RITES OF PASSAGE

by

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FOREWORD

Nguyen Van Thuan's Rites of Passage was originally published by the Michigan State University Viet Nam Advisory Group, Saigon, in April 1962. It is reprinted by the American Friends of Vietnam with the kind permission of Michigan State University.

In the foreword to the original publication, the author stated that he had " . . . made extensive use of descriptive data provided in papers written by National Institute of Administration/students, especially that data unveiling regional discrepancies. He has provided additional information on relatively old patterns and has added an interpretation of trends in Vietnamese rites of passage."

In the foreword, also, Mr. Thuan expressed his indebtedness to Dr. John Donoghue "for providing him with pertinent documentation and to Myrna Pike for her work on the English manuscript."

I. LUNAR CALENDAR NEW YEAR'S DAY, OR TET

Preliminary Consideration. Tet was the most important celebration of the year in old Vietnam. Today it is still observed with much solemnity by nearly all social classes in both urban and rural areas. Although many changes have occurred during the last forty years--to an unequal extent in different parts of the country--the general pattern is still adhered to with much affection.

The significance of such a celebration derives from many motivations:

(1) The attachment to the millenary traditions among which ancestor veneration is one of the most important. The Tet period is the best occasion to acquaint children with their ancestors.

(2) The eagerness of family members earning a living far away from home to return to their birth place and live amid the extended family. This, to a great extent, reflects the patriarchal family pattern, so predominant in Asian countries.

(3) The desire for a rest after a long working period, as most Vietnamese do not yet afford themselves summer vacations, week-ends, or regular and irregular recesses of any kind.

(4) A traditional desire to meet relatives and friends and to wish them good luck, prosperity, longevity and a large family.

Tet can also be considered to some extent a season for children and gifts. It is not the point here to evaluate the desirability of the gift-giving practice, but it is interesting to note that the practice has created much worry for underprivileged subordinates who have to pay for offerings destined for superiors or "benefactors," and a sort of embarrassment to some people of high social status who are expected to distribute gifts.

Preparation for the Tet. In the first decades of this century, preparation for the Tet virtually began in the 10th month of the lunar year with household embellishments, such as white-washing; the making of clothes, and arrangements to clear debts and financial obligations. It has been believed that the physical appearance of people and their homes during the Tet is a factor determining social prestige, and those who are more or less concerned about appearances usually have made efforts to show off their social standing and values. This common habit has often exhausted the resources of people who are economically unprivileged but affected by snobbery.

As early as the 10th month in the lunar calendar, markets and shops are loaded with goods of all kinds--foodstuffs, ready-made clothing for children and grown-ups, kitchen utensils, household equipment, appurtenances for the altar (candlesticks, incense burners, oil lamps, tablets), firecrackers, incense josssticks, paper flower and flower pots. These months see, on the whole, a seasonal boom in the production and distribution of consumer goods.

However, the really bustling time is the final two weeks of the year. The 23rd day of the last lunar month is the Kitchen God's Day on which nearly all householders offer the god a farewell meal, usually announced by the first firecrackers, to solicit his favorable report on their conduct and behavior during the year just ending. It has been believed that the Kitchen God is assigned by the Emperor of Heaven to observe and record all right and wrong doings of householders under his protection and supervision and to report them to the Emperor at the year's end.

As a rule, the offering to the Kitchen God consists of candles, glutinous rice, fruit, boiled chicken, votive papers, including money, gold, garments, and many carps. These last are to be used as a means of transportation for the god's heavenward journey.

People of the north used to plant a lunar new year pole--cay neu--in the center of the front yard. The pole bore some leaves at its very top and included a set of several small earthenware gongs (khanh), an amulet made of red paper, a small rice container and a small water container. It was believed the device had a magical property which would chase away evil spirits and prevent them from disturbing the householders. The pole was set up on the 23rd of the old year and brought down on the 7th day of the new.

After the Kitchen God's Day, life gets more and more hectic in every home and shop. Most shops are overloaded with goods of all kinds and many small, seasonal merchants display their products on the sidewalks of blocks surrounding the neighborhood marketplaces. Sometimes improvised "markets" are set up for a few weeks preceding the Tet to cope with the large number of occasional and non-professional vendors who hope to add to the family income. The last goods to appear in the markets before the Tet include all kinds of candies, glutinous rice cakes, fresh flowers, green branches, shrubs and trees, the last being almost indispensable items for household decoration. Also on the sidewalks in populous quarters, old scribes sit writing beautiful Chinese characters expressing greetings and wishes such as Welcome Spring, Happy New Year, Happiness, Prosperity, Longevity and Peace. By the side of these traditional "learned men" are dealers in folklore sketches and pictures representing the figures of pigs, cocks, well-fed children, handsome old characters out of Chinese literature and envied idols: the God of longevity, the God of Virtue, the God of Wealth, etc. All these rudimentary symbols are to be stuck or hung on pillars, gates, columns or walls of the house, both as decorations and devices to wish oneself and others a happier life in the coming year.

The well-known traditional food for the Tet has been, since time immemorial, the banh chung (or banh tet in South Vietnam), a kind of cake made of boiled glutinous rice, stuffed with pork and green beans and wrapped in green leaves. In nearly all households there is a fairly large provision of these cakes which can be conserved for a couple of weeks and served at breakfast, as a snack or as an additional dish for young and old. The origin of this cake is the topic for many versions of a folk story told and retold from one generation to another. Among other commonly prepared foods are onion pickles and hog lard. They stand out, with the traditional glutinous rice cakes and the parallel sentences written on red paper, as most symbolic of the Tet. They also relieve shortages due to the slack in food production and distribution during the first weeks of the year. In North Vietnam, lean pork pies, pork jellies, fish bladder, bamboo sprout, pig leg, vermicelli, and chicken are dishes most desired by people of some economic standing. In South Vietnam especially, pickles of soya bean sprouts and cabbage leaves are widely eaten with stewed meat. Among the various fruits consumed during the holiday, watermelon and grapefruit are the most common.

In every household, furniture, especially in the parlor, is cleaned and rearranged. The altar requisites are polished until they shine with a touch of newness. The walls are whitewashed, the floor carefully washed or swept. In the North an almost leafless peach branch with its lovely pink flowers and buds and a few hollow trays in which narcissus bulbs are planted are most appreciated as decorations for the parlor. In the South where peach trees do not grow, apricot branches with white or yellow flowers, and chrysanthemums of all varieties planted in earthen pots, are found in almost every prosperous household. A belief which has been widely held says that it is not desirable to sweep the floor during the first three days of the year. Rice and water containers should be full and the firewood stock large enough for many days, if not for a whole month. People try to have a profusion of everything as an omen of plenty for the year ahead.

The eve of the New Year is a time when all social and personal business should have been settled, and debts and obligations cleared. People want to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, pending affairs in the belief that it is an ill omen to begin the new year with troubles of debt and contention. Whatever the economic status of the household, all obligations should be fulfilled by the last hour of the old year and both human beings and inanimate objects ready to welcome the new.

In past years, especially those of peace, the deafening sound of firecrackers was heard all around by midnight. The practice of shooting firecrackers has been looked upon as a way to chase away evil spirits and other invisible agents along with the old year and to welcome the coming of a better new life that is so longed for. Shooting off many firecrackers also was a snobbish way of showing off wealth and nobility, especially in periods when the Chinese mode of life was still much admired by the Vietnamese.

However, with the cultural impact of Western living habits on the Vietnamese people and with the restrictions in the production and use of firecrackers for either economic or security reasons, there has been in about the last two decades a growing tendency to minimize the practice in both rural and urban areas.

When still permitted, firecrackers were shot off on the 23rd day of the last month, on the eve of the New Year, during the first three or sometimes seven days of the year and on the 7th and final day. They were set off in series or in isolated claps. Now that firecrackers are prohibited, more for security than economic reasons, it is much missed, especially by nostalgic grown-ups and boisterous teenagers.

