



## Editor's Introduction

### Popular Religion and the Sacred Life of Material Goods in Contemporary Vietnam

The eight articles in this issue testify to the vitality of popular religion in Vietnam in the Renovation Era (*Đổi Mới*, post-1986). Six articles on sacred objects wed material culture studies to the anthropology of religion and magic and to the practical work of museums that house sacred objects in their collections. Underscoring the importance of material goods in popular religious practice, our work appears at the intersection of three trends: a revival of interest in and rethinking of the broad concept of “magic,” material culture studies’ new emphasis on commodities and market relations that sometimes finds “magic” at work in these transactions, and the insistence by aboriginal communities that museums treat some material artifacts as sacred objects. This introduction situates the six object-oriented studies in relation to these developments as resonant with other work on religious revival in Vietnam today, represented in this issue by two additional contributions: an account of a village’s quarrel with folkloric representations of its festival, and a study of sacred healing by spirit mediums in the Mother Goddess Religion.

KEYWORDS: Popular religion—material culture—Vietnam—museum—magic

ANTHROPOLOGICAL interest in “magic,” a concept whose popularity has waxed and waned over the history of the discipline, now seems to be waxing again.<sup>1</sup> In Vietnamese, magic translates as *ma thuật*, a word with a darkly negative connotation. As some of us completed our contributions to this issue, we discussed theories of magic and whether Vietnamese writing should retain the term *ma thuật* or find some circumlocution. “We may as well speak of ‘magic;’” one researcher suggested, “after all, ‘capitalist entrepreneur’ used to be a bad word.” This juxtaposition of a rehabilitated market with a possibly rehabilitable magic makes a proper point of departure for the material we will present.

All of the articles in this issue witness the vitality of popular religion in Vietnam in the Renovation Era (*Đổi Mới*), and as such, they contribute to a growing literature on the revival, revitalization, and transformation of ritual life.<sup>2</sup> As Vietnam revalues the ritual traditions of its ethnically diverse population, yesterday’s “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*) comes to be valued as “national heritage” (*di sản quốc gia*) and cultural festivals and performances introduce both the gestures and material objects of ritual into secular settings. As in many other accounts of popular religious phenomena elsewhere in East Asia, these studies from Vietnam have as their backdrop a heated economy where both market anxieties and a market-engendered surplus foster a lively production and consumption of ritual goods and services. As with other handicrafts, the market also serves up inexpensive mechanical reproductions of ritual goods, and many new devotees buy them in ignorance of traditional techniques that combine both magic and art (cf. BENJAMIN 1969) even as some artisans and ritual masters are tempted to simplify and thereby compromise their own work.

The six articles on sacred objects underscore the importance of material goods in popular religious practice and bring this new perspective to our understanding of popular religion in Vietnam, and in market economies more generally. These contributions are the products of a collaborative research project undertaken by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME). The two additional articles, one by Hue-Tam HO TAI and LÊ HỒNG LÝ and the other by NGUYỄN THỊ HIỀN, round out this issue on Vietnamese popular religion and give readers not directly familiar with contemporary Vietnam some sense of a larger context of contemporary popular religious activity.

Hue-Tam HO TAI and LÊ HỒNG LÝ’s study of the tutelary god of Đồng Kỵ Village brings fresh insight to an already substantial discussion of village

tutelary gods, the festivals held to honor them, and the complex social, political, and economic maneuvering that undergirds their revival.<sup>3</sup> A village festival, particularly a festival held to honor a god who was also an apotheosized national hero, became a politically acceptable subject of national folklore and local revival as the result of a scholarly conference held in 1993 (DIGREGORIO and SALEMINK 2007, 435; PHẠM 2005). TAI and LÊ take us inside a messy contestation between scholars and villagers over the true identity of the tutelary god of *Đông Kỳ* village—agricultural deity or local hero?—and the symbolic significance of the amply documented Firecracker Festival held in his honor. In arguing that the villagers were far from voiceless in this exchange, and that their position as peasants addressing a Communist leadership gave them favorable political access, the authors offer not only a cautionary tale for folklore scholars, but an awareness of the dynamic and mutually constituting processes through which folklore scholarship and local ritual enactments are created in Vietnam and how such constructions necessarily engage a complex administrative and cultural management apparatus. The story of the Firecracker Festival in *Đông Kỳ* village complements NGUYỄN Văn Huy and PHẠM Lan Hương's account, also in this issue, of a quarrel in *Hòa* (pseud.) village over the installation of a statue in the communal house. Here, too, articulate villagers were willing to take on several tiers of bureaucracy and to make their case on the basis of law and precedent, ultimately correcting what they saw as a breach of ritual propriety.

