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The One-Eyed God at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

The Story of a Village Conflict

The votive image of the One-Eyed God, newly installed and ritually animated in the communal house of Họa village near Hanoi, precipitated a quarrel between the donor and the managers of the communal house on the one hand and a grass-roots movement of villagers led by a member of one of the old village families on the other. In the end, the statue was deanimated and given to the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. Retrospective interviews with villagers who had been party to the quarrel and a review of existing documentation from the incident reveal a complex struggle between old families with long prestigious lineages and new families who had acquired leverage in the local administration, between popular religion and its perceived abuses, and between established local authority and grass roots democracy. "What happened in Họa village" emerges as a "Rashomon"-like layering of local rivalries and religious and political motivations carried out through an argument about the propriety or impropriety of installing a tutelary god's statue in a village communal house.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—museum—popular religion—communal house—village conflict—animation ritual

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The One-Eyed God (VME 51.97.40.27-1.2) of this story sits in the main storeroom of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME). The VME received it from the Từ Liêm District Department of Culture and Information on 31 July 1996, after its removal from the communal house (*đình*) of Họa village in the Red River Delta near Hanoi.[1] Representatives of the Department of Culture described a conflict that arose when a statue presented to the Họa Communal House displeased some of the villagers. This faction had mounted a contentious lawsuit involving the greater Hanoi administration and the Ministry of Culture and Information. The ultimate decision of the several different administrative bodies that were subsequently drawn into this conflict was to remove the statue from the communal house. In supporting these claims, the Department of Culture and Information faced a dilemma. How could they dispose of the statue without offending the faction that had originally placed it in the communal house? Their solution was to offer the statue to the Museum.[2]

As an ethnologist, I (Nguyễn) understand both the significance of and special circumstances created by an animated statue and how a conflict over its placement could arise. As the Director of the Museum, I became a player in this story when I agreed to receive this object. I sent a team of researchers including Vũ Hồng Thuật to work directly with the local administration to effect the transfer of the statue to the VME. However, the team did not have enough time to delve deeply into the history of the conflict and the resulting lawsuit. They met with the original donor of the statue to ask permission to bring the statue to the museum. The donor said that the statue had already been presented to the community and ritually animated. Because the statue had been ritually seated in the communal house, the donor denied having any claim of ownership over the statue. Since the statue now belonged to the village, he was willing to accept the decision of the village and the state authorities. Researchers Phạm Văn Dương and Nguyễn Bá Hoan brought the statue directly from the village communal house to the museum storeroom. The museum conservators understood that this statue was newly made and recently removed from the communal house where it had been ritually animated. Even though the statue had been ritually desacralized before its removal from the communal house, some members of the museum staff were

FIGURE 1. Outer gate of the communal house in Họa village, October 1997. VME archive.

reluctant to approach the statue, uncertain whether this procedure had been sufficient to deanimate it.

Nearly ten years later, when the VME had the opportunity to conduct a research project on "the sacred life of material goods" in museum collections, we selected this image of the One-Eyed God as an appropriate case study. There was a huge gap in our knowledge as the Museum records only contained information about the physical attributes of the statue. Therefore, we returned to Họa village and approached the villagers who had been involved in the incident in order to explore the nature of the conflict that had caused the statue's removal. In the village, our queries were greeted with a mixture of triumph and distress, and we found that many people were reluctant to talk about what they remembered as painful events.

The background: họa village in the *đổi mới* era

As in other traditional Red River Delta villages, the history of the Họa village communal house is closely linked to that of its oldest and largest families: the Đỗ, Nguyễn, Phạm, and Phan. Each family has an elaborate ancestral altar and the many steles in the communal house record the accomplishments of particularly illustrious ancestors who brought honor to the village in times past. As elsewhere in Vietnam, illustrious families also contributed to maintaining and refurbishing the communal house. In Họa village, one of the old families, the Phạm, had a particularly close association with it. According to the Phạm family genealogy, in 1635, Mr. Phạm Thọ Lý offered one hectare of land to the village as a site for the communal house. Later, Mr. Phạm Quang Dũng (who distinguished himself in the civil service examination in 1706 and later served as ambassador to China) and his wife provided all of the hardwood for a restoration of the communal house,

which was completed in 1718. In recognition of their contribution, Mr. Phạm Thọ Lý and Mr. Phạm Quang Dũng are venerated at subsidiary altars inside the communal house. Other contributions of money or land by members of distinguished families are recorded on steles in the Họa communal house.