Another important stage in the celebration of the New Year is sitting up and awaiting its first hour. Except for the small children, most family members generally want to keep themselves awake for this hour, first to present an offering to their ancestors, then to the spirit of the homesite and finally to the Heaven and Earth God. On the altars, oil lampsand candles are lit as are joss sticks and incense, to be burned from the first hour throughout the seventh day of the New Year. At that time the New Year Pole is taken down, signifying the departure of ancestors for the other world. At midnight, every member of the family, beginning with the highest in rank, pays his respects before the altar. Afterwards, at least a few members of the family start a journey for luck which usually consists of (a) a visit to a neighboring pagoda, usually to the one believed to have the most supernatural powers; (b) paying respects to the spirits of the pagoda by kowtowing before their altar; and (c) bringing back a good luck leaf, branch or flower from shrubs or trees on the pagoda grounds.(In Hanoi, the most frequented pagodas were the Ngoc Son and Quan Thanh. In Saigon, it has been the Marshall Le Van Duyet shrine, commonly known as the Lang Ong or Great Mister Shrine.)

Starting on the journey to the pagoda, a person takes care to step out in a propitious direction as indicated by a horoscope, to avoid meeting a female first, and guard against any unwholesome thinking, heated discussion and vulgar language. It is believed that such "misdoings" would be omens of bad luck in the coming year.

A meal is usually given to the family upon its return from this journey and everyone then goes to bed for a sound sleep.

People get up either early or late the next morning and try to put themselves in a serene state of mind and a pleasant, if not a merry, mood. Immediately after washing and dressing up in their best clothes, family members wish one another a happy new year, good luck, good health, longevity, wealth and other good things. Greetings are offered first by the lowest in familial rank to the highest and the latter return the courtesy by distributing luck gifts consisting usually of small amounts of money wrapped in red paper.

The first visitor to the household on New Year's day and the first trip out by each member of the family are matters of concern to everyone.

Most people are extremely anxious to receive, as the first caller of the day, a man of high moral standing (of a generous, dignified, noble character) and hope very much to avoid a person who has a reputation for being avaricious, dishonest, cunning or crafty. It is believed that the first visitor to the house will be followed for all the rest of the year by people of his type--a decisive factor in the success or failure of the family's business and personal affairs.

Whoever the first man may be, he is always warmly received and invited to have one or many cups of tea, a cup of liquor, to taste a large variety of candies and marmalade and finally to have a "lunch" with the head of the family.

It is desirable, though not always expected, that the visitor offer his hosts a luck gift, usually firecrackers to be set off immediately after his arrival, or a symbolic gift of money to be distributed to the children.

Although it is hoped that the first visitor is to be a man of great moral dignity, this is not to say that the visitors to follow may behave loosely; everyone who pays calls on relatives and friends should make an effort to appear as easy-going, generous, joyful and serene-minded as possible, even if they are troubled about something.

For those who did not make the journey described above in the first hour of the year, the first trip may be on New Year's day, usually at an hour which the horoscopic calendar says is the most propitious or the most "harmless" so as to insure good luck and prosperity all year long. If in a particular year, no harmless hour is found on the first day, many people are careful to defer the journey to the second or third day. The same pattern is followed on these days concerning the propitious direction and hour for setting out.

There has been, especially in the rural areas, a general practice to go to pay respects to the dead on the first day of the Tet in the family communal house--the extended family worship house--and to meet and greet close and distant relatives. At this time, a more or less substantial offering is brought to the common ancestors.

It has also been a customary practice to pay courtesy visits to parents, relatives, benefactors, employers, good friends and to return courtesies rendered by people of the same or higher social rank. Up until recently, it was expected in Vietnam that people of lower social or familial rank first visit their superiors; while return visits were usually expected only from equals, all signs of kindness were very much appreciated by inferiors.

On the first day of the New Year, a newly married couple is introduced to its older relatives who did not get the chance to attend the wedding. As a rule, the two are warmly greeted and receive such wishes as to have many children, to have the first boy baby in the coming year, to become wealthy and to enjoy happiness, prosperity and longevity in their life together.

On the whole, this custom of exchanging visits with the serving of tea, liquor, cigarettes, candies and other foods, sometimes repeated dozens of times during the day, makes everyone very busy and absorbs a good deal of money from family budgets. It often creates a deficit in the finances of people who are not really well off.

The first day is generally the most burdensome as far as courtesy visits are concerned. Many people are so scrupulous as to return the courtesy on the very day they receive it, fearing that a call on the next day would reflect a slighting attitude towards the initial visitors. This day is extremely busy for people who have many social relations; the following ones usually are filled with less important calls.

Calls are a social duty, especially for family heads and people of some social standing; for young people, the first days of the new year are generally a time for entertainment and enjoyment. Young children often accompany their mothers and sisters to pagodas and on visits to relatives and acquaintances. Teenagers usually saunter about the streets or meet at pagodas, cinemas, theaters, tea shops, restaurants and more recently, stadiums and playing grounds where they can enjoy refreshments, dramatic performances, music and petty talk. People who are not bound by social calls often indulge in such indoor games as chess, cards and gambling of all kinds. This does not mean that players are not found on the sidewalks of crowded streets, but these improvised gatherings include only people of the lower social strata.

The first days of the year, even the first couple of months, are busy ones for fortune tellers. Their business usually begins with the first hours of New Year's Day, immediately after the early journeys to pagodas and shrines where most people procure "personal" horoscope sheets. These are prepared and printed in advance and the people pick them at random. The sheet usually bears prophetic statements about the eventual success or failure of the consultant in a fairly large range of affairs from personal problems to business activities. The interpretation of these sheets is not an easy matter for the layman and usually requires the help of skilled persons, conversant with Chinese characters and the figurative language of invisible powers. It has also been a habit, in the early days of the year, to consult a horoscope reader about what will happen to a person during the year so he knows what is to be avoided and what is to be adopted.

In the old days, it was customary for literate or learned people to use their writing brush for the first time in the New Year on the days and hours thought to be most propitious.

These days the Tet celebration ends with the reopening of government offices and those of large private agencies. Many a small shop, though, will wait for a propitious hour and day within the first two weeks before resuming business. Travelers, too, will wait for a lucky day, as indicated by the traditional Chinese calendar, on which to begin a trip.

The general thinking has been that the first weeks (formerly the first two months) of the year are a time for enjoyment, for happy living, and not much for toiling and worrying about productive activities. To what extent this indolent attitude affects economic activities and development has been a matter of concern to many economists and sociologists. It is safe to say, however, that in the case of many householders who are economically weak but affected by snobbery, this somewhat foolish attitude toward spending money and refraining from work has caused many family money problems. There are many instances of debts having been contracted to defray the expenditures made by householders who spend beyond their means. This often makes us think about a desirable change in the psychology of the present generation and in its attitude toward the annual Tet celebration.

II. MARRIAGE AND WEDDING

Preliminary. In old Vietnam, where social life was so strongly based on family units, the heavily patriarchal and paternalistic character of the family had considerable impact on the marriage process and was the reason behind many cultural manifestations. Even in present days and in areas most influenced by western culture, the main traits of a patriarchal system still remain intact, at least in their observable forms: the rituals are kept alive and in essence, hold the same significance as they did decades ago; the authoritarian role of parents and grandparents is, at least outwardly, equal to what it was in the past; the wedding celebration follows roughly the same essential steps which appear to be dictated by the old traditional and cultural motivations. Changes have occurred to unequal degrees in both rural and urban areas, mostly in the matter of clothing, means of transportation, entertainment, and to some extent in the parlance, behavior, attitude toward family authority, and aspirations. But generally speaking, marriage continues to be viewed with the same importance, despite the fact that recent economic and other conditions have been diverting the way to familial union.

In the following description, the reader should bear in mind the existence of at least two patterns which are not clearly distinct but need to be treated separately: the traditional and the modern sophisticated patterns of behavior. Although it is neither accurate to draw a clear line of demarcation between them, nor feasible to divide them on a geographical basis, e.g., into rural and urban patterns, these words are used here for the sake of convenience and lack of better terms to depict the relatively conservative observance of old customs and rituals, and today's tendency toward change and receptiveness to new ideas.

Adolescent Relationships. In the old days there was a strong emphasis on chastity, close supervision of the young was widely practiced, and the society under the Confucian ethic system did not highly regard the physical development of love nor its enjoyment. Falling in love was somewhat discouraged and adolescent courtship prevented.