The spirit mediums described by NGUYỄN Thị Hiền were less easily rehabilitated from the onus of “superstition” than village festivals and patriotic gods. Spirit mediums and other practitioners of popular religion finally gained legal recognition in a decree that went into effect on 15 November 2004 as we were completing our fieldwork on sacred objects. At the same time, other decrees periodically reinforce the ban on amulet making, ghost calling, spirit petitioning, and other “superstitious” practices, rendering ambiguous the distinction between acceptable devotion and widely practiced but technically illegal activities (FJELSTAD and NGUYEN 2006a, 15; NGUYEN 2006 and 2007).

NGUYỄN Thị Hiền's discussion of “yin illnesses”—illnesses attributed to impaired relations between the living and the dead—crosscuts several domains of popular religious practice: daily devotions to the dead at the family altar, the proper location of graves, propitiating land spirits before undertaking construction, and spirit mediumship. A yin illness can foretell that a man or woman has been chosen to serve the spirits as a medium, and mediums draw on cultural understandings of yin illness to construct a “mythic world” wherein the client receives a satisfactory diagnosis of an otherwise inexplicable illness. A client who accepts this explanation then participates in an exorcistic healing ritual the medium performs on his or her behalf. NGUYỄN Thị Hiền offers sufficient case material to suggest that many clients experience a sense of healing through this process, but in a complex popular religious field, others resort to alternative, albeit still spiritual, interpretations. As a description of the kinds of services provided by a skilled master medium

and the desperation of many would-be mediums, this article also provides useful background to KENDALL, VŨ, and NGUYỄN's description of a burgeoning market in the production of statues for spirit medium temples.

The six articles that deal specifically with sacred objects wed material culture studies to the anthropology of religion and to the practical work of museums that house sacred objects in their collections. Those who make and use the divine images, amulets, diviners' tools, musical instruments, and offerings that are the subjects of our six studies understand them to embody power, efficacy, divine presence, or potential danger. These conditions are not fixed; they may exist in potential or past tense. Our mini-ethnographies explore how an object's sacred qualities are produced, maintained, terminated, and violated in contemporary practice. We present the sacred life of material goods (or the material life of sacred goods) as a dynamic, fluid, and intrinsically social phenomenon in much the same way that anthropologists from Marcel MAUSS (1969) to Ardjun APPADURAI (1986) have understood the material objects of exchange between living people and between people and gods (ATKINSON 1989, 180–82; VALERI 1985, 67–71; GREGORY 1980).

Edith Turner has criticized anthropologists for reducing “numinous objects” to flat “symbols” or “representations” (TURNER 2000, 128–29). Within museum practice, catalogue entries and exhibit labels routinely flatten worlds of meaning and experience to “ritual object” or “shaman's tool.” Critics and curators now recognize that such inscriptions elide the fact that much of what passes for “art” in Western museums has been “pulled out of chapels, peeled off church walls” (GREENBLATT 1990, 44) or ripped from other contexts of sacred meaning in non-Western cultures.<sup>4</sup> Well-intentioned curators steer a difficult course between mounting pressure to respect the “sacred” character of indigenous artifacts and the need to deal gingerly with representations of “religion” in public institutions (PAINE 2000; SULLIVAN 2004).<sup>5</sup> This curatorial engagement with the material life of the sacred coincides with other developments within anthropology and related disciplines, enabling a new look at Turner's “numinous object.” Our six case studies appear at the intersection of three distinctive trends: a rethink of the broad concept of “magic,” the renewal of material culture studies with a new emphasis on commodities and market relations that sometimes finds “magic” at work in these transactions, and a new regard by many museums for the sacredness of objects in their care. This introduction situates our work in relation to these developments.

#### SACRED OBJECTS AND MUSEUMS

We came to this project through our work as museum professionals, most immediately through two formative incidents during our work together on the exhibition, *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*.<sup>6</sup> When a spirit medium from the Tiên Hương Palace, Vietnam's premier Mother Goddess temple, visited the VME in Hanoi and saw VME conservators diligently cleaning the three gold Mother Goddess statues she and her husband had gifted to the Museum for use in

the exhibit, she was horrified to discover that the conservators had placed the statues on the floor and removed their protective red cloth coverings. The vehemence of her response prompted our research into the significance and treatment of religious statues, with the three gold Mother Goddess statues as our focus and with the gracious collaboration of that same spirit medium and her husband. Although the statues had never been animated with the active presence of a god, to their devotees they were clearly more than “just statues,” but what did this mean? The contribution by Laurel KENDALL, Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, and NGUYỄN Thị Thu Hương addresses this question.

