

## VIETNAMESE CHRISTIANS SHARING GOD'S BEAUTY IN SACRED DANCE AND DRAMA

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### Deep Roots of Bodily Movement in Christianity and in Asian Ritual

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” proclaims John’s gospel. Christianity is not just a religion of the invisible mystery of the Holy One, but a religion in which divine love took a body in Jesus Christ. Through the ages Christian worship has involved embodiment. The culture of Vietnam has been shaped by a strong sense of veneration for ancestors, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism before the first Christian missionary arrived in 1533. In all of these bodily movement has been a part of ritual practice. A deep bow, a kowtow, was a part of Confucian ritual expression. In Buddhism, dance was associated with prayer. For example, the Lotus dance, *Mua Hoa Dang* was performed at the Imperial Palace when the emperor was asking Buddha’s blessing for peace and prosperity for the country. Many variations of the traditional Lotus dance are shared today. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq432db1nyU>

In 1583 Spanish Franciscans from Manila went to Vietnam and a few years later Spanish Dominicans went there also. During the next century the style of Christianity which was spread in Vietnam had characteristics of the Iberian Catholicism of that period. In the book *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, Peter C. Phan writes of the missionaries to Vietnam: “These Portuguese missionaries, just as the Spanish ones, brought with them their own brand of Iberian Catholicism wherever they went to evangelize, whether in Latin America or in Asia, and transmitted it to their converts.” (“In Our Own Tongues” 93) Phan goes on to explain, “Iberian Christianity was largely popular Catholicism, in the sense that it was the form of faith believed and practiced by the common folk, not the intellectual and hierarchical

elite, and it displayed a predilection for the visual, the oral, and the dramatic as the means of communicating the gospel.” (94) Dance and drama were among the methods used to share the Christian story.

Eugene Louis Beckman’s *Religious Dance in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* extensively documented the enduring importance of dance in prayer in Spain. Spain has more dances associated with worship than any other European country, so it is quite natural that the priests took dance with them to missionary countries. “The Council of Toledo which discouraged rowdy and inappropriate dancing for feast days encouraged St. Isidore of Seville to compose a ritual with elaborate movements in 678. This ritual which included boys dancing was incorporated in the Mozarabic Mass.” (Kirk 23) In many parts of Spain there have been elaborate religious processions that have included dance. Vietnamese Catholicism is known for elaborate processions which both looks back to European ideas and to Asian ideas of processions.



In 1645 the French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes asked Catholic leadership in Rome for more assistance for Asian missions and this led to the French having much influence in Vietnam. De Rhodes developed a method for writing the Vietnamese language with Latin letters rather than Chinese characters. The official script of Vietnamese used today is based on his work. The first books printed using this script were two books written by de Rhodes, *Catechismus* and his *Dictionarium*. De Rhodes’ comments on devotion to Mary written in 1651 are a good place to start in considering the value and importance of movement in prayer in Vietnam. He wrote, “At this point, we should show a beautiful image of the Blessed Virgin Mary carrying her infant son Jesus, our Lord so that people may adore him humbly by bowing their heads to the ground. First, a triple adoration should be made to the three divine persons in the one divine essence, thus confessing the mystery of the divine Trinity by this external adoration. The knees should be bent only once, to confess the one divine essence. The head should be bowed to the ground three times, demonstrating our adoration to the three divine persons, imploring each of them to forgive our sins. The head should be bowed once more to render reverence and adoration to the Lord Jesus Christ, man and mediator, humbly asking him to make us worthy to receive the fruits of his abundant redemption and to forgive all our sins. Lastly, reverence should be shown to the Blessed Virgin by bowing the head to

the ground once more, though we know that the Blessed Virgin is not God, but because she is the mother of God, all-powerful over her son, we hope to obtain pardon for our sins through her holy intercession.” (“In Our Own Tongues” 96-97)

The bow, kowtow, was very much a part of Asian religious expression and de Rhodes wanted for it become a part of Christian expression. He also associated Mary with her son Jesus Christ in an effort to be sure that people would not adore her, but that reverence for her might lead them to Christ, her son.

