two patients were Catholics. During the time when they came to Ms. T, the symptoms of illness were mostly related to neurological and internal medicine. When asked to explain the reason for coming to Ms. T, all patients said that they were advised by an acquaintance who had been cured before. The method described by the patients in the record was similar to the method that the researchers had witnessed in previous cases. The psychological development of the patient was similar - not believing at first, then becoming completely convinced by Ms. T's treatment.⁷

4 Concluding Philosophical Assessment

1. The use of religion for treatment is relatively common in Vietnam, especially for severe cases for which there is no definitive treatment by utilizing modern medical methods (i.e., Western medicine). Alternatively, religion appears to be the preferential choice for those who do not have the economic means to pay for medical treatment or who have limited access to medical services in hospitals. Upon a closer examination of our patients' cases, all patients who came to Ms. T had gone to the hospital for treatment but could not recover. When they asked for her help, their faith in her healing ability was not strong. However, following the change of their physical condition during the treatment process, their faith was gradually strengthened. When cured completely, they strongly believed in the power of Ms. T. (based on their subjective evaluation). This process is different from what has been perceived and

⁷ See the Appendix.

concluded in a similar study on Buddhist religious healing conducted in 2014 by Huang Nguyen (2014b). According to this study, exorcism and spirit-calling were chosen because the sufferers and their families had a strong belief in the existence of souls, spirits, angry gods, and the power of exorcism and/or spirit calling (Nguyen, 2014b: 41). Our study shows that when patients came and sought help from the Buddhist healer, Ms. T, they did have a personal acknowledgment of the existence of ghosts and spirits (as many Vietnamese do), but it was not necessarily strong in the beginning. They also came for practical reasons (their other options had failed or were not available) and became stronger believers for practical reasons (the treatments proved to be significantly effective).

2. People who identify themselves as supernatural, like Ms. T., are very popular in Vietnamese society and often follow a common motif: they suffer from weak health, go for examination and treatment in many places, and use many different methods. After they are cured by a spiritual method, they suddenly find themselves with a special ability. However, there is a difference in the sources who grant special abilities to them. They can be the Saints, Bodhisattva, God, or gods. Sometimes they lack a fitting vocabulary to describe the higher powers; hence they call them Superiors or Energy. The rituals used by those who claim to have this special ability will depend on their reception of a religion or spiritual belief or might be a mixture of many types of religions and beliefs in Vietnam, such as the Worship of Goddesses, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. (Guy, 2011)

3. The use of religion for healing is not necessarily due to cognitive restrictions (superstition) on the side of the participants, as some researchers and administrators argue. It can also be formed by cultural and religious factors with such concepts as: worship, sacredness, keeping a taboo or simply good luck; in case of sickness, people tend to follow any feasible cures and chances of remedy ... In some aspects, the use of religion for treatment reflects the worldview of Vietnamese people when they think that the material world and the supernatural world (the world of ancestors, saints, gods, demons...) impact and influence one another.

4. The use of rituals and religions for healing in Vietnam today has been deemed as superstitious and anti-scientific from the viewpoint of the communist government (Minh, 2005). It was severely suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (Nguyen et al., 2020: 104). Even today, it is still not allowed by law.⁸ However, in many practical cases, religious intervention in disease treatment has given certain positive effects. Therefore, both the state and scientists need to conduct more detailed studies into this phenomenon so that, on one side, we do not miss a special healing method besides modern and traditional medical methods; on the other hand, by allowing these religious practices to carry on, we also preserve precious elements of cultural value as part of a rich heritage of the Vietnamese culture. These beliefs and practices contribute to the moral and social fiber of the society. Moreover, the intellectual legacy and practices of Confucianism and Buddhism seemed to have been essential for the making of modern Vietnam as a culturally distinct and socially developed

⁸Article 320, Criminal Code 2015 on charges of superstitions and superstitious practice: 1. Those who use divination, homophobia or other superstitious and superstitious forms that have been sanctioned for administrative violations of this act or have been convicted of this crime, have not yet been removed from their criminal records but still violated, then be subject to a fine of between VND 10,000,000 and 100,000,000, non-custodial reform for up to 3 years or imprisonment of between 6 months and 3 years; 2. Committing the crime in one of the following circumstances, the offenders shall be sentenced to between 3 and 10 years of imprisonment: a) Causing death; b) Gaining illicit profits of 200,000,000 VND or more; c) Causing adverse impacts on security, social order and safety; 3. The offenders may also be subject to a fine of between VND 10,000,000 and VND 50,000,000).

nation (McHale, 2004; Taylor, 2013). The unifying power of religious traditions and rituals continues to play a constructive, unifying role among Vietnamese diaspora communities around the world (Ninh, 2018).