Later, in New York, as we were installing *Vietnam Journeys* at the AMNH, I offered what I thought was a correction to a case devised to represent a shaman's ritual of the Tày minority. The preparators had designed a mount that held the shaman's long-necked stringed instrument (*đàn tính*) vertical, as if suspended by ghostly hands. I asked that the instrument be placed flat on the straw mat that covered the case floor, “as if waiting for the shaman to come into the room and pick it up.” Two members of the Vietnamese curatorial team, both familiar with Tày ritual life, quickly corrected me. A Tày shaman would *never* let her instrument touch the floor. She would hold it in her hands, or if necessary, suspend it from a peg on the wall. Our preparators restored the vertical mount, and the stringed instrument became the subsequent focus of LA Công Ý's research, presented in this issue.

When, at the suggestion of Richard Fox of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Nguyễn Văn Huy, Director of the VME, and I discussed the prospect of collaborative research, we quickly settled on the issue of “sacred objects.” In addition to our experiences with the Mother Goddess statues and the shaman's stringed instrument, Nguyễn described the history of the statue of the One-Eyed God that was resident in the Museum's storeroom after its removal from a village communal house. Although the statue had been officially “deanimated,” vacated of its inhabiting god, village gossip suggested that the procedures might have been inadequate or that improper material had been installed inside the statue, causing some anxiety among the VME collections management staff. This was a good opportunity to learn more about the ritual condition of this problematic statue, particularly since Phạm Lan Hương would be able to initiate research in her ancestral village.

In a brain-storming session, researchers on the VME staff quickly identified three other objects in the collection and the lingering unanswered questions that hovered about them. The VME's exhibit of Thái culture includes a reconstruction of a Thái flower tree similar to those erected by a shaman as a bridge for the celestial spirit *phi* to descend into this world. Võ Thị Thường had learned, on a previous research trip, that an ordinary woman rather than a shaman had made the VME's flower tree and that the local shaman seemed to fear or at least avoid the artificial tree. She wondered if Thái people would read the Museum's tree as a source of ritual danger. Vi Văn An recalled the divination kit he had collected for the

Museum from a Thái diviner in his native village. When the diviner subsequently lost his wife and suffered an accident, members of his family attributed his misfortune to the loss of the kit. VI wanted to resolve any concerns the diviner might have about relinquishing his kit and also learn more about the significance and use of the bamboo tube and sticks that make up the kit. Vũ Hồng Thuật had already spent two years researching amulets and welcomed the opportunity to deepen his knowledge on the subject, focusing on an amuletic woodblock that he had purchased for the VME.

As we planned this project, we were aware that Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and Maoris have enjoined upon museums the need to respect sacred objects in their practice. In most major anthropology museums, curators have removed some sacred or secret material from public exhibits. Some museums also store and exhibit sacred objects in a particular ritually appropriate directional orientation, or at a specific height and apart from inappropriate collateral material. Likewise, conservators may modify their standard practices to preserve the “life,” “soul,” or “power” of an object.<sup>7</sup> There have been satisfactory compromises between the desires of native communities to purify, feed, or use sacred artifacts and museums’ concerns for conservation and security.<sup>8</sup>

Museum personnel can easily accept the broad principle that sacred objects and their associated beliefs should be respected, but “the sacred” remains an ambiguous and problematic category. Some traditions “sacralize”<sup>9</sup> and “desacralize” objects through human activity but the condition of a specific artifact may not be known, or may be questioned as in the case of the statue of the One-Eyed God. Ritual specialists, even from the same community, may disagree over appropriate procedures or the sacred status of specific objects (HALL 1989; REEDY 1992), as we would also discover in the course of our research. Difficulties are compounded when the objects were collected long ago with critical information irrevocably lost. Some representatives of Native American cultures claim that sacred knowledge was never meant to be known outside the circle of use (FRIDAY 1989, 1). Conversely, other Native American spokesmen report a precise witnessing of object histories, as in the case of the medicine object belonging to Old Man Weasel Head, who was active in Blackfoot medicine societies. “The old man kept the vision and the power, and could always recreate another. Those things he did not sell, but it should be treated with respect, nevertheless” (HALL 1989, 39). As one moves from general concerns with “sacred objects” to engagement with specific objects (like Old Man Weasel Head’s medicine object), particular interlocutors, and contrasting traditions, the generalized “sacred object” explodes into a vague exoticism, leaving us with a growing list of questions and cautions, borne of prior experience, and a desire for more precise information regarding the cultural production and protocol of sacred objects in specific contexts of practice.