Alexandre de Rhodes was a Jesuit priest and the Jesuits have extensively used the arts in evangelization. Elaborate ballets had been created to celebrate the canonizations of the founder of the Jesuits St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1609 and the canonization of St. Charles Borromeo in 1610. A French Jesuit Francois Menestrier described these and other dance in *Des Ballets Anciennes et Modernes selon les regles due theatre* which was published in Paris in 1682. Judith Rock's study of Jesuit education France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicates that ballet was used extensively to bring biblical stories to life. Perhaps de Rhodes and other French missionaries appreciated art, movement, and dance in Vietnam since they were so valued in Jesuit education in France.

The reverent bows of Vietnamese Catholics today are like a congregational dance. While the meaning is very different, it is interesting to compare the form of Christians' reverent bows in prayer and the form of Buddhists' bowing.

### **Dance Development in Vietnam**

Vietnam has fifty-four different ethnic groups and thus a variety of cultures with music and dance forms. The Kinh, the ethnic Vietnamese make up the largest group and these have had the greatest influence on the dance styles discussed here. Various forms of dance have developed in theater and operas, in festivals, and for the royal court. The danced used in theater does not have set forms as those used for festivals and special occasions. Vietnamese opera which is related to Chinese opera combines theater, music, and dance. A favorite dance which originated in China is the Lion dance which is to dispel evil and bring good. The Lion dance is performed for the lunar New Year called Tet and the mid-autumn festival Tet Trung Thu. The Lion Dance is done in front of the royal palace in Hue, Vietnam <http://youtube.com/watch?v=9VgU17T-uLE> Today it is even performed for special occasions like the opening of a new business.



The imperial court dances developed to special court music called Nhã Nhạc used from the Tran dynasty to the Nguyen dynasty. Nhã Nhạc meaning “elegant music” was used in the Vietnamese court for ceremonies, anniversaries, religious holidays, coronations, funerals, and official receptions. Some intricate dances developed to this music. The main influence has come from China, but the music of Cambodia also had some influence. These are especially performed in Huế where the royalty lived. Some of the main dances are the Fan dance, Lantern dance, Lotus dance, Flag dance, and Platter dance. An example of the Fan dance done at the imperial theater in Hue can be seen.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwK9isNxweI&mode=related&search=>

Another popular tradition at the imperial theater is the Lantern dance.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXyEc7x8BZw> The dances and music of the period have been declared an Intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO in 2005. In the 1950’s and 1960’s there was an effort to define and preserve “traditional Vietnamese dance.”

Considering the main styles of dance which are ethnic, theater, and imperial, the style of last seems to have had the greatest influence on sacred dance that is being used in Christian prayer today both in Vietnam and among Vietnamese Americans.



### **What is the style of “Vietnamese dance”?**

Often people are so immersed in a culture that they are not able to recognize or define aspects of that. Having been raised in the U.S. and taking classical ballet as a child from 1952 to 1962, I considered ballet “normal dancing.” I was surprised as an adult by comments that I heard in Africa. In Harare, Zimbabwe, a European high school teacher told me about how the girls in her class laughed when she tried to teach them movements from ballet to interpret Christian hymns. For the African girls, ballet was a strange and humorous type of ethnic dance from Europe. How do people like me start to understand that what we consider “normal dance” is a taste for a particular aesthetic style and in this style our bodies have encoded certain ways of moving?