Youngsters socialized in such a way as to avoid unwatched relationships, uncontrolled contacts, and, consequently, falling in love. Both popular and aristocratic literature, however, speaks of spontaneous and/or romantic love, which existed in this country as in any other part of the civilized world even though it suffered from rigid social and cultural sanctions. Avoidance of adolescent love relationships was accepted as ethically desirable and therefore placed all those who fought against pressure and authority into a category of "outlaws." Their action was formally condemned as shameful not only to the individuals involved, but also to their extended families who were morally responsible for their loose education, to say nothing of the larger community, e.g., the villages or cantons, whose reputation might be affected by the misconduct of their younger inhabitants.

Marriage was almost formally defined as duty and sometimes alliance. Many unions, therefore, were arranged in a relatively arbitrary manner by elders (grandparents and parents or, in the event of their absence, uncles and brothers). Among people of the higher classes there often was a large range of pre-existing specifications regarding an eligible or possible mate. Betrothal with or without immediate marriage was arranged before youngsters had much opportunity to interact with each other as adolescents, often before puberty. Even if physical maturity or puberty was awaited, there still was physical and social separation of potential mates. In spite of all, this sex partition can only be regarded as an ideal, rather than a strict observance, especially among the ordinary people.

Choice of Mate. Among the factors determining choice of mate were social standing, economic status, honorableness, and the moral reputations of ascendants' parents' and grandparents' pasts were often taken into consideration since heredity was believed to strongly influence moral character.

Much emphasis was placed on other social values, such as the prospective mates' and parents' degree of formal education or literacy, social rank, honorific title, and moral and intellectual deportment as measured by Confucian cultural and ethical canons and contemporary standards. Certain prejudices limited the choice to classes of eligibles, preventing, for example, theatrical artists and singers from marrying people outside their occupational category, and women of bad reputation from making honorable engagements.

The role of parents, as pointed out earlier, was clearly dominant, if not exclusive, in the choice of mate. Although the desirability of yielding to the wishes of the young people was always somewhat recognized, parents seemed to exert strong pressure upon their children, especially their daughters, to accept their decisions. Up to the third or fourth decade of this century, the young people, particularly girls, showed a generally submissive attitude toward their parents' choice and decision.

In more recent times this easily manageable disposition has been found more commonly in the countryside than in urban areas. In both geographical patterns, there has been a growing change in the attitude of children and parents as well toward the matter of choice and enforcement of decision. The tendency has been that young people fight to free themselves from the arbitrary authority of their parents and the parents no longer exert their authority with the same diligence as before. At present, conflicts between children and parents in the choice of a mate seem to be more frequent, or at least more apparent, as a result of less submission to paternalistic authority, stronger desire for individual self-determination and a relative deterioration of the old ethical and cultural pattern.

Adolescents and young adults meet one another much more frequently than in the past and opportunity for pre-marital social contact exists, with or without control, in market and business places, schools and entertainment spots. This has lead to contacts, engagements and unions initiated by the parties concerned. The role of parents has been reduced, in many cases, to one of advice and sponsorship, probably more effective in rural areas than in towns.

Many parents nowadays appear to be more receptive to cultural change and either tolerate this virtual violation of paternalistic domination or are indifferent to it.

Marriage Age and Child Marriage. In old times, the marriageable age was believed to be 13 for girls and 16 for boys. In spite of this, marriage, for various reasons, very frequently occurred at earlier ages. Among farmers, there might have been economic motivations--parents perhaps were short of labor and tried to get daughters-in-law for "free" domestic help. Daughters-in-law sometimes were sent to work on or even supervise the farming operation. A girl's own parents, if financially weak, might have wanted to get rid of mouths to feed. In most cases of child marriage falling into the first category, the girl was older than the boy, sometimes his senior by five, ten or twelve years. The boy may not even have reached his teens

Another motivation for child marriage might have been an excessive eagerness to have grandchildren, especially boys. This was particularly true in families which had very few boys, regardless of the number of girls. Here again, the girls were generally older than the boys who often were not yet out of their teens. In many cases, both motivations concurred to build up this practice regarded as harmless by many a naive parent who rarely anticipated any overt or latent discontent.

In former times, the alliance of two families was also a factor which produced child marriages. Engagements in such cases were generally made by parents when their children were very small or even before they were born. Seemingly very few of these couples failed to hear about the absence of happiness in marital life and their problems, mostly hidden, did exist and tortured them all their lives.

However, everything has changed with time. The marriageable age is no longer set so low as before; throughout the country it is now around 16 or 18 for women and 20 or 21 for men. Minimum ages tend to be higher in urban areas, probably a result of the influence of western culture and changed economic conditions. While it is not the point here to determine the actual age at which marriage most often occurs in rural and urban areas, it may be interesting to note that country people marry earlier than city people, that the actual marriage age in rural areas is closer to the modern ideal mentioned above. In towns, the actual marriage age seems to be much higher and bachelors and spinsters are not rare among people who have been affected by the cultural and economic impacts of modern life. Child marriages are also less frequent nowadays, especially in urban areas. In very remote parts of the country, the general tendency has been to move gradually away from this practice, apparently for the same reasons as in towns.

Wedding Rituals. The rituals observed during the last three decades have roughly the same principal characteristics as those followed in earlier times. They still bear the same appellations and imply therefore the same significance. However, the way of conducting them has changed in many aspects, and to unequal degrees, according to different levels of acceptance of the foreign, or more explicitly, western, culture.

Although discrepancies in ritual also exist among regions and smaller divisions of the country, they are not so important as to alter the general pattern significantly. Wherever necessary, qualifications arising from geographic, economic and social differences, as well as evolution, will be indicated.

The Inquiry of the Name. When a boy has reached the marriageable age, his parents set about discreetly choosing a mate for him, either by themselves or with the help of an intermediary. In either case, the formal contacts between two families usually require the intervention of an intermediary, a man, or more often a woman, of middle age, well known in the community, and enjoying a good moral reputation. Naturally, the intermediary, or go-between, should be an acquaintance, if not a close friend to both parties. The reward he or she may receive for rendering such services is rarely publicized, but it is understood that a small gift of a traditional robe or something similar was the most frequent item chosen in the recent past by North Vietnam country people as a token of their gratitude. It also could be food, drink, money or jewels depending on the economic level and the degree of sophistication of those concerned.

During the selection process the boy is usually asked or allowed to express his opinion about his would-be wife. In former times, since most boys did not know much about the girls outside their familial environment, there generally was not much contention about the eligible girl proposed by the parents. Youngsters usually relied on their parents and trusted in the wisdom of their choice. Recently, because of increased social contact between the sexes, more disagreement and conflict has occurred; the boy or girl often has a partner already in mind by the time the parents make their move. In such a case, there is either a compromise between the parents' decision and the child's wishes, or a conflict which often ends with the more or less reluctant submission of the child to his parents' will. It is not difficult to understand why conflicts caused by boys are treated as less sinful than those caused by girls. Public opinion has dealt much more severely with

misbehaving women than with men. In a relatively few instances these conflicts lead to suicide, reflecting much less a protest against the parents' oppression or rigidity than a recognition of an unavoidable transgression of moral principles by weak human creatures.

The intermediary's task always has been to introduce the families of the betrothed, to provide them with the necessary information concerning each other's moral, social and economic standing and to act sometimes as negotiator advocating the interest of one or the other partner. Whatever may be the opinion of the girl's family, their answer is always a very courteous but indecisive statement leaving freedom for possible favorable or unfavorable attitudes in the future. No girl's parents are so clumsy as to give an immediate affirmative or negative answer. They may slight themselves in the first instance and be accused of haughty or conceited behavior in the second. Some time later the intermediary calls once or twice again to get the answer which may be favorable or not, but invariably is formulated in very courteous terms. Usage requires that acceptance of a proposal begin with stereotyped decorum and end with such words as, "We believe that it is within the authority of Mr. and Mrs. X (the boy's parents) to decide on the matter, we have no idea of our own and rely upon them to judge on the desirability of this alliance, which would be a moral privilege to us..." Refusal should be formulated in no less tactful and graceful a manner so that it cannot hurt the feelings of the boy's family. For this, a whole collection of conventional formulas are available. Their meanings may be as follows: "Our daughter is still too young, too inexperienced in household and other work, her age does not match that of her proposed mate..."; "She has too many younger brothers and sisters who need her care, her imminent absence from the household would be detrimental to the economic condition of the family."