Members of the four families were considered old residents, while other families, whose ancestors settled in the village only three or four generations past, were seen as "outsiders" and looked down upon by members of the old families. This mentality of inequality and discrimination was a target of the revolutionary struggle (Malarney 2002). The old attitudes had been almost completely transformed in official rhetoric and public social practices, such as advancement on the basis of merit, but they persist implicitly in daily village life. In the new era, the old families have reasserted themselves (Kleinen 1999; Luong 1993). At the same time, some of the newcomer families have been successful both in politics and the new market economy, creating resentment among the old families. Verses composed for the Spring Festival in 1996 denounced members of the Họa communal managing board whose recent ancestors came from other provinces and reflected the depth of animosity toward new families in Họa village:

> Wherever Tiên goes, something gets broken. However many times you try, you fail. So let me tell you clearly that Họa village does not lack for talented men and women. We don't have to ask an outsider like you for help. Get out of our chair, come home, and wash your skirt. Cook rice. Don't wait until the chair collapses out from under you. Go away, you can't come back.

Religious revivals provide a new arena for old family/newcomer conflict. During the revolutionary struggle, the practice of making contributions to the communal house and acknowledging the donors had been suspended in Họa village for thirty to forty years. After 1945, and especially during the resistance against the French colonizers and throughout the American War, many communal houses and pagodas were destroyed due to a mistaken understanding of popular religious practices as "superstition." The buildings and their furnishings were used for other, secular purposes, and many historical relics were lost or damaged. In addition, daily life was difficult during this period. From 1945 to the 1980s and even into the 1990s, the custom of donating to communal houses and temples in the northern delta appeared to have died out.

In 1986, the Sixth Party Conference caused a new breeze to blow through the whole country; the profound effects of this transformation on all of Vietnamese society were evident by the early 1990s. The subsidized system was abolished, the market economy and the private sector developed, and material life improved. Religious revival occurred throughout the northern delta in the 1990s in tandem with the growth of the private sector and the success of many business enterprises in the city and surrounding countryside. Slowly, village festivals and other popular religious customs reappeared. Business people, especially company directors, were taking an active role in financing religious revivals and the renovation of temples, pagodas, and communal houses.

FIGURE 2. VME staff members carry the One-Eyed God to a waiting car. VME archive.

This new breeze also blew through Họa village where the communal house was recognized as a cultural and historical relic (in 1993) and the village festival revived, enabling old families to reassert their claims to distinction.[3] For example, in Họa village, members of the Phạm family were again making significant contributions to the communal house.[4] However, newcomer families who had benefited from the market could also participate in the revival. Mr. Tuyên's family's desire to provide a statue of the One-Eyed God was conceived in this new atmosphere.

The child of a "newcomer" family, Mr. Tuyên was born in 1921 and is now more than eighty years old. Before his retirement he was a civil servant; in retirement, he became treasurer of the Village Relics Management Board. During the French war, he had acted as an intelligence operator behind enemy lines, earning many medals for his work in the resistance. Mr. Tuyên is also an enthusiastic practitioner of popular religion who performs as a spirit medium (*ông đồng*), serving the private temple that his family has maintained for three or four generations and where he was initiated at the age of six. Villagers comment that Mr. Tuyên's family's wealth comes from the offerings that devotees bring to his temple.[5] His children are successful in business, and his eldest son, Uyên, the director of his own company, gave Mr. Tuyên the money to make the One-Eyed God. Uyên himself visited the God's temple in Nghệ An province to ask the God's permission for the project and to photograph the God's statue as a model for the carver.

The statue installed

Documents, orders, couplet scrolls, steles in the communal house, and local legends link the story of the One-Eyed God to the long history of the village.[6] The main temples of the One-Eyed God are in Cửa Roi in Nghệ An province and Sầm Sơn in Thanh Hóa province. According to village history, General Đồng Tri Đồng Xuyên Hầu and his troops, after fighting the Kingdom of Siam,

brought the worship of the One-Eyed God back from Nghệ An province and worshipped him in the communal house out of gratitude to the god for having enabled them to transport livestock through Nghệ An. Local legends give a different version, linking the god's arrival in Họa village to the agency of a mandarin from the village, the scion of another of the four "old families." There are two distinct versions of the story, but the following is consistent in both renditions: The mandarin visits the God's temple and is insufficiently respectful when he venerates the god. The God appears in a dream and severely chastises the mandarin, who then brings incense from the God's temple back to the Họa communal house and establishes his worship there.