Cheryl Stock, an Australian choreographer, had opportunities to work in Vietnam with dancers there, and to bring Vietnamese dancers to perform with her company in Australia. Being fascinated with the form and aesthetics of the dancers and dances, she considered both how individuals seem to “encode” certain ways of moving and also how cultures have aesthetic preferences. Stock interviewed 53 Vietnamese asking what they thought was central in Vietnamese approaches to dance. From the interviews, she concluded: “Qualities distinguishing Vietnamese dance from both classical and contemporary Western dance styles, would seem to be a lower centre of gravity with particular emphasis on circularity, and continuous fluid movement described in Vietnamese as *mem*. These aspects are combined with an internalization of both feeling and form. Often resulting in a containment of space and emotion. Symmetry, harmony and balance of opposites reflecting the *am/duong* philosophy still seem to play a role through preference for clear, ordered and regular spatial patterns, and a tendency towards even dynamics. Despite a constantly evolving ‘dance aesthetic.’ Through the absorption and adaptation of new cultural influences, these time-honored aspects are still discernable in today’s choreography in

Vietnam.” Stock also wrote of Vietnamese style as introverted rather than extroverted. Some qualities discussed can be seen in this example of dance used in St. Paul’s Catholic church.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT78o5kbdXg>

Stock discussed “Vietnamisation of outside dance influences.” She explained that Vietnamese dancers learned her choreography for a work called “Through the Eyes of a Phoenix,” that she developed from ancient stories in Vietnam. The dances learned the steps, but they danced it in their own way through “changes in dynamics, phrasing, spatial projection, and through emotional investment in individual interpretations. Perhaps it can be compared to communicating in a second or third language that is spoken fluently but nevertheless retains strong accents, inflections and rhythms from one’s native tongue.” (From “Moving Bodies Across Cultures, Analysis of Vietnamese/ Australian dance and music project” by Cheryl Stock. Presented at 1998 ADSA Conference, *Bodies in Question*, Hamilton, New Zealand, 29 June – 4 July 1998. [http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00000364/01/stock\\_moving.PDF](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00000364/01/stock_moving.PDF))



Frequently Vietnamese dancers carry something such as fans, flowers, musical instruments, or lanterns. When a Malaysian was watching a video of some Vietnamese dancers holding something unfamiliar, he asked if it was a weapon. In his country men always hold weapons when they dance. The Vietnamese dancers were holding musical instruments.

### **Movement and Dance Among Christians in Vietnam**

Zaragoza has described the beauty and color of a religious gathering in Vietnam: “Phuc Nhat yearly hosts a major celebration for the feast of the Vietnamese Martyrs, November 24. Parish groups come from all over the region, each location bringing a small red wooden box (*thank rich*) that holds the relics of a martyr from their church. At the celebration I witnessed a beautiful and lively procession. It included various musical ensembles---traditional drumming

groups, brass bands, and indigenous musicians. Vietnamese women in the traditional flowing silk dresses (*ao dai*) were followed by women religious, by a music group, by the relics of one saint, by another church group, by more religious, by another saint's relics, and so forth. There were colorful flags, streams of boy altar servers, and men and women in traditional Vietnamese traditional dress." ("Honoring the Martyrs of Vietnam" 5-6) All are engaged in this "movement prayer," this "congregational dance."

While the focus on this article is on movement and dance, the styles of these are often so intertwined with styles of music. Vietnamese dance has been described as lyrical and as Zaragoza writes, "Melodies for Vietnamese hymns tend to be highly lyrical, often with extensive ranges. Because of the need to have note placement match the proper relationship of tone for the word, usually counter melodies are used rather than homophonic harmony. Most hymns may be sung a cappella; in fact, it is not unusual to find choir rehearsals conducted without an accompanist, since the repertoire is more melodic than rhythmic. Minor keys and slow tempos are favored. Currently, post-Vatican II composers are exploring songs that are in a more Asian



style, inculcating pentatonic folk song scales in their melodies." ("Vietnamese Catholic Express" 28-29.) Both dance and music are dynamic forms evolving as people learn and as people come in contact with other styles. Vietnamese Christian dance forms are evolving in contact with western modern dance styles and with various Asian styles.