A very frequently indicated reason for refusal used to be discord in the couple's horoscopes. Since time immemorial, one of the most important steps in the tentative and final arrangements for marriage has been to consult and interpret the horoscopes of the two parties and sometimes those of their parents as well. This process is called the "comparison of the couple's ages." If the ages are interpreted as being in discord, either one or both of the parties involved is reluctant to offer or accept marriage for fear of eventual marital problems which might result in separation or even divorce. Cases in which the horoscope date has been deliberately misinterpreted to provide an excuse for a courteous refusal or to withdraw an offer already made have not been exceptional occurrences.

If proposal of the boy's family is accepted, it is expected that the two families will appear to decrease their visits to each other and make them more formal, especially if they previously were close friends. The girl's parents try to avoid visits to the boy's family for fear that frequent contact might be interpreted as an over-zealous effort to "sell" the girl. Up until the last couple of decades, the girl and boy also tried to avoid meeting as it was believed that pre-marital social contacts, public or private, reflected bad behavior or violated ethical principles. This explains why an engaged girl even tried to hide her face with her hat when she confronted her future life companion. The boy never found this strange and could, in fact, only be proud of it, being assured that this shyness was proof of her chastity.

More recently, in urban areas especially, this avoidance of one another is no longer observed with the same diligence as before. Future husbands and wives are permitted to meet together fairly frequently as an approach to better understanding. These meetings are generally under the discreet supervision of parents or the disguised "watch" of brothers and sisters.

The first ritual in the marriage process has always been the "inquiry of the name" or, in popular terms, "the crossing the girl's house gate." It consists mainly of bringing the future bride's family gifts which must include a full bunch of areca nuts, a copious provision of betel leaves and possibly tea and other foodstuffs such as cakes or candies. As usual the hour and date for the ceremony should be carefully chosen by the horoscopic calendar. The visitors include the elder members of the boy's family, both men and women, dressed in their best clothes, and led usually by a distinguished looking family patriarch. The gifts are placed on round, red-varnished trays covered with lids and borne on the heads of black-clothed porters wearing red sashes around their waists. The porters march to the girl's house single file. The visitors are always welcomed with great fuss and solemnity. It should be noted that the future bridegroom's participation in the first visit is a necessary condition and that the intermediary also is always present as a member of the boy's party. It is expected that during the reception the girl must appear under the pretense of serving tea to the visitors.

In an ensuing interview between the girl's parents and the intermediary, the nature and importance of the wedding gift is discussed. The results of the discussion are later relayed to the boy's family. After many tactful exchanges of views, the families agree, through the intermediary, on terms concerning the amount of the gift required by the girl's parents and provided by the boy's parents. At these meetings the date for the formal offer of marriage is also fixed.

Wedding gifts asked by the girl's parents usually are comprised of a certain number of sets of presents to be distributed to the relatives, friends and acquaintances of the girl's family. Each set usually is composed of a couple of more or less substantial packages of tea, candies or glutinous rice cakes, one or many areca nuts and many betel leaves. The number of sets depends on the social relations of the girl's parents. A wide circle of acquaintances would lead them to demand a considerable amount of gifts, while a limited number of relatives and friends would restrict the number of gift sets presented. In addition to these, a fairly complete trousseau; jewels consisting mainly of the engagement ring and/or earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, and a certain amount of money may be included among the items demanded for the bride.

The next step is the delivery of these gifts which also must take place on a propitious day and hour. This ritual is called the formal offer of proposal of marriage. On the appointed day, the boy's parents select a relative or close friend of advanced age to accompany the intermediary and conduct the family "delegation" to the girl's house. This delegation is composed of the future bridegroom and some of his relatives and close friends, followed by gift carriers who may be either relatives or hired persons. In most parts of the country, the boy's father participates in this ceremony but in some regions, people say, he does not.

At the girl's home, the group is solemnly received and invited to sip tea, to smoke pipes or cigarettes, to chew areca nuts and betel leaves and sometimes to have a drink of liquor. Gifts are displayed on the ancestral altar where lights and joss sticks are lit and incense burned. The girl's father bows repeatedly and kneels before the altar to request acquiescence by his ascendants. He is followed in this ritual by the future bride and bridegroom. Afterwards, the girl usually withdraws into a back room; the boy may sometimes act as a member of his future wife's family and entertain the guests.

After a long talk, oftentimes desultory, the head of the girl's family rises to express his thanks to everyone and takes down the gifts from the altar. The edible gifts are divided into two unequal parts. The smaller portion is set aside to be returned to the boy's family as an appreciation for its excessive generosity and as

an indication that the girl's parents are not being so greedy as to accept the whole amount. It is a symbolic gesture signaling good luck in the alliance of the two families.

In some cases, the visitors are invited to stay for a welcome lunch. After they have departed, the sets of edible presents are distributed by the girl's parents to relatives, friends and acquaintances. It is usually the girl's sisters, sisters-in-law or close friends who actually take charge of this operation but they act always on behalf of the parents or grandparents.

After this formal offer or proposal of marriage, the boy is expected to become one of the girl's family and occupy a rank determined by his future wife's position.

In the past, the bridegroom sometimes had to wait as long as two or three years before celebrating the wedding and all during this period his relationship with his future in-laws was supposed to be maintained with generous presents offered on such occasions as New Year's Day, anniversaries of death of the girl's ancestors and annual celebrations (the 3rd day of the 3rd lunar month, the 5th day of the 5th lunar month, the Mid-Autumn festival and so on). Invitations also were sent to his future in-laws on all anniversaries of the boy's own ancestors. The waiting process was often so demanding that it caused many complaints among the populace. In the last three decades, many changes have occurred in the requirements of the waiting period which has now been reduced to one year or a few months, sometimes a few weeks, and considerably simplified.

The Celebration. As dictated by long tradition, it is necessary to consult the horoscopic calendar and make a comparative study of the couple's own horoscopes to find propitious date and hour for the wedding celebration. It is believed that weddings should not take place during the hot season, supposedly an undesirable time to start a stable union. In both households, preparations are made to celebrate the long-awaited event.

In most rural areas, especially in North Vietnam, communal ties are very strong and require that the boy's family formally notify the community in which it lives, usually the village or hamlet, of the forthcoming marital union. In the North, the notice-giving once consisted of (1) a more or less substantial present of food and drink offered to a council of socio-ceremonial character existing in every village, and (2) a payment of money made to the same organization as a contribution to its fund.

This formal but extra-legal acquiescence by the community does not waive the more recently established (some 40 years ago) inscription in the civil status record kept by the village or municipal civil status officer operating in the smallest administrative unit.

Another most important matter in time past was to provide the couple with a nuptial couch. The purchase of it was usually entrusted to a relative who has enjoyed a happy marital life and has many children. He was also requested to lie down on it to impart his good luck to the new couple. Nowadays this practice is no longer heard of, and it should be accurate to consider it a regional custom of the past.

The boy's parents usually invite their relatives, friends and acquaintances to a banquet on the day before the wedding. In the past, this affair was generally arranged at the family's own residence, but now many people turn it over to some decent restaurant which is better equipped to serve large numbers of people. A few weeks before the wedding day, a wedding announcement card is sent by both families to each of their relatives, friends and acquaintances. To the closest relatives

and friends, an invitation to the banquet is attached to the wedding card. Those who accept are expected to send a gift to the new couple, which may consist of a sum of money placed in a red envelope, or household items. At the beginning of the party, one guest usually acts as spokesman for all the others and expresses congratulations to the couple's parents and wishes happiness and longevity to the bride and bridegroom. The boy's parents then thank the guests for their wishes and gifts and ceremoniously invite them to sit down at the table and begin the party. During hard times and among less wealthy families, this celebration may be simplified; it may consist of a "tea party" at which tea, soft drinks and a variety of cakes and candies are served. In still less privileged families, no entertainment is offered to a large group of people and the sending of wedding cards is the only step taken to notify relatives and friends of the event.

