

VIETNAM - Tales and Festivities

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Abstract

“People say that time goes by; time says that people go by.” is a popular Vietnamese expression.

The mythology of the ethnic Vietnamese people has been passed on from generation to generation through word of mouth and writing. Vietnamese folklore has also been influenced by historical contact with neighboring ‘Tai’ and ‘Austroasiatic’ speaking people as well as people of Greater China.

The Vietnamese folk inheritance was suppressed in multiple ways from 1945 to 1980s. In the project of nation-building, Vietnamese people are encouraged to worship ancient heroes of national identity along with Gods and spirits with a long-standing presence in folklore.

Some of the mythological tales have captured the imagination of the Vietnamese people, who celebrate them as festivals and festivities.

Keywords

Mythology, traditions, legends, festivities

Introduction

Myths and legends including those of kitchen Gods and sacred animals play a significant role in Vietnamese culture. They have endured the test of time. They help provide moral lessons, a national identity and a foundation for a variety of celebrations.

Vietnamese believe, *“He that knows nothing doubts nothing.”*

Vietnamese Tales and Festivities

THE FOUR ELEMENTS - The Turtle, the Dragon, the Unicorn and the Phoenix

Turtles, dragons, unicorns, and phoenixes are revered in Vietnamese mythology as they represent the four main elements: earth, fire, air, and water.

The Dragon symbolizes peace, prosperity, and good luck. The Vietnamese dragon has an interesting anatomy. It is an eclectic combination of a fish, a deer, and a lizard wrapped up in one body. Some famous sites such as Ha Long Bay get their names from legendary tales of dragons.

The Unicorn, which brings good luck is part horse, part dragon, and part buffalo is said to ward off evil spirits from houses and pagodas. Unicorns may be seen at entrances of religious sites and dwellings.

The Phoenix is a combination of a snake, an eagle, a fish, and a peacock. It represents nobility and grace.

As a symbol of royalty, the phoenix (yin) and dragon (yang) are common sights at Vietnamese weddings, for they are believed to bring happiness to a marriage.

The Turtle is the only living animal of the four mythical creatures. It is celebrated as a symbol of longevity, wisdom, and spiritual endurance. At the temple of literature, Hanoi, eighty-two turtle sculptures carry the names of doctoral graduates from the Le Dynasty era, a representation of the highest sign of respect towards the most educated in society.



Image 1: The Four Elements

The Story of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ

The Story of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ is the mythological story of the Vietnamese creation.

Lạc Long Quân was the son of a tribal leader and a dragon princess. He was an imposing figure with magical powers. He had a fascination for the ocean and protected his people from foreign threats. He taught the ancient Vietnamese people valuable lessons in agriculture and architecture, giving his people a fledgling foundation for a flourishing civilization.

His wife, Âu Cơ, a descendant of mountain fairies, and he had a hundred eggs which hatched into a hundred children. Being a descendant of fairies, Âu Cơ had to return to the mountains. Lạc Long Quân was a descendant of the dragons and had to return to the sea. Hence, they separated.

Lạc Long Quân took fifty children along with him to the sea.

Âu Cơ took fifty children to the mountains, where they governed, built houses, cultivated the land, and lived in harmony with the natural environment. They dispersed across the land

and are considered as ancestors of the modern Vietnamese. The eldest son is said to be the first of the Hùng kings, the original dynasty of Vietnam. His importance is celebrated as Hùng King festival.

The story of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ is narrated to promote the idea of unity and shared origins of the Vietnamese people – the ‘children of the fairy and the dragon.’



Image 2: Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ with Their Children

Hung King Festival

Hung King Festival is a Vietnamese national holiday commemorating eighteen Hung kings, who are credited with establishing the Vietnamese civilization. The Hung kings made significant agricultural advancements, laying the foundation for patriotism.

From 8th April to 11th April, celebrations take place at about eighteen hundred Hung temples to pay tribute to the kings and teach the young generation about their historical roots. Many Vietnamese make the journey to Phu Tho Province, where the main event is celebrated.