In 2004 when the Franciscan Friars, Sisters, and lay order celebrated a 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of French Franciscans returning to Vietnam, dance was a part of the celebration at St. Francis Church in Ho Chi Minh City. They remembered that “Between 1583 and 1834, over 80 Franciscan missionaries came from Europe, most of them through the Spanish Philippines.” (“Franciscans Celebrate” 25) In 1834 the last of the early Franciscans, Odorico da Collodi, died for his faith in prison in Vietnam.

St Francis Parish has about a thousand members and many activities for youth. On various evening of the week young people can play sports or have dance classes. The pastor encourages much lay participation. Zaragoza notes, “St. Francis is one of the few Vietnamese parishes where I have seen female altar servers and lay eucharistic ministers. In Vietnam, usually only little girls (and maybe boys) do liturgical movement. But the sacred dance group at this parish, a ministry performed at Marian celebrations and other feast days, includes teenage boys and college-age males. The pastor Father Alphonse Minh Nguyen, OFM, who did graduate studies at the Catholic Theological Union, encourages such inclusivity. He adds, ‘We are a parish of minor-ness, fraternity and of joyful behavior.’ Choirs minister at every Mass at this parish, which has six active ensembles.” (“Franciscans Celebrate” 29)

Zaragoza pointed out, “The resilient Vietnamese people survived 1,000 years of occupation from China, outlasted over 100 years of French colonization and endured continuous wars in the past century.” (“Franciscans Celebrate”, 26) In the Bible when the Hebrew people were oppressed in Egypt, the dance of Miriam celebrated the movement from slavery towards a promised land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 15:20-21). As is noted in *Dancing with Creation: Mexican and Mexican American Dance in Christian Worship and*



*Education*, “Dancing is a way of appropriating and claiming freedom and thanking God for it. People who have been oppressed in one way or another claim their dignity and liberty as children of God in the energy of dance.” (Kirk 19) Like Miriam, the Vietnamese claim God’s gifts in the joy of dance.

### **Movement, Dance, and Drama Among Vietnamese American Christians**

Christmas commemorates the divine leaping to earth in Jesus. Legends say that St. Francis of Assisi encouraged dances to Christmas carols around the Nativity scene. Through the ages the festivities of Christmas have been celebrated in dance. In both Vietnam and among Vietnamese Americans Christmas dances are popular.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3JhOr0CeKU>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxDR0ottxNI>

At Baltimore Vietnamese Baptist Church children share “Silent Night”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dviJojY83Gw>



Not only dance, but also drama is used by Vietnamese Americans. At the July 2003 National Vietnamese Youth/Young Adult Conference in Irvine, CA the LaSalian Youth Troupe of San Jose performed the story of the trial of the Vietnamese martyrs before their execution.

Through the ages it has been recognized that “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” Following Christ is not always easy or popular and it has not been in Vietnam. Pope John Paul II canonized 117 Martyrs of Vietnam on June 19, 1988. These saints represented over 130,000 faithful who were martyred over a period of four centuries in that country. (“Honoring the Martyrs” 4) Movement, dance, and drama are used in various ways for different celebrations in different places. Zaragoza notes, “Many Americans are inspired by the sacred dance tradition of the Vietnamese. Usually these dances are done in honor of May during May or October (traditionally observed as special times for venerating the Virgin Mary). Rarely is sacred dance done in honor of the martyrs; the primary gesture is incense veneration as appropriate for an honored ancestor. In Vietnam it is rare to see a skit about the martyrs during a liturgy, although sometimes these take place outside the church on the day of celebration or during a youth conference. In the United States, some youth or young adult groups will dress in the traditional robes of the Vietnamese king, soldiers, and Catholic martyrs. They act out the call to denounce the faith and ‘step on the crucifix’ as a sign of apostasy. Of course, the Christians in the play do not give in to the allurements of the mandarin or king, and remain faithful to the gospel of Jesus, comforting their fellow prisoners before shedding their blood. Such skits are a way of catechizing the second-generation children about their heritage. It also affirms the involvement of the young adults, who have the challenge of preserving Vietnamese faith and culture while living in a post-modern society that neither honors ancestors nor esteems ancient traditions.” (“Honoring,” 7)