Unlike most ethnographic collections in North American and European museums, those of the VME were collected relatively recently, in anticipation of the Museum’s opening at the end of 1997. Those who commissioned, made, or used

the objects that are the subjects of our six studies were still alive and active at the time of our research, willing to resume conversations initiated by museum ethnologists in the late 1990s. Through these encounters, we learned that, like Old Man Weasel Head, the donors of five of the six objects in our study had actively negotiated the transformation from “sacred object” to “artifact,” either by using existing ritual measures to remove and placate the spirits that had empowered them or, in the case of the Mother Goddess statues and the Thái flowery tree, by improvising objects intended for secular display. Only the woodblock used to carve amulets remained in an animated state, but this discovery raised concerns about other woodblocks in the Museum’s storeroom.

Some donors seem to have interpreted their transaction with the Museum through pre-existing patterns of making or distributing sacred objects, a process that may be more common than we think but, in the absence of timely fieldwork, a challenge to decode (cf. WHITELEY 2004). With respect to the objects in our study, devotees make gifts of statues to temples, keepers of major temples bestow unanimated statues on smaller temples, Tày shamans give musical instruments to their apprentices, and the maker of the Thái flower tree used as her prototype not a potentially dangerous sacred tree, but an iconic festival prop. The story of the three gold Mother Goddess statues reveals a profound misunderstanding between the expectations of a donor, whose experiential models were other temples, and the Museum staff’s understanding of correct museum practices.

Some donors felt that having removed the animating power from their objects, it was sufficient that the Museum respect and protect them according to its mandate; others, once they were asked, expressed concern over where objects were placed in the Museum’s storerooms and whether they would be handled by ritually impure persons. Villagers from the two factions that had participated in the installation and removal of the One-Eyed God had diametrically opposed opinions as to its proper fate, even as the bad feelings engendered by their conflict remained unresolved. Even the gods joined our conversation, speaking through a spirit medium to offer an opinion on Museum practices.

When we planned our research, we used the broad category of “sacred,” in Vietnamese *linh*, a state of efficacious empowerment, or *thiêng*, in the sense of “sacred national purpose.” We assumed, following general knowledge about animated statues, that appropriate rituals make otherwise ordinary objects “sacred.” In the case of the Tày shaman’s stringed musical instrument (*đàn tính*), unanimated *đàn tính* are secular musical instruments and treated with no special respect. Similarly, the Thái diviner’s bundle that VI Văn An collected ceased to be sacred when the diviner asked his divining ancestor’s permission to remove the bundle from practice. But what about the sticks that the diviner had so painfully quested to make an efficacious kit, sticks that were never ordinary sticks? If not “sacred,” what then should we call such material? As our research developed, we found more precise terms for different conditions of material sacredness. Statues are “animated” (*hó thần nhập tượng*, literally “call the god into the statue”) following Gell’s usage for

similar practices in South Asia (GELL 1998, 121–26 and 136–37) and ritual masters “activate” previously animated amulets. At the same time, producers of temple images speak of the *linh* or *thiêng* qualities of their materials and methods of production, suggesting qualities of at least potential auspiciousness and power that exist prior to and in the aftermath of animation. Any understanding of the powers imputed to material things lives inside the worlds of popular religious belief and practice that informed their production and use and cannot be reduced to the simple question “Is this or is this not a sacred object?”

#### MATERIAL CULTURE AND MAGIC

From the Victorian era, anthropologists have described as “magic” the appeal to, or manipulation of, material objects for non-material ends. S. J. TAMBIAH (1990) recounts a history of specifically Western philosophical and religious traditions, a legacy of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, that reinscribed magical practices as “superstition”—not only heretical religion but bad science. Tambiah suggests that as a legacy of this history, the founding fathers of the anthropology of religion regarded magic as a circumscribed, tangential, and sometimes awkward or problematic domain of religious practice. TYLOR (1958) assigned magic to a lower stratum of religious evolution than “true” religion as practiced in late nineteenth century Britain, positing “animism” as a misperception of the natural world that imputed souls to inanimate things. For FRAZER (1980), magic was a flawed logic of sympathy or contagion. MALINOWSKI (1954) attributed magic in the Trobriand Islands not to primitive misunderstanding but to primitive technology, as well as the psychological needs and uncertainties associated with coral gardens and oceangoing canoes. EVANS-PRITCHARD (1976) and HORTON (1967), to different degrees, characterized magic as a proto-science, an exercise in analogical thinking that fell short of the mark.