The propitious day having been chosen, the bridegroom and his family start on a trip to the girl's home, at an hour also determined by horoscopic readings, to conduct her to the groom's house. They walk in a procession which follows a fairly set pattern, usually led by an elderly man clad in indigo or black robes and carrying an incense burner. Close behind him are other older relatives of the groom and his parents. Next comes the bridegroom himself, wearing brand new clothes and escorted by half a dozen attendants. He is followed by his brothers and sisters and closest friends. Some ladies occasionally may be found accompanying the procession, bearing in their arms round boxes containing areca nuts, betel leaves and cigarettes to refresh the marching group.

This march on foot to the bride's home is common in rural and other economically poor localities. Sometimes the trip is shortened by the use of boats or motor buses depending on the distance and the physical condition of the marchers. In urban areas, wealthier people generally use various means of transportation in the procession, from the old fashioned rickshaws and tricycle cabs to hired taxis or cars, or cars owned by relatives and friends. The means of transportation, of course, is considered a great reflection of the socio-economic status of the parties concerned and many a prestige-conscious town dweller is willing to spend much money on the ritual of the procession.

Upon arrival at the gate of the girl's house, the procession announces itself and the marchers are invited in at once by the girl's parents and relatives who do not want to go farther out than the threshold or gate. This is because the latter only accept or wholeheartedly welcome the proposal of marriage and do not initiate the move to offer the hand of their daughter.

After taking seats in the parlor and sipping the customary cup of tea, the head of the boy's family group solemnly formulates the request to "bring away the girl to be a daughter-in-law of our family." The head of the girl's family answers with a courteous and equally solemn statement of approval.

Next, the bride's father approaches the ancestral altar and bows and kneels in front of it to request supreme acceptance of the marriage by his ascendants. He is followed in this ritual by the bride and bridegroom, the former to take leave of her ancestors and the latter to introduce himself to them and ask their acquiescence to his integration into the family.

At the end of this purely ceremonial activity a banquet sometimes is offered to the boy's family delegation. They gladly accept but afterwards appear to be very impatient to leave, thus giving the impression that they are anxious to take the girl to their own home.

On the way back, the elder relative again leads the procession, carrying the incense burner. Now the group is joined by many of the bride's attendants, friends and relatives who want to follow her to the house of her future husband.

In rural areas of North Vietnam, at various spots along the way to the bridegroom's house, children used to hold strings as barriers across the road or path and collect "tolls" which were always gladly paid. This generosity was believed to attract the good luck so strongly desired by every new couple. A reluctance to pay would have been interpreted as an unwillingness to seek a durable union.

At the gate of the groom's house the procession usually is greeted by a thunder of firecrackers. The bride's relatives and friends are invited into the house, asked to take seats and sip tea. Then the ceremony to honor the genie of marriage begins.

The genie of marriage or the Rose Silk Thread God is supposed to promote and be responsible for the marital union. In his honor a special altar is set up lit with bright candles and perfumed with burning incense and joss sticks. Here again an elderly member of the boy's family conducts the ceremony, standing at the point closest to the altar and bowing before it. In the next places, just behind him, are the bride and groom. After bowing many times, along with the bridal pair, the patriarch holds up a sheet of red paper on which an appeal for protection to the genie of marriage is written in Chinese characters. While the appeal is read aloud, the couple stands still listening attentively to it. When the reading is over, the elder pours alcohol into three cups standing on the altar, bows three times, then gives one cup to the groom who sips from it and hands it to the bride who does the same thing. After this ritual drink, the sheet of red paper is burned and the three bow again before the altar to pay their final respects.

The bride is then taken by her attendants into a room set aside for her at the entrance of which is a table holding food and drink and intended for her and her followers. The reason why they are served in a separate room is that women, and especially newly married girls, are generally very shy in social gatherings.

In the meantime, other members of both families sit down together for a banquet or a tea party. The bride is expected to appear at the end of the celebration to pay her respects and be introduced to the relatives and friends of her husband. In regions where gifts are not sent prior to the wedding day, this is also the time for the guests to present their gifts to the new couple. Sometimes the groom's parents deliver their gift at this time, formally and publicly, and also give guidance and advice to their children as they prepare to start an independent life. After this, members of the bride's family begin to withdraw, their hosts accompanying them to the gate. Only the bride's attendants remain with her in her own room.

In many instances, entertainment offered to the boy's family, friends and acquaintances went on for many long hours or even days, keeping the new husband busy as long as it lasted. The bride spends the first night in her room at her husband's house with her attendants, while the groom sleeps in a separate room with his attendants. In former times, professional entertainers were hired to play various kinds of music to divert the guests and hosts.

The second day is set aside especially for treating the bride's and groom's attendants. A lunch is given at the end of which the groom's parents thank his friends for their assistance and courtesy. Generally on this day, but sometimes on the third, the new couple pays a formal visit to the bride's family. The couple may be accompanied by the husband's parents or other relatives. On this occasion, a gift consisting of one or many trays of cooked glutinous rice, cooked chicken, roasted pork and other delicacies are presented to the bride's parents. The visitors are invited to have tea and stay to a luncheon party; before they leave, they are requested to take back a portion of their present. The parents and relatives usually leave first, leaving the newly married couple to follow some time later.

Marital Life. From that day, the new couple starts its own life. They may either live independently and earn their own living or live with the husband's parents for a fairly long period of time, under the parents' authority and guidance.

The girl no longer bears her maiden name. If, for example, her husband is called X, she will be called Sister X by her husband's brothers and sisters and also by her husband's parents. His nieces and nephews will call her Aunt X and so on.

When the first child is born, the couple no longer calls its parents "father and mother" but "grandfather and grandmother," on behalf of the child and to teach the child to call his grandparents by the proper names. Also, after the birth of a child, the couple is called in rural areas by a variety of curious appellations, such as "mother of the boy," "father of the boy," or girl, as the case may be.

How much the general pattern described above has been affected by change in each region of the country and the smaller geographic divisions, in various socio-economic groups and in various culturally sophisticated classes, can only be guessed and should be the subject of a more elaborate survey than this impressionistic description and analysis.

III. PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

Preliminary Considerations. Until relatively recent times, to have many children and a large extended family was the dearest desire of almost every married Vietnamese couple. This pronounced love for children, especially for males, derived from the attachment to the patriarchal family pattern and to the Confucian ethical and cultural philosophy which dictates that to procure male descendants is one of the most important duties of every man in society. In Vietnam, responsibility for the care of aged parents and the veneration of ancestors rests with the sons of the family. This helps explain why childless couples tried all means available to remedy their situation, including frequent visits to pagodas or grottoes where spirits, famous for their "effective" powers to endow devotees with child-producing ability, were worshipped.

At the first sign of pregnancy, the mother-to-be must take great care to preserve and promote the physical and mental health of the baby. Years ago, she was usually bound to follow very strict rules concerning her diet and all her activities. She was advised to eat only foods known to be nourishing, to behave in an exemplary manner, to avoid indecent speech and unwholesome thinking, to keep the strictest ethical rules in mind, to act always as though she were in the presence of her baby, talking to him day in and day out, educating and guiding him in physical, intellectual and moral activities. All these cares came under the term thai giao, or "prenatal education," and were given considerable importance in former times, especially in families of some standing.

It is also interesting to note that the expectant mother was encouraged to eat only moderately nourishing food and avoid things considered "too nourishing." People believed that the latter would make the fetus grow too big and the delivery therefore would be difficult and painful. The pregnant woman also was advised to take certain medicines which would keep the baby from growing too big and would make delivery easier.

Among the undesirable foods are dog, rat and snake, none of which are commonly accepted either by men or non-pregnant women, regardless of socio-economic status. Alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking, considered very bad habits for women, have been strictly condemned in the North and looked upon as loose conduct in the South. Betel leaf and areca nut chewing are tolerated.

Pregnant women are discouraged from undertaking work which requires a great deal of physical effort, and from getting involved in tense situations. It is feared that excessive physical and emotional strain are detrimental to the normal growth of the baby.

In the past, sexual intercourse was supposed to be avoided all during the period of pregnancy for fear of miscarriage, which was often considered a punishment from God for misdeeds committed by the parents during their earlier life or even in a previous existence.