Vietnamese Catholics seem to number over 325,000 in the United States. Orange County, California, has the largest number of “overseas” Vietnamese of any area of the United States. In one of the largest Catholic periodicals in the U.S., the *National Catholic Reporter*, Sharon Abercrombie wrote an article called “All of the beauty of God.” “The influx of immigrants in the United States poses challenges to Catholic parishes seeking the best way to serve new arrivals, from practical questions of scheduling Masses in foreign languages, to broader issues of creating one community amid ethnic diversity. But those who work in multicultural ministry see the gifts that the newcomers bring to the American church as well. As Franciscan Br. Rufino Zaragoza says, ‘I hunger for God’s face, but one culture does not contain all of the beauty of God.’ Zaragoza serves



in one of the most culturally diverse dioceses in the country: Oakland, Calif., where Sunday Masses are held in 17 languages.” ([http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2006c/091506/ss091506a.php](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2006c/091506/ss091506a.php) , September 15, 2006) No one culture can reveal all the beauty of the face of God. No one dance style can reveal all the beauty of God’s movement in the world.

Peter C. Phan discusses popular religion and liturgical inculturation at length in *In Our Own Tongues: perspectives from Asia On Mission and Inculturation* and he notes that globalization influences not only non-Western cultures, but it is like a boomerang coming back to Western cultures. Peoples of former colonies or occupied lands come legally or illegally to live in Western countries. These countries become diverse and complex. Phan notes, “In light of this postmodern and postcolonial understanding of culture, it is easy to appreciate popular devotion as a form of resistance and subversion, as well as compromise and appropriation of the official religion. Keith Pecklers, in the wake of Latin American theologians, highlights the ways in which popular devotion has opened up alternative access to the divine, especially in the Marian devotion and different forms of blessings, and has privileged the role of women . . .” (88) Elder Vietnamese Americans encourage Marian devotions among young as a way of conserving their culture. Considering the beautiful significance of Our Lady of La Vang as a comforter and protector, it is no wonder that dances remembering her have become very popular in the United States. October 16, 2004, for the first anniversary of the Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang at Las Vegas, Nevada, dance was used to the lovely instrumental melodies of *Longing Heart* created by Rufino Zaragoza from traditional songs.



Around the Mediterranean Sea for thousands of years bread, wine, and oil were staples of the diet. Within the development of Judaism and then Christianity, these basic things for ordinary life come to be used in religious ritual. Ceremonial meals and anointings for strength and

healing were important. The mystery of the Divine was inculturated with symbols of bread, wine, and oil. In cultures in which these are not central parts of everyday life, people need ways to understand the sacred stories and to be renewed by the rituals. A very fine example of Vietnamese liturgical inculturation can be seen in the dance remembering Jesus' Last Supper which was created and performed by the Vietnamese Youth Group of San Jose, California. The supper includes things that you would find in a Vietnamese home, rice cakes, bowls of rice and chopsticks, a flagon for drink. The sounds of the music and the movement of the dance profoundly convey emotions of the Last Supper. This moving dance created in California was then used at the World Youth Day in Toronto, Canada, in 2002.



The Vietnamese Youth Group in San Jose, California also created a very moving dance of women lamenting the death of Jesus. In Hebrew scriptures again and again there are references to women dancing lamentations. Both spiritually and psychologically acknowledging pain and expressing an emotional release is important. The Vietnamese women are not only re-telling an ancient story in dance, but creating space for people today to bring their sorrows, express them, and through the grace of God know transformation.