Tambiah charted fresh new terrain for the study of magic by emphatically denying its claims to science, arguing that while analogical thinking is a common human attribute, the analogies of science, aimed at proving or disproving a hypothesis, are fundamentally different from the analogies of magic, whose results cannot be subjected to empirical proof and whose ultimate meaning would be missed in any attempt to do so (TAMBIAH 1973). Following AUSTIN (1962), he describes the performance of magic as an *illocutory* act, “something very common in human activity: an attempt to get the world to conform to words (and gestures)... It assumes that through performance, under appropriate conditions, magic can achieve a state of change” (TAMBIAH 1973, 221).

The notion of an illocutory act accords very well with the Vietnamese expression we have translated as “to do magic” or “to do the work of magic” (*làm phép*). In our accounts, the words and gestures of ritual masters cause gods to descend into and vacate statues and amulets and compel malevolent spirits to enter a spatially-designated “jail;” a shaman of the Tày people sings an epic of her



spirit army's journey to recover errant souls, a performance enacted as simultaneous with the journey itself and culminating in restoration and healing; a Tháí shaman and his community perform with music, dance, and mime the act of carrying the celestial spirit *phi*'s tree to heaven, a tree that they have decorated with lavish offerings so that the human world will be lush and fruitful.

By grounding magic in a linguistic and logical frame distinct from the logic of scientific proof, Tambiah moves the discussion away from any notion that magic is what "primitive" people use in the absence of better science and technology and into the domain of shared human behavior. Most rituals, including the blandest of Protestant weddings (a central example for Austin) and Confucian ancestor rites are in some sense "illocutory," and to that degree in some sense magical. The ubiquitousness of magical operations is part of Tambiah's point, but a mechanistic summation of broadly recognizable illocutory acts somehow misses the subtle and imperfect distinction between routinized, formalized procedures, whose outcome is generally positive, and the high stakes and high risk activities that are part of magic's claim.

High stakes and high risks are very much a part of Michael Taussig's poetic and illusive *Mimesis and Alterity*. TAUSSIG (1993, xii) posits a "mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other." The Cuna Indian carving of a European or the shaman's evocation of a jaguar or peccary acts "such that 'calling them up' is to conjure with their image, hence their soul, and hence give birth to the real. I am suggesting, in other words, that the chanter is singing a copy of the spirit-form, and by virtue of what I call the magic of mimesis, is bringing the spirit into the physical world" (TAUSSIG 1993, 105). By the act of mimesis, the shaman, carver, or painter captures the power of the thing portrayed (TAUSSIG 1993, 62). The production of a statue in the likeness of a god or Buddha and the gestures of the ritual master to summon the deity inside it, the Tháí diviner's manipulation of divining tools, the construction of a flower tree to draw down a spirit, and especially the Tày shaman's sung and enacted journey and the spirit medium's performance could all be characterized as mimetic acts intended to evoke power from somewhere out there into the here and now.

Similarly concerned with the process of capturing power from out there, Alfred GELL's essay (1988) on "magic and technology" describes magic as an artful means of trapping the spirits and seducing them to one's will. Gell places a specific emphasis on the beauty or artistry of the magician's execution as a key to the magic's efficacy. In Nicholas THOMAS's (1998, viii) summation of Gell's work, "Technology is enchanting because it is enchanted, it is a virtuoso product that exemplifies an ideal of magical efficacy that people struggle to realize in other domains." In these studies from Vietnam, the beautiful statue that is more pleasing to the gods and consequently more efficacious, the complex inscription of an amulet, the virtuoso musical performance of the Tày shaman, the lushly constructed flower tree of the

Thái, the artful orchestration of a village festival, and the emphasis on beauty in a spirit medium's seance lend themselves to this interpretation.

GELL's work makes the most explicit link between material objects and operations of magic. In his posthumous *Art and Agency* (1998), he offers the elegantly simple suggestion that objects be understood in a manner analogous to social actors enmeshed in relationships with other social actors. To describe how such relationships might operate, Gell draws on the philosophical notion of "abduction," a method of reasoning by which one infers to the best available explanation. In other words, causality is logically perceived—abducted—but neither inductively nor deductively proven (KEANE 2006, 201). Gell presents abducted agency as the mental process of inference whereby "Agency is attributable to those persons and things...who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention rather than the mere concatenation of physical events.... Social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by 'things'" (GELL 1998, 16 and 17–18).