Talk of dedicating a statue to the One-Eyed God began amid the new prosperity of the 1990s.[7] On 12 February 1995, Mr. Tuyên made a petition and sent it to different levels of the government, requesting permission to induct a statue of the One-Eyed God into the communal house, a process that took several months because of the communal house's status as a historical relic, which is state property. Various levels of government authority are required to offer guidance and supervision to ensure that petitioners follow the intentions of the 1985 ordinance governing the preservation of cultural property. In making his proposal, Mr. Tuyên did not precisely follow the specified procedures for renovating a cultural and historical relic, and by the time his petition reached the higher authorities, the statue had already been carved. Even so, ten months after his initial appeal and two additional submissions of his petition, the request was successfully passed from the management committee of the communal house to the chairman of the commune, and finally to the head of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board who approved the request. A master artisan who observed all of the traditional taboos of his craft carved the statue from the solid core wood of a jackfruit tree. The statue was installed in the communal house on 7 February 1996. At an auspicious hour, the monk Thích Quảng Dũng of Họa pagoda, assisted by several other monks, performed a solemn ceremony to call the One-Eyed God into the statue and awaken its senses. To hold this ritual, the Họa communal house management committee had requested permission from the commune people's committee. Several officials attended, including the head of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board, as well as villagers and other guests.

The animation ritual (*hô thần nhập tượng*), held after dark, proceeded through many stages and lasted well past midnight. The ritual masters say that an animation ritual is best done at midnight, the potent hour of the rat, although these days darkness is usually considered sufficient.[8] Based on interviews with ritual masters knowledgeable about animation rituals, including the monk who animated the One-Eyed God, the ritual would have proceeded as follows.[9]

The ritual master, Monk Dũng, invited high spirits from heaven to oversee the ritual, making appropriate offerings[10] and burning five sets of costumes, boots, hats, and horses for the five messengers who invite Buddhas and gods from the heavens, the underworld, the mountains, the water, and from the east, west, north,

and south. The monks read petition sheets inviting the Buddha who is on monthly duty, reported the ritual and the list of offerings to the tutelary god (*Quan Hành Khiển*), and petitioned the guardians of heaven to open their gate. The monks also burned offerings and petition sheets to complete this segment of the ritual.

Monk Dũng then demarcated a ritual space that was protected by his magic from the incursions of evil spirits. Any evil spirits that he captured, he placed in this "jail," which in some areas is a bowl, while in other places the ritual master establishes the space by making ritual gestures. The ritual master stood in the middle of the fortified area holding incense sticks and writing talismans in the air with their burning tips to repel evil spirits from the east, west, south, north, and middle.[11] The ritual master recited sacred words, extinguished the incense, and put himself into a meditative state. To facilitate concentration and Buddha-mindfulness, he read appropriate texts,[12] including the *Đại bi* sutra of the Mật sect that invites Buddhas and gods to descend.[13]

In the next rite, the ritual master invited the Jade Emperor, the Buddha, and the other deities with offerings of fruit and flowers and the recitation of additional sutras.[14] During the fifth rite, the lights were extinguished, ideally during the hour of the rat (midnight), and the spectators waited silently in the dark while Monk Dũng called the God into the statue three times, asking the God to enter the statue quickly. Pointing incense at the statue's eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and heart-mind, and concentrating on an incantation to awaken the statue body's five senses, Monk Dũng pulled off the red cloth. According to the monk, "My mind and my heart have to be completely focused on the incarnation to sanctify the ears, the eyes, the nose, the tongue, and heart-mind of the statue. At this instant, the wooden statue changes its nature and becomes a god, animated and powerful."

The cloth removed, Monk Dũng quickly reached into the tray of offerings for wandering ghosts and threw grains, rice, corn, beans, peanuts, sesame, coins,

FIGURE 3. Ritual master conducting a ritual to deanimate a statue. VME archive.

needles, and five-colored thread to the four directions. Everyone scrambled after them in the dark because of these objects' talismanic value. The grains are gifts from the Buddhas and gods and promise a bountiful harvest when sown, and when fed to livestock the animals flourish. The coins or folded "butterflies" of paper money can be placed on the family ancestral altar as a wish for successful business, while needles and five-colored thread repel evil spirits. People also tore at the red cloth, taking scraps filled with the miraculous power of the gods and Buddhas. Placed on the family altar, the scrap becomes a protective amulet, or sewn onto a child's shirt, it has the power to chase away evil spirits and protect the child from illness. With the light restored, what had been a statue covered with a red cloth was now the animated presence of the One-Eyed God.