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APPENDIX

No	Full name	Year of birth	Religion	Year of treatment/ Disease status
1.	Pham Thi Song P		Buddhism	2012/ cured
2.	Le Thi H and grandchild	1951	Buddhism	2012/migraine headache and stomachache (cured after 19 days)
3.	Tran Thi Thuy H	1988	Buddhism	2012/ In 2015, I developed sinusitis, insomnia, headache, unfocused (after 3 days, I felt better; then after 1 month, my disease was gone)
4.	Pham Thi T	1968	Buddhism	2012/ Sinusitis, headache (cured after 2 months)
5.	Do Thi Thanh T	1985	Buddhism	2012/ Headache, insomnia, unfocused (she felt better after 4 days, and after 27 days, her disease was gone)
6.	Nguyen Thi Thanh T and her sister	1991 1983	Buddhism	2012/ The leg was weakened without any pain from the 8th - 9th grade. Going to both hospitals in Singapore and in Vietnam, but the disease was not detected. Feeling better after 4 days. Her sister was treated through photos The mother of the patients suffering from cervical spondylosis was also cured here
7.	Dang Thi C	1958	Buddhism	2012/ Insomnia, headache, dizziness, chest tightness, cold feet and hands, numbness. Feeling better after 4 days
8.	Nguyen Thi Thuy H	1970	Buddhism	2012/ blurred vision. After 1 week, the eyes could see clearly
9.	Do Thi M	1948	Buddhism	2012/ High blood pressure and diabetes for 3 years. After 3 months of treatment, the disease was completely cured.
10.	Nguyen Ky A	1980	Buddhism	2012/ In 2008, he had the appearance of bumps under the skin throughout the body, dyspnea, and inability to move limbs. Cured after 20 days
11.	Phan Thi Hong T	1949	Buddhism	2012 / Cardiovascular, dyspnea, insomnia (since 2011). Feeling better after 5 days, the disease was cured completely
12.	Tran Xuan D	1940	Buddhism	2013/Blood pressure, cardiovascular, pain in knee, difficulty walking, gout. After nearly 2 months, all diseases were gone completely.
13.	Vo Thi T		Buddhism	2013/Haunted!
14.	Ta Van H and his 2 sons	1974	Buddhism	2013/Diseases such as: Get a cold, upset stomach eye pain
15.	Nguyen Thi Thuy M		Buddhism	2013/ in 2012, swollen and pain in left leg
16.	Hoang Thi L		Buddhism	2013/ sinusitis, after undergoing

				palate surgery, it was very painful. After treatment for nearly 1 year, it was completely cured.
17.	Nguyen Thi T		Buddhism	2013/Headache, spinal pain, herniated disk. During the first 15 days, the patient was treated through the photograph; following 20 days of direct treatment, the disease was completely cured
18.	Tran Thi T		Buddhism	2013/ Back pain, chest tightness, fatigue. After 7 days, it was better, and now it is gone.
19.	Nguyen Thi T And her daughter	1983	Buddhism	2013/ Headache, neck and shoulder pain, fatigue, pale skin. After 2 days, a positive change was seen. T's daughter had insomnia and delirious, after meeting Miss T once, she recovered.
20.	Truong Thi Kim T		Buddhism	2013/ Headache, shoulder pain, neck, fatigue, pale skin.
21.	Nguyen Thi Giang P	1980	Buddhism	2013/ body aches
22.	Nguyen Quang T	2000	Catholic	2014
23.	Pham Thi H	1969	Catholic	2014