As a socially and culturally constructed inference—the possibility that divine images, divination kits, amulets, the misplaced incense pots that cause yin illness, or the flower trees dedicated to the celestial spirit *phi* cause things to happen—abducted agency need no more be subjected to the criteria of rationality, science, or material possibility than anthropological analyses of complex kinship systems and incest taboos be subject to judgments derived from the science of genetics. By positing the abducted agency of things within a frame of relationships between people and things, Gell offers easy to grasp ideas on the study of magic and material goods. In these studies from Vietnam, Gell's influence is most explicit in KENDALL, VŨ, and NGUYỄN's discussion of the production of divine images, a topic that also concerns Gell in *Art and Agency*, but his basic premise implicitly structures the six papers on sacred objects. In our concerns with how different sacred objects are properly made, handled, stored, and used and with the consequences of inappropriate or disrespectful use, we are probing the varied terms of appropriate relationships between people and things and the manner in which those who made and used sacred objects abducted agency to them (or to the spirits resident within them). We seek this knowledge not from intellectual curiosity alone but also from a professional Museum ethic that would respect, insofar as possible, the understandings of those who made and used the objects in our collections.

#### BUT WHAT ABOUT "SUPERSTITION"?

Gell's "abducted agency," as a common act of human cognition, offers with Tambiah's "illocutory acts" and Taussig's "mimetic faculty" a means of attributing magical thinking to common human processes of logic or imagination without reducing magic to a lower stratum of religious evolution and without attributing it to the psychological needs engendered by primitive technologies only. Anyone, anywhere is capable of magical thinking. This emphasis on

commonality however, should not obscure specific histories of opposition—modern discourses that “reinvent” magic as their own antithesis (PELS 2003). Ideologies of modernity—from both the right and the left—propagate and to different degrees enforce the notion that recourse to magic is “primitive,” “backward,” “superstitious,” or “peasant” in virtually any social landscape where anthropologists are likely to research popular religion today.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, fieldwork from areas with recent histories of extreme suppression, such as the former Soviet Union (BALZER 1989 and 1996; HUMPHREY 1999) and the People's Republic of China (CHAU 2005; SIU 1989; YANG 2000), testify to the tenacity of popular religion. Studies of contemporary Vietnamese popular religion, both in this special issue and those cited at the start of this essay, witness a similar situation of enthusiastic revival after decades under the shadow of “superstition.” Our interviewees described the destruction of votive statues, divination books, amulet blocks, diviners' kits, and shamans' musical instruments in successive waves of anti-superstition campaigns in the past. VI Văn An explains how, in convincing a Thái diviner to sell his divination kit to the VME, he took pains to explain that placing the kit in the Museum, where it would be part of a rare and precious collection of Thái culture, was fundamentally different from the confiscation of diviners' kits by state authorities in the past. Hue-Tam Ho TAI and LÊ Hồng Lý's description of a controversy over scholarly analysis of a village festival should be read against villagers' sensitivity to the aspersions cast upon popular religious expression in the recent past.

Consistent with Tambiah's acknowledgement that operations of science and technology eliminate the need or demand for some operations of magic (pesticides eliminate the need for a ritual to repel insects) (TAMBIAH 1973, 227), the studies by VI, VÕ, and LA suggest that in the mountainous minority areas of Vietnam, better access to modern medicine and improved hygiene reduces but does not eliminate the caseload of shamans and diviners. One challenge for any on-the-ground study of popular religion today, and one that broad theories of magic have not answered for us, lies in recognizing, as Stacy Pigg's Nepalese ethnography does, the tensions and contradictions that people live with every day, when choices to visit a ritual specialist or to shun “superstition” may be influenced by social identities as much as attitudes or beliefs, and contradictory attitudes might coexist within a single social actor (PIGG 1996). LA Công Ý's description of a Tày shaman relates how civil servants and educated young people generally shun traditional healers, but gives the counter-example of a seemingly miraculous cure for an unlikely patient. NGUYỄN Thị Hiền's discussion further underscores the contingency and variability of sacred healing.

Popular religious practice among the Kinh (Việt) majority contains many surprises that confound expectations of religious adherence and opposition. VŨ Hồng Thuật describes two ritual masters who are cadres in their day jobs; one of the spirit mediums interviewed for our study of votive statues retired from the civil service in order to serve the spirits full-time; and anyone who expresses an

interest in the world of Vietnamese spirit mediums will soon hear gossip about politically well-connected people who have dual identities as initiated mediums. In NGUYỄN and PHẠM's description of a village quarrel over the installation of a religious statue, it was the entrenched local authorities who were pro-statue while a grass roots resistance movement successfully campaigned to remove it. Hue-Tam Ho TAI and LÊ HỒNG Lý's discussion inverts common sense expectations by describing a situation where villagers armed with texts mute the scholars' authorization of their rituals.

Our interlocutors describe how a great deal of popular religious activity went on in secret and how, a few years before the officially-sanctioned opening of markets and other once-forbidden social practices in 1986, communities were already beginning to refurbish abandoned temples and repair damaged statues.