It was also believed that a pregnant woman should not attend weddings or funerals as her presence could bring bad luck to the individuals and families concerned. An expectant mother was discouraged from meeting people about to set out on business trips for fear that her appearance would be a bad omen for the success of a traveler's commercial or personal affairs. She was not supposed to step over a hammock (for fear the child would become a lazy boy), walk too much, ride in uncomfortable vehicles, reach for things high up, nor frequent places of worship.

In earlier days, a midwife was sent for the time for delivery arrived. She helped deliver the child, cut the umbilical cord, and washed and dressed the mother and infant. The midwife was assisted by one or several female members of the family, usually the mother-in-law or a sister-in-law who was well informed in this sort of thing. A traditional practice, found in all parts of the country, was to cut the umbilical cord with a sharp piece of broken earthenware or a knife made of bamboo, instead of a metallic tool, and to wrap or dress the newborn baby in old clothes discarded by his elder brothers, sisters, cousins or children of neighbors. The father usually was allowed to have a look at his child only after it was washed and dressed.

After giving birth, the mother was often warmed by means of a charcoal stove placed beneath her bed in the belief that she needed to regain the heat lost during the delivery. The ironing of the mother's body by a small hot stove, intended to smooth the wrinkled skin of the abdomen, was practiced in the Khanh Hau area, but was not common elsewhere in the country. However, the use of a decoction made of special vegetal ingredients has been observed nearly everywhere.

The newborn child used to sleep beside its mother but now, in urban areas, there is a growing tendency to provide the infant with a cradle of its own.

Although the common desire is to see the mother relieved of all physical activity for at least two months, mothers from low economic levels are often compelled to resume their regular indoor and outdoor work one or two weeks and sometimes a few days after giving birth.

It is considered advisable that a couple abstain from sexual intercourse for at lease three months after the birth of a first child. It id difficult to determine the extent to which this recommendation is followed, but it is believed that people in rural areas are more willing to observe the restriction.

In the last few decades, most expectant mothers have gone to local maternity clinics where their babies are delivered by western trained midwives and nurses. There appears to have been little or no reluctance--even in remote rural areas--to accepting new medical techniques and practices in connection with childbirth. This does not mean that the majority of women, from both rural and urban areas, no longer rely on many traditional practices, such as avoiding certain foods believed to be harmful to expectant mothers; eating heavily salted stewed lean meat, potages and noodles; avoiding exposure of the body to the sun and wind for many months;

avoiding baths for many months. It is not the purpose of this short paper to determine the extent to which traditional practices have lost favor among present day Vietnamese women; however, it is safe to say that many an old belief and practice is no longer followed and has gradually become "strange" to succeeding generations.

Gifts to Mothers. In both rural and urban areas there is a custom, rather closely observed, for relatives and close friends to send to the mother of a newborn child a small gift usually consisting of some nourishing food items (lean pork pie, hog leg, high quality fish sauce, glutinous rice, chicken eggs) in rural areas and fancier or more luxurious articles in urban areas.

Celebrations. The most widely observed celebration held after the birth of a baby is the "full month" celebration which involves an offering presented to the "Holy Godmother" who is believed to grant protection to the newborn child. It is usually held on the 30th day after the birth (in some regions on the 29th for a boy baby, the 28th for a girl).

The offering may consist of the following items: a pot of flowers, a cup of tea, joss sticks, candles, votive papers, a tray of foods including boiled chickens, cooked glutinous rice, rice soup, sugared bean soup, fruit and cakes of various kinds. The rite involves many steps: (1) prayer during which the conductor of the ceremony (usually the child's mother, father or grandparent) lights the incense sticks and asks the Holy Godmother to grant protection to the mother and the baby, to secure their health and intelligence. (It is believed that the Holy Godmother teaches the baby how to smile and that crying is an indication the child is being punished for his stubbornness); (2) holding over the baby's mouth a flower wet with the water contained in the cup on the altar and allowing the water to drip into his mouth in the expectation that the baby will learn to speak in sweet scented words; (3) serving tea to the Holy Godmother by pouring the liquid into small cups and placing them on the food tray. At this stage, the prayers are to be repeated. The rite ends with the burning of the votive papers.

At the close of the rituals, relatives and close friends are usually invited to attend a social gathering at which a meal including most of the edible items of the offering is served.

Celebrations also are held on the first birthday and, more rarely, on the third, sixth and twelfth birthdays.

The first birthday is widely considered as quite important but ensuing ones are often neglected in present day households. One consultant pointed out, however, that in his native area (a province of South Vietnam) both the first and twelfth birthdays are given a special significance.

An interesting rite is often performed during the first birthday celebration. At the completion of worship before the altar, the child is placed before an array of implements symbolizing occupational or professional categories. A pen-holder, for example, symbolizes intellectual activities, a pair of scissors the tailoring trade, a pair of pliers the skill for manual labor and so on. If the baby happens to pick up the pen-holder first, his parents would anticipate his future career to be that of a learned man, one who lives by his intellect; if he grabs the pair of scissors first, it would be indicative of a career as a good tailor.

The significance of the birthday celebration is roughly the same as that of the "full month" observance; it lies in the desire to obtain protection and favor from invisible powers to benefit the child's health and intelligence during his infancy and childhood.

It can be said, in terms of the general impression gained from the pattern sketched above, that the desire to have many children and especially male descendants is strong in present Vietnamese society which still is, in spite of modern trends, heavily patriarchal and paternalistic.

Pregnancy and childbirth have always been regarded as important stages in human life and women bearing children receive much attention and care from all family members. However, the traditional practices pertaining to childbearing have gradually changed during the last fifty years, especially in urban areas. What has been described in this section should not be regarded as a stagnant pattern, characteristic of any particular geographical location or social category but as a vague picture of behavior observable in a changing society.

New life conditions, for instance, have greatly altered attitudes toward health practices and western medical techniques. The celebration of birthdays has been losing its importance among the low economic classes of the urban society and its significance among people in higher brackets. The western culture has had its impact on local methods and ways of life. Many traditional ritual processes are no longer carried out.

Compared to the celebration of weddings and funerals, people of all geographic and social categories in Vietnam seemingly are less concerned with observing the ritual customs and beliefs surrounding childbirth and more inclined toward the change and innovation brought about by western medical practice.

IV. DEATH AND FUNERAL CEREMONIES

There is a strong belief among the Vietnamese that a man or woman should die at home surrounded by his family. One who dies outside his family's house is considered struck by the most undesirable final events. Bringing a corpse home is also avoided for fear that evil spirits will follow it and bring bad luck and bad health to the living. When a person is sick, he may be taken to a hospital--a practice of only the past thirty years or so--but if or when he is beyond help or it is evident that he is dying, he is always carried back home in all haste so that he might still be alive on arrival at his house.

If a deceased person's eyes are open, a close relative will gently brush the eyelids down. The face is always covered with a white piece of paper, sometimes a kerchief as a symbolic barrier between the dead and the living and to shield unrelated visitors from emotional shock.

In the past, wealthier families sent death notices to all relatives, neighbors and acquaintances but in recent times the practice of publishing death notices in the daily newspapers has become common. The notice generally bears the full name, age, title, occupation, honorific title and distinction of the deceased, followed by a fairly complete enumeration of his closest relatives: parents, sons, daughters, sons- and daughters-in-law, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, sometimes mentioning their titles and occupations. In recent years, most public notices end with a brief request not to bring funeral gifts.

Poorer people and those from rural areas inform relatives, neighbors and acquaintances of a death by word of mouth.

Upon hearing the bad news, relatives and friends rush to the deceased person's house to express condolences to the family and to pay last respects to the deceased by bowing or kneeling before an improvised altar set up in the parlor.

In traditional families, the corpse is generally laid on a bed under a mosquito net. A wedge is placed between the jaws to keep the mouth open so that uncooked grains of rice and a few coins (gold coins in wealthy families) can be introduced into it. A closed mouth would be opened with a comb.

In some areas of the South a bunch of bananas is placed on the abdomen of the deceased in the belief that this food will distract the devil from devouring the dead person's bowels.

While one or two relatives are busy applying to the civil status officer for a certificate of death and eventually to other officials for permission to keep the corpse in the household for a few days, other members of the immediate family wash the body with a scented lotion and dress it in the person's best clothes. The lotion commonly used is ngu vi huong, a fragrant decoction made of five or less kinds of wood, bark and leaves. Nails are cut and trimmed and the pieces of nail put in small packages and attached to the proper hand and foot. This permits recognition of the hand and foot bone when, three years later, the body is exhumed and the bones transferred from the wooden coffin to an earthenware box for a final burial.

