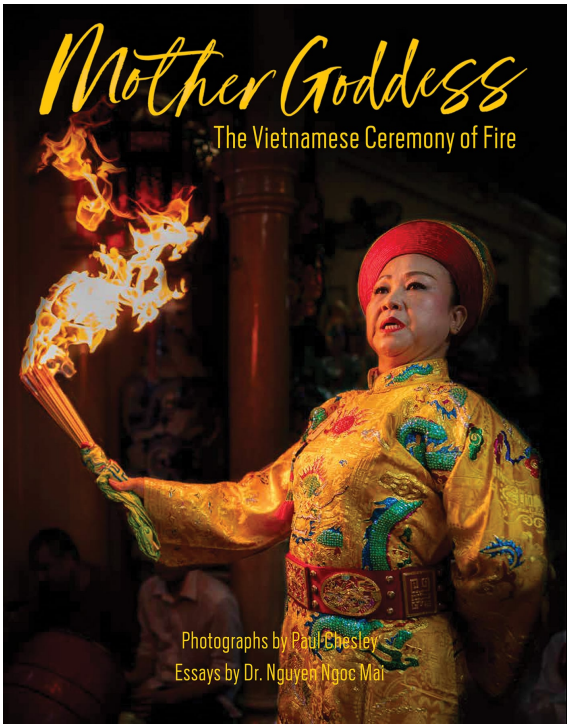
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Mother Goddess

The Vietnamese Ceremony of Fire

By (photographer) Paul Chesley

ISBN	9781966515876
Publisher	ORO Editions
Binding	Hardback
Territory	World excluding USA, Canada, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, Malaysia, and Australasia. India non-exclusive.
Size	285 mm x 216 mm
Pages	160 Pages
Illustrations	100 color
Price	£49.95

- The Mother Goddess is a spiritual mother. Whenever we are happy and joyful, we come to Her, and whenever we are sad, we talk and share with Her
- A journey to the Mother Goddess Ceremony in Hanoi, Vietnam

Mother Goddess worship took shape in the 16th century as an alternative to Confucian ideals that cast women in passive, subordinate roles. In this religion, female deities and their spirit mediums stand at the centre of vivid ceremonies filled with fire, music, trance, and offerings. Women needed a symbol and found it in the goddess Lieu Hanh, who represents their desire for freedom, independence, and happiness.

The narrative would follow selected mediums and their communities in several regions, from the birthplace of the religion in Nam Dinh to urban temples in Hanoi and beyond. Through long nights of ceremony and the everyday presence of the religion in local life, we see how this faith gives women and their families a way to negotiate power, identity, and hope in a rapidly changing country. Modernisation, urbanisation, and social media are reshaping the practice. Once associated mainly with farmers and working class families, Mother Goddess worship now attracts civil servants and high-level officials. The religion is being revived, regulated, and commercialised at the same time, which makes this an ideal moment to document what endures, what transforms, and what may be lost.

Paul Chesley comes from a family of inventors, artists, and adventurers who encouraged exploration into the unknown. By the time Chesley was in his mid-twenties, he realised that he could make a larger contribution to life through his photography. For the next four decades, beginning in the late 1970s, he completed more than 35 projects around the world with the National Geographic Society. He also freelanced for numerous American and international publications including *Time, Life, Newsweek, Fortune, Forbes, New York Times, Paris Match,* and *Stern-Geo* magazines. His latest memoir *Paul Chesley, A Photographic Voyage* won the National Ben Franklin Gold Award for America's best coffee table book. Chesley was also honoured by the inclusion of his work in the Society's first major exhibition *The Art of Photography at National Geographic: A 100 Year Retrospective* at the Corcoran Gallery of art in Washington DC. Solo exhibitions of his work have appeared in museums in London, Tokyo, New York and Honolulu. In 2012 during the National Geographic Society's 125th anniversary, Chesley's work was included in the exhibition and auction at Christie's in New York City. His greatest enjoyment is capturing the lives of people and cultures on his international projects.







Publish date 4th Jan 2027