#### POPULAR RELIGION, THE MARKET, AND THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

Competitive markets foster popular religious activities; this has become an ethnographic commonplace, particularly where entrepreneurs and laborers have reason to regard markets as exploitative, capricious, unpredictable, or otherwise irrational and inhuman (COMAROFF and COMAROFF 1992 and 1999; KENDALL 1996 and 2003; PELS 2003; SANDERS 2001). Some of this work is influenced, at least in part, by Taussig's novel reading of Marx's theory of the commodity fetish, describing the operations of a volatile market, unhinged from any notion of labor value, as a perceptual operation of magic (TAUSSIG 1993, 98).<sup>11</sup> The link between magic and markets also benefits by a new anthropology of consumption that draws the mass-produced commodity into long-standing anthropological discussions of relationships between people as mediated by exchanges of material goods (APPADURAI 1986; MILLER 1995a and 1995b; MYERS 2001). New commodities and cash become sites of magical manipulation and sorcery in studies from Latin America (TAUSSIG 1980 and 1997), Africa (MEYER 1998), Russia (LINDQUIST 2002 and 2005), and Taiwan (WELLER 1994).

So far, this productive meeting of popular religion and the marketplace commodity has had relatively little to say about the production, distribution, and use of religious materialism per se, by which I mean goods commissioned, produced, and purchased for specifically religious uses.<sup>12</sup> Statues, votive goods, icons, and ritual paraphernalia generate their own complex marketplaces: commercially printed South Asian "God pictures" help to unify notions of a Hindu Pantheon across national and diasporic space (INGLIS 1999), Afro-Caribbean charms appear in mail order catalogues (LONG 2001), and specialized shops service the contemporary American Catholic community in all of its surprising diversity (PRIMIANO 1999). TAMBIAH's *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984), illuminating how anxious status groups in a rapidly changing Thái society inscribe commercial amulets with both personal aspirations and oblique critiques of the Thái Buddhist hierarchy, illustrates the interpretive power of combining material

culture studies, religious studies, and a nuanced ethnography focused on a particular genre of sacred object.

In Vietnam, producers of religious goods witnessed a crescendo of popular religious activity from the 1990s as increasing numbers of Vietnamese were drawn into the entrepreneurial sphere (NGUYỄN 2006). In this special issue, changing markets in the production of religious goods provide a lively context to the three studies on sacred objects among the Kinh (Việt) majority. In NGUYỄN and PHẠM's account, the market in divine images and temple fittings enables new elites to express distinction in village society, while the prospect of mass production and the ritual specialists' responses to it inform VŨ's discussion of amulet production and KENDALL, VŨ, and NGUYỄN's story of the three Mother Goddess statues. These visits to the ritual marketplace of Vietnam complicate Benjamin's dichotomy between the "authentic work of art," produced and used as an object of ritual, and the mass produced commodity (BENJAMIN 1969). They describe not only the commodification of ritual goods and services, but how ritualized versus mechanical reproduction sort into hierarchies of value established through perceptions of relative efficacy, and how the idiom of making offerings to the spirits enables the religious practitioners' frequent assertion that "the gods things are not for sale." Popular religion may be both in and of the market, but it must simultaneously rise above it to affirm the propriety and efficacy of its own practice and to escape the taint of an exploitative superstition.

The papers by LA and VÕ deal with a different form of commodification, the presentation of minority rituals as cultural festivals and entertainments, usually in the name of "cultural heritage" (*di sản văn hóa*). However problematic some scholars find the now universalized notion of "heritage" (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 1998 and 2006), Vietnamese folklorists and ethnologists and their subjects generally embrace it as a means of recuperating what was only recently reviled. Local cultural festivals, initially mounted as celebrations of minority culture, have expanded to include the activities of shamans and ritual masters. The media seeks them out, and some have gained national recognition. In these contexts, performers who once lived under the onus of "superstition" would seem to have every encouragement to adapt sacred rituals as secular entertainments if by so doing they and their work gain recognition and dignity. But they may not everywhere be willing participants.

VÕ suggests that because the local authorities encouraged festivals featuring sacred objects and ritual dances so swiftly on the heels of anti-superstition campaigns, Thái shamans may have felt that they had little voice in challenging the potentially dangerous activity of bringing ritual trees onto secular performing arts stages. VÕ's research reveals that at least some of these "sacred trees" were only decorated poles, carefully constructed to avoid inappropriate contact with the spirits. However, the local shamans only learned of this reflexive adaptation through VÕ's own research, and it remains to be seen whether, in the eyes of Thái performers and their audience, iconic festival trees and decorated poles exhibited

as folk art will ultimately trivialize cultural memories of the shamans' work. By contrast, the Tày shamans of LA's account carefully orchestrated their own performance in the capital city, ever-cognizant of what would be pleasing or offensive to the *Then* spirits they serve.