Dressed in traditional clothes, processions of families along with their children honour shrines as they ascend Nghia Linh Mountain, at the peak of which is situated the most important Hung Temple. Feasts filled with traditional foods like banh giay (sticky rice) and banh chung (sticky rice cake), folk music, human chess, dancing, wrestling and bamboo

swinging competitions create a joyful atmosphere and present a unique insight into Vietnamese culture.



Image 3: Hung King Festival Celebrations

The Legend of Lang Lieu

Lang Lieu, was the son of the sixth Hung King. When the sixth Hung King was approaching the twilight years of his life, he summoned each of his sons to make food offerings, of which the one to offer the best, would become his successor.

In order to impress their father and take over as a successor, the sons turned to exotic, foreign delicacies. Lang Lieu was a simpler and less pretentious character. He turned to two local ingredients and created Banh Chung with banh chiay (rice flour) and banh chung (mung bean and pork). Banh chiay represents the sky, and banh chung represents the land, plants and animals. Impressed with his presentation, the king chose Lang Lieu as his successor.

Contemporary Vietnam holds high regard for Banh Chung, amongst Vietnamese food delights. It is served at Tet Nguyen Dan, or Tet festival and widely served as food offerings at pagodas and temples.



Image 4: Lang Lieu preparing Banh Chung

Tet Nguyen Dan

Spanning nine days of festivities, Tet Nguyen Dan, or Tet festival, is the most important national festival in Vietnam. This festival marks the beginning of the lunar calendar and the beginning of Spring.

Similar to Christmas, lights and festive decorations dress the streets. Dazzling flower garlands, peach blossoms, and kumquat trees denote hope and prosperity. The air is filled with excitement as many Vietnamese prepare to return home for family reunions.

Families sit down to large feasts and give lucky money to children, before heading out to enjoy street parades charged with firecrackers, drums, and cultural events.

Festive food specials include Banh Chung, a sticky rice dish filled with meat and wrapped in banana leaf, and Gio, a Vietnamese sausage served with sticky rice. They wander the streets and say *Chúc mừng năm mới*, pronounced *chook moong nahm moi*, which means Happy New Year in Vietnamese.



Image 5: Tet Nguyen Dan festivities

Tet Trung Thu

Vietnam's mid-autumn festival (Tet Trung Thu) falls on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month. Traditionally a harvest festival celebration, the mid-autumn festival now centres around children and family reunions. Family gatherings under the full moon symbolise reunion and wholeness for Vietnamese people.

Mooncakes, usually round wonderfully decorated cakes filled with sweet and savoury fillings, are synonymous with the mid-autumn festival.

Banh Nuong (oven-baked mooncakes) is usually filled with preserved taro, sesame and sausage, whilst Banh Deo (soft crust mooncake) commonly contains black sesame, mung bean paste or lotus seeds.

Parents give hexagonal, star and koi fish-shaped lanterns to their children, lighting up young, excited faces in the night.

A lot of street performers throng the streets. Street performances include the popular lion dance, a cherished street performance involving stunts and dancing. It is believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck to families.



Image 6: Koi-shaped lanterns at Tet Trung Thu

Acknowledgment

The tales and festivities in this article are based on the beliefs and interpretations of the Vietnamese people.

References

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About the Author

Ms. Neeti Parti is an educationist, a prize-winning poetess and writer, an exhibited artist, an editor.

She has received the LIONS CLUB DELHI VEG WOMEN PRESIGE AWARD 2023, ALSWA EDUCATION ICON OF THE YEAR AWARD at the Women's Alliance

Conclave 2022, ASIAN LITERARY SOCIETY INDIAN WOMEN ACHIEVERS AWARD 2021 for LITERATURE among other laurels for education, poetry and prose.

She is a keen environmentalist associated with many 'green causes' and loves nature photography. She believes: 'When the Universe smiles, a child is born, nature's greatest tribute to itself!'