Old persons from certain rural areas and of traditional nature may procure their coffins some years before their deaths and store them, not in the household (except in the highlands of North Vietnam where the coffin is used as a bench and is usually placed on the veranda of the house), but in one of the communal rest shelters located somewhere by the side of the road leading to the rice fields or surrounding the residential area. The practice of procuring a coffin beforehand is no longer followed in towns and neighboring areas.

In the North the coffin is of a long parallelepiped form with two equal ends. In South Vietnam, it usually has two unequal ends and the lid is barrel-shaped. With both types of coffin the body is wedged in with reed branches, rolls of paper or other objects.

Before being laid in the coffin, the body is bound with strips of cloth and wrapped in a white silk shroud. The coffin containing the corpse may be kept in the house for a few days, or as was sometimes done in the past, a few months. Also in the old days, the coffin may have been buried temporarily in the household's garden until the flesh partially decomposed. This discouraged grave desecrators from stealing the gold, jewels and precious stones placed in the coffin along with the body. Only wealthy families kept coffins in their houses for a lengthy period of time; the practice required much care and caution and usually meant that the coffin had to be made of hard wood and insulated with many coats of paint and glue or pitch.

A bowl of uncooked rice is sometimes placed on the lid of a coffin in the belief that it will hinder the dead body from rising up. If the deceased person is an elder or important member of the family, the coffin is set in front of the household altar; in other cases it is placed before a side altar.

When this preparation has been completed, members of the family gather before the altar to bring an offering of food to the deceased person's soul. The offering usually consists of three bowls of cooked rice, three cups of tea and a few other dishes. In the North, it would probably be one bowl of cooked rice, a cup of water and a boiled egg; a bundle of joss sticks is planted in a bowl of uncooked rice, surrounded by many lit candles in candlesticks. The ceremony is supposed to be repeated three times a day during the entire mourning period but simplifications of recent years have reduced the time in which it must be carried out to one hundred days.

The distribution of mourning garb is another step preceding burial; it takes place when the body has been placed in the coffin. Before this stage, women who customarily wear turbans of one type or another remove them and carelessly roll up their hair so as to appear very upset and too busy to put their turbans on correctly. Between the time of death and the time mourning clothes are put on, a wedding may be held if some member of the family is engaged and the family does not want him to wait until the end of the mourning period to marry. A wedding on the eve of a funeral should be celebrated in a very simple manner with all elaborate arrangements for entertainment eliminated.

In wealthier families, the ritual of distributing mourning garb is carried out by a religious priest. Morning garb is divided into many categories depending on the degree of kinship of the deceased person to the mourners. The longest mourning period, in principle, lasts three years, but is actually observed only 27 months by the wife, the children, daughters-in-law and adopted children of the deceased. A shorter period, lasting only 12 months, is observed by a deceased person's husband, sons-in-law, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and grandchildren. Nine months of mourning is observed by cousins on the father's side and five months by cousins on the mother's side. The shortest mourning period is kept by grandnephews and grandnieces.

To be in mourning means to abstain from visiting temples and pagodas, attending festivals, parties and entertainments of all kinds, to delay marriage and to avoid wearing brightly colored clothing.

Mourning garb consists of a robe made of very low quality white gauze, rough trousers left ungirdled and a white turban to be wound around the head with a length hanging down the back. Men in the long and middle length mourning periods wear, in addition to the headgear mentioned above, a straw crown and a hemp string "sash." They use a walking stick made of bamboo and should appear to be groping their way along, leaning on the stick. Those mourning for shorter periods wear only the white gauze robe and turban.

One of the main portions of the garb distribution ceremony is carried out by the eldest son of the deceased who leads the rite and kneels down for long hours before the improvised altar and coffin. He offers wine three times along with all kinds of food and delicacies displayed on the altar: tea, fruits, rice, rice wine, other foodstuffs and votive papers.

It is only after the distribution of mourning garb that the presentation of condolences begins. This can be done day or night indiscriminately since the dead body is watched over at all times under the light of a multitude of candles. The long vigil watch has many objectives: it is an opportunity for the children and other descendants of the deceased to pay final respects; it is also to keep dogs, cats and other animals from approaching or jumping over a corpse as it is commonly believed than an animal jumping over a corpse will revive it momentarily, making it sit or stand up, scratch, bite and frighten the living and spread panic among them.

Along with the presentation of condolences, or sometimes just before the start of the funeral procession, friends and acquaintances may bring or send gifts to the deceased's family. The gift is understood as an offering to the deceased and may consist of wine, incense sticks, votive papers, wax candles and pairs of scrolls, the last being vertical sentences written on black and white silk or cotton.

In many cases, both in rural and urban areas, these contributions of friends to the funeral consist of money but it is highly improbable that this is common among the upper economic classes.

More recently there has been a growing tendency, especially in urban areas, to send a wreath which bears on a silk or paper ribbon a brief statement of sympathy followed by the name of the person or group of persons who offer the wreath as testimony of esteem for the deceased.

The wreaths first are to be laid on and around the coffin, then carried in front of the burial procession to the cemetery, either by individual marchers or on vehicles. Later they are heaped over the grave.

For the burial ceremony, special funeral accouterments are usually necessary for people of some social or economic standing. These items are either borrowed from some communal benevolent or mutual assistance association, which generally exist in rural areas, or hired from undertakers operating in most cities. Planquin carriers and funeral service attendants are either volunteers from the community, as is often the case in rural areas, or persons employed through undertaking establishments.

Musicians play many kinds of wind and string instruments, at funerals, the most striking of them being a funeral trumpet producing heart-rending airs which are sometimes accompanied by the cries and lamentations of the deceased's children and relatives. The words either eulogize the dead and express the regrets of the living or are sterotyped songs appropriate to the circumstances. For example, a song may accompany the cries of sons and daughters on their father's or mother's death, another is for grandchildren at the death of a grandparent, a wife for her husband and so on. It is up to the musicians to choose the appropriate music.

For a non-Catholic family, the service of funeral musicians is almost a necessity because it is believed, as said in an old popular saying:

> Living people need the light of oil lamps;
> Dead people need the trumpets and drums.

The funeral of a Buddhist would also require the services of a monk, formerly carried in a hammock, to lead the procession. He is sometimes followed by a group of old women carrying long pieces of cloth above their heads. On each side of the women and behind them are banner carriers who recite prayers as they move slowly along.

After the banner carriers comes the altar which has on it a tablet carrying the name of the deceased person and his picture, two peanut oil lamps, a couple of candlesticks, an incense burner and a couple of pots of flowers. Next comes one or more tables on which are displayed offerings consisted of roast pig, sugar cakes, cooked glutinous rice and wine in large porcelain urns.

The coffin, borne in a hearse, which may be of several descriptions, is next. The hearse is pulled by four or eight persons, depending on wealth, or a two- or four-horse carriage borrowed from a benevolent association or hired from undertakers. In the old days, the coffin usually was covered completely by a house made of votive papers.

The children, relatives, friends and acquaintances of the deceased follow the hearse. Members of the family and relatives cry, sometimes loudly, lament in tearful voices and praise the deceased person's virtues and achievements. Frinds walk in silence behind the cortege, wear sad looks and exchange a few words about the life of the deceased.

The coffin is sometimes buried in a rice field if the dead person lived in a rural area. If he was a Catholic, burial is in the churchyard; if he was from an urban area, it is in the town cemetery; if he is a resident of a highland village it is on the slope of a hill.

At the burial spot, on the order of the procession leader, the palanquin bearers lower the coffin into the grave, which is generally six to eight feet deep. At this moment the wailing usually grows more heart-rending and many close relatives rush to the coffin and fight madly against the attendants and bearers to prevent them from burying their beloved companion.

To begin the burial, the procession attendants usually throw a symbolic handful of earth into the hole. Then they withdraw and receive thanks from a few people who are closest to the deceased person: the eldest son, widow or widower, grandsons, brothers or sisters. At the gate of the cemetery all close relatives wait until the grave is filled with earth.