### **Dance as a bridge to understanding and healing**

Maura Ngugen Donohue wrote of “Together Higher” the only independent modern dance company in Vietnam which recently toured the U.S. This group is from Hanoi. She was disappointed that more people did not attend the performance with the directors Long and Lan and their company of five hearing-impaired dancers in New York City in March 2007. She notes that many in the U.S. seem to forget that “Vietnam is still a divided nation in the eyes of those who fled the Communist regime after the U.S. withdrawal and Saigon's fall. Producers naively had no idea why Vietnamese-American communities wouldn't want to support the presentation of an artist originating from North Vietnam, the winning side. Did we forget it was a civil war we stepped into? Or could it be that Americans saw all of Vietnam as the enemy, and thus are insensible to the political divide, specifically that between those forced to flee and those who now rule the country? . . . . Deaf audiences showed up. Some young, intrepid Viet Kieu turned out. Where was everyone else? Could it be that Hollywood has so effectively taught us over and over that Vietnam was simply a morality tale for America, that our 50,000+ dead soldiers meant more than the more than two million Vietnamese killed during the war, not to mention the more than four million dead or continuing to suffer from the legacy of Agent Orange? That the disappearance of an entire generation is not on our hands but on the hands of a primitive people? . . . . That the war is barely taught in our schools? That we'd rather watch Mel Gibson's racist “We Were Soldiers” than see live Vietnamese share their contemporary selves with us?” She writes of the “opportunity to see a true post-modern revolution” as it develops in the emerging creative dance forms. Even a brief part of “Stories of Us” preformed by “Together Higher “ at the Dance Theater Workshop in March is intriguing and reveals Le Vu Long’s creativity.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL3LiMeMPpI>

Maura Ngugen Donohue emphasized the difficult context in which this first independent modern dance company works. They are “making art in a landscape monitored by a Ministry of Culture and Information. The focus, by those in charge, has been on creating a form of Vietnamese Modern Dance that ends up suffering from all the horrible outcomes that "fusion" brings to mind. The process has been entirely political, the generation of ideas and aesthetic completely inorganic and totally biased towards technical showmanship and entertainment. . . That Long has made it his mission to work against the prevailing Vietnamese aesthetic of 'pretty,' to work with dancers who didn't spend years in Kiev learning ballet or Paris or Sydney learning modern, to work with non-dancers, to work with non-dancers from the fringes of society, to work with non-dancers from the fringes of society creating dances about those at the fringes of society (he has worked in H.I.V. positive and AIDS communities as well) makes him a true maverick. Together Higher is the first independent, contemporary dance company in Vietnam.”

When Zaragoza and Kirk gave a workshop “Vietnamese Christians Sharing God’s Beauty,” at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival 2007, “Many Faiths, many forms dancing the sacred together” in Berkeley, California, the session concluded with Ngugen Donohue’s allusion to the four million Vietnamese who have suffered from the toxic effects of Agent Orange. Starting August 10, 1961 about 12 million gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed during a ten year period by U.S. forces to kill the foliage in areas where the enemy was believed to be. Kirk showed the workshop participants pictures of babies recently born in Vietnam whose deformed and retarded bodies show the on-going effects of Agent Orange. Dance is bodily and through the ages has been used in prayers for healing bodies. The body of Earth is still wounded by the effects of



Agent Orange and thousands of human bodies are. May we learn to appreciate the dance of Vietnamese, may we learn to circle with them in dances of healing. We listened to the poignant melodies of “Longing Heart,” an instrumental CD of traditional songs during this closing reflection.

After the session a man who had fled as a boat person from Vietnam stayed back. Finally he said, “The music reminded

me of when I was put in a concentration camp for three years. We could not sing the words of our hymns or the guards would get us, so we hummed them very softly.”

Music and dance can heal hearts and bodies. Let us learn from each others dances and dance together in circles of compassion around the earth.



*For Vietnamese Christian music and information on pilgrimages to Vietnam with Rufino Zaragoza, see*

[www.ocp.org](http://www.ocp.org). He has been the production manager of several collections of hymns published in books and on CD's. He has created a CD of instrumental meditations based on Vietnamese melodies called Longing Heart.

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