#### CONCLUSION

In the museum world, one often hears the claim that objects “speak to us.” The six mini-ethnographies on sacred objects in Vietnam reveal how much the language of otherwise mute “ritual objects,” “shamans’ tools,” and “divination kits” becomes articulate through the language of fieldwork encounters. The different ritual experts encountered in these six studies negotiate both changes in the production of sacred goods and markets and the manner in which they allow such objects to be used in the unprecedented contexts of museum exhibits and cultural festivals. As active and thoughtful players, they extemporize on past experience in a complex and changing social and economic milieu.

Our conversations with ritual masters, shamans, spirit mediums, diviners, and ordinary people reveal moments of consensus but also significant disagreements about the correct and proper relationship between people and sacred objects, the meaning of local festivals, or the root cause of affliction. In the article by NGUYỄN and PHẠM, a disagreement over the propriety of installing a statue in the communal house was so profound that it culminated in a lawsuit, and ten years after the events described, the rift had not healed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet's observation that “culture” is a place of contestation finds ample support in this story (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 2006) and in TAI and LÊ's account of the Đồng Kỵ Village Firecracker Festival.

These several studies represent different popular religious traditions within Vietnam against the background of a new market economy, religious revival, and the ongoing work of a museum. We hope that our readers will find popular religion in Vietnam as engaging and vital as we have and will see our studies as windows into this space.

#### A NOTE ABOUT VIETNAMESE NAMES

In this introduction, I have referred to individual authors by their family names (for example, Nguyễn, Vi, Phạm) since family names are used to cite scholarly work. We refer to our ethnographic subjects by the last syllable of their given names, following common Vietnamese usage (e.g. Mr. Đỗ Thế Thìn is addressed as “Mr. Thìn”).

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#### NOTES

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2. This growing list of works in Western languages includes but is not restricted to BERTRAND 1996a and 1996b; ENDRES 2002; FJELSTAD and NGUYEN 2006b; *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2007; MALARNEY 2001, 2002 and 2003; NORTON 2000 and 2002; NGUYỄN 2002; PHẠM 2005; TAYLOR 2004; TAYLOR 2007; *Vietnamese Studies* 1999.

3. DI GREGORIO 2007; ENDRES 2001; KLEINEN 1999; LUONG 1993; MALARNEY 2007; NGUYỄN, NGUYỄN, NGUYỄN, and NGUYỄN 2003.

4. See, for example, BOON 1991; CLIFFORD 1988, 209–210; CLIFFORD 1997, 188–219; DAVIS 1997; GRIMES 1992; HORSE CAPTURE 1989; NICHOLSON 1983.

5. Others have argued, to the contrary, that because the religious impulses that have inspired most art are remote from the viewing public, art curators can only be “true to the object in our fashion” (VOGEL 1990).

6. *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit* opened in New York in March 2003. It opened in Hanoi, the final venue, in December 2005. For more about this project and its contents, see NGUYEN and KENDALL 2003.

7. See discussions by DRUMHELLER and KAMINITZ 1994; MAUNDER 2000; POWELL 1989; REEDY 1992.

8. See the cases describ

ed by ANDERSON 1990; BERNSTEIN 1992; CLAVIR, JOHNSON, and SHANE 1987; FRISBEE 1987; GULLIFORD 2000; HERLE 1994; KREPS 1998 AND 2003; MIBACH 1992; MIBACH & GREEN 1989; REEDY 1991.

9. “Sacralize” is preferred to “consecrate,” which is sometimes identified with specifically Christian practices.

10. See, for example, ANAGNOST 1987 AND 1994; ARGYROU 1993; KENDALL 2001; PIGG 1992; PRAKASH 2003; SERED 1990.

11. “Marx used that term in *Capital* to refer to the cultural attribution of a spiritual, even godlike, quality to commodities, objects bought and sold on the market standing over their very producers. He could just as well have used the term ‘animism.’ Under capitalism the animate quality of objects is a result of the radical estrangement of the economy from the person; no longer is man the aim of production, but production is the aim of man” (TAUSSIG 1993, 98).

12. One exception to this generalization is in the several studies that deal with the (sometimes larcenous) appropriation of sacred objects by the art markets and museum displays (CLIFFORD 1988 and 1997; DAVIS 2002; FORSHEE 2002; UDVARDY 2003; VOLKMAN 1990).

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