In some rural areas, people still adhere to the tradition of serving a meal to all friends and acquaintances who have participated in the funeral or sent a gift to the family.

After burial, a special altar is set up in the family's home for the veneration of the deceased. It is kept for at least one hundred days during which time incense sticks are burned continuously and rice is offered two or three times a day. At the end of this period, the incense urn may be moved to the ancestral altar and worshipping becomes less diligent. Still a solemn ceremony is held at least on every death anniversary, on the lunar calendar New Year's days, and sometimes on the first and fifteenth of each lunar month.

In rural areas and among more traditional families of urban societies, it has been a custom to invite a limited circle of relatives and friends to a meal on the 49th and 100th days following the death and on the first anniversary, sometimes on every ensuing anniversary of the death.

Three years after death, the body is usually exhumed and the bones, after cleaning and arranging them in proper order, are buried again in a smaller earthenware coffin. This rite is generally carried out without elaborate preparation and involves only relatives and the family's closest friends. It rarely implies a social gathering.

V. ANNIVERSARIES OF DEATH

Ancestor veneration, for a very long time has been a widespread practice, almost religious in character. In the old days and at present, it is considered the most important filial duty to be performed after the death of a father, mother and grandparent. People generally commemorate the death of ascendants up to the fourth generation, i.e., the great-grandfather and great-grandmother.

After the burial of a parent, a succession of rituals takes place intended to pay respect to the deceased and to commemorate the date of his departure from the material world. He is offered two or three meals a day on a regular basis for many months, sometimes for a couple of years. His spirit is worshipped at an altar set up especially for the purpose. It must hold a tablet bearing his name and eventually his honorific title, a joss stick or incense bowl, an oil lamp constantly kept lighted and a few cups of water or alcohol. In many families, one or more framed photographs of dead parents are hung on the wall near or above the altar. There are among these daily rituals many much more important celebrations, such as those occuring on the 7th, 14th, 21st, 49th, and 100th days following death and especially on the first and second anniversaries of death.

These ceremonies are celebrated with more or less substantial offerings, depending on the economic status of the family, but the ones on the 49th and 100th days and at the end of the first and second years are generally held with wide participation of the extended family and oftentimes friends and acquaintances as well. Usually the second year anniversary is called the "end of mourning" ceremony, since it marks the conclusion of the mourning period.

From the third anniversary on, the ceremony is held as an occasion for descendants and relatives to remember the deceased person and to offer him food and clothing so that he has not to live in the other world as a wandering and begging ghost.

In North and Central Vietnam, before the last couple of decades, there was kept in each family a register in which the dates of death of all family members were recorded and descendants relied on these records to remind them of the anniversaries of death. In the South, family registers also existed but probably among more conservative families in rural areas rather than the less traditional social classes.

In North Vietnam and the upper part of Central Vietnam, anniversaries of death are celebrated by the eldest son who generally receives the largest share of the inheritance, is responsible for the family worship house and keeps the ancestral worship land (dat huong hoa).

In the southern part of the country this duty is likely to be performed by the youngest son who receives the largest share of the inheritance, the family worship house where the anniversary observances are expected to take place and the ancestral worship land which is to yield the income necessary to defray the ceremonial expenses.

Preparations for the anniversary begin one or two days before the celebration with the cleaning of house and furniture, polishing of brass and copper ritual pieces and their arrangement in proper order on the altars and the purchase and gathering of ingredients for food preparation.

All this preliminary work and the ensuing duties are to be performed by members of the family in charge of the ritual duty--that of the eldest or youngest son. They may be assisted eventually by brothers, sisters and in-laws.

All expenses are to be paid by the holder of the ancestral worship land but, in most cases, brothers, sisters and other relatives try to bring a symbolic contribution of some kind. This can be ordinary or glutinous rice, rice wine, chicken, pork pie, cakes and candies of various kinds, wax candles, incense sticks, votive papers and sometimes money. Neighbors, friends and acquaintances who are invited to attend the ceremony and the lunch or dinner which follows usually bring less substantial offerings. A token of their respect to the spirit of the deceased rather than a material gift to the living, these may consist of rice wine, fruit, votive papers, incense sticks or wax candles.

On the eve of the anniversary, a simple ceremony is held for the direct descendants and closest relatives of the deceased person. A meal, not very elaborate, is prepared and served to this limited circle of people who take the opportunity to remember the life, moral virtues and achievements of their ancestor.

The next day, a very large meal is prepared and neighbors, distant relatives, friends and acquaintances are invited to partake. One or more family members are expected to welcome these visitors who are invited to sit on flat beds or around tables where they may converse on the life of the deceased person. An additional table may be placed in front of the altar on which to display various food items in bowls and on plates.

When all preparations are complete, the eldest son, wearing his best clothing, approaches the altar and issues his formal invitation to his deceased parent's spirit to come back home to receive the offering and accept the respect paid by the living. In this ritual, the son usually kneels four times and bows deeply three times with his hands joined before his chest. A prayer, lasting five or ten minutes, is sometimes uttered. It is made up of a somewhat stylized eulogy to the deceased, a request that he accept the offering and a plea for protection of descendants from sickness and misfortune.

It may be interesting to note here that the Household God's altar also is cleaned on this occasion and its incense bowls, candlesticks, and oil lamps burned and lighted. The head of the household never fails to pay respect to the Household God, as if for permission to issue the invitation to the deceased parent's spirit.

After the eldest or youngest son has made his obeisances and repeated prayers, others of lower familial rank and indirect kinship ties, beginning with direct descendants and ending with distant relatives and sometimes friends, take their turn. But only the head of the household must kneel before the altar of the Household God.

The ceremony ends after the burning up of two successive sets of incense sticks. The first set is lighted when foods are displayed and the spirit of the deceased invoked; the second set when cooked rice is scooped out of the pot and displayed on the table. When the second set is half burned, tea is poured and fruit is peeled and served in small morsels. When the second set is completely burned down, the meal offering is considered over and a third set of incense sticks is lighted. Now the food delicacies are set about the room to be served to the family and its visitors.

At the moment that the third set of joss sticks burns out, sometimes not until the end of the day, votive papers, representing paper money, gold and silver ingots, clothing, and more rarely, furniture, houses, concubines and servants, are burned at a clean spot outside the house and thus sent to the deceased.

All these ritual practices are replicas of real life actions. The attitude, behavior and demeanor of family members and invited guests reflect their eagerness to pay respect and gratitude to the deceased ancestor and to give the ceremony an atmosphere of solemnity by refraining from loud talking and laughing and by appearing before the altar in tidy dress. However, in recent times, such rites as the offering and burning of votive papers have been gradually eliminated.

After the meal, all the invited guests leave the family house and return to their homes, bearing in mind the good impression they expected of the social and familial behavior of the person whose filial duty it was to celebrate the anniversary.

Anniversaries of death are still the family celebrations most cherished by people of all classes, almost regardless of their social or economic status, their degree of sophistication or their attitude toward western cultural patterns. There is, however, one interesting point to note here: if Catholic families have given up the practice of observing death anniversaries by venerating ancestors at the altar, most of them continue to prepare a meal to be served to a more or less restricted circle of relatives and friends after a mass held at the church and attended by the descendants, relatives, neighbors and friends of the deceased. The only significant difference probably is that there is no kneeling and incense burning at an ancestral altar, which is rarely found in a Catholic household.

Unlike other rites, such as New Year, childbirth and marriage celebrations, which have undergone considerable change especially during the last decades, veneration of ancestors through observance of death anniversaries probably has not suffered many detractions by the Vietnamese people, despite the effect of western culture on traditional ways of thinking and living. The Catholic people, as pointed out above, would be an exception.

Many people are inclined to give the death anniversary one more significance. They look on it as an occasion for a family and social gathering which should tighten the family bond among the living and consolidate the family as the foundation of the society that it is in every Eastern country. In the old days, even descendants who lived a long way from the paternal or family worship house, tried their best to join their kin under the paternal roof. They looked on it as a very important duty toward their ancestors. For some wealthier classes in both rural and urban areas, the celebration often turns out to be an opportunity to show off a family's high financial status or to return courtesies received. But generally speaking, the anniversary of death has retained its original significance as a ritual in which homage is paid to founders of the family.