The ritual master performed the joyful rite of welcoming the light of the Buddha and seeing off the visiting deities, making hand mudras, reciting incantations, and inscribing talismanic words with burning incense smoke. He performed the rite to open the jail (*khai ngục pháp*), commanding malevolent entities to return to whence they came or face annihilation. As a symbol of opening the "jail," he made ritual gestures signifying release or he upended an overturned bowl. Finally, Monk Dũng performed the *Khai Quang* ("sanctifying the statue") ritual to make the One-Eyed God wise and capable of performing every task. Holding a small mirror, a tree branch, and three incense sticks,[15] he used the burning incense stick to write first on the mirror the ideographs for *Quang minh kinh* and then on the One-Eyed God's eyes, chanting, "The left eye is shiny as the sun. The right eye is shiny as the moon. The left and the right eyes must become five or six eyes to see through six things." He sanctified the statue's five eyes: heavenly eye, magic eye, spirit eye, normal eye, and heart-mind eye.[16]

To conclude the ritual, Monk Dũng gave alms to wandering ghosts in the form of votive papers, puffed rice, and rice gruel, an act of merit making on behalf of the ritual's sponsors. In the final rite, he petitioned the gods and Buddhas to protect the villagers. As an effectively animated divine image, the One-Eyed God was now resident in the Họa village communal house, but he would enjoy veneration there for only five months.

The conflict and the social contradictions behind it

On 19 March 1996, one month after the statue had been ceremoniously animated, Mr. Đỗ Văn Thìn, age sixty-five, the head of hamlet 4A of Họa village, wrote the first of several petitions to the Minister of Culture and Information objecting to the installation of the statue in the communal house. A retired policeman and a member of one of the four old families, Mr. Thìn enjoyed a large circle of connections. From 1959 to 1969 he was a fireman, and then he transferred to the police force of Từ Liêm district. After unification in 1975, he worked in Quy Nhơn in central Vietnam. On his retirement, he became the head of hamlet 4A and a party member.

Mr. Thìn had been away from the village when the statue was animated. He became suspicious when he heard the villagers discussing a statue that seemed to have been installed on the god's chair in the communal house. He told us, "When I saw what was there, I realized right away that this was against time-honored customs, village precepts, and the law. I used to be a policeman, so I feel strongly that I must be responsible and cooperate with the local government in following the law. That is why I launched my campaign against the statue." Because the statue was already carved and painted when the communal house management board began procedures to secure permission for the installation, Mr. Thìn believes that Mr. Tuyên had ordered the statue in early 1995 with the original intention of installing it in his family temple, but that the family had rejected the statue because their temple does not have a tradition of venerating the One-Eyed God. In Mr. Thìn's plausible interpretation, Mr. Tuyên presented the statue to the communal house as an afterthought, to cover his original mistake. In his first petition, written by hand on ordinary notebook paper, Mr. Thìn stated:

> (The installation of the statue)… is against both national law and local custom…. The communal house has participated in one thousand years of national history and was renovated three times. Even before it was recognized as a cultural and historical relic, the communal house was considered an ancient structure that could not be altered. Installing a statue in the communal house supports those who would advocate the practice of superstition inside the communal house itself. A communal house [*đình*] is not a temple [*đền*]. Communal houses usually do not have statues.

In other words the communal house did not have a statue in the past, but rather venerated the God "from afar" through a tablet placed on a chair, a long-distance connection to the animated and consequently efficacious statues of the God in its distant temples in Nghệ An and Thanh Hóa provinces.

Significantly, Mr. Thìn addressed his petition directly to the Minister of Culture and Information rather than following the normal chain of authority that required him to send his petition first through the commune to the district and then to the Hanoi City Culture Bureau, which might have forwarded it to the Ministry. Mr. Thìn felt that because the intervening bureaus had agreed in principle to the installation of the statue, they were complicit in supporting "superstitious practices" in the village, and he must appeal to a higher authority. In his many subsequent petitions, Mr. Thìn would repeat his claim that the commune authorities, with the collusion of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board, had improperly imposed the statue on the community.[17]

On 25 March 1996, Mr. Thìn initiated a meeting of hamlet 4A. Fifty people representing nineteen families attended and approved another petition to the Ministry signed by the vice head of the hamlet and representatives of the Woman's Union, and co-signed by representatives of the Front for the Fatherland and the Association of Elders. This petition claimed a violation of national decrees, specifically: "Certain religious activities that are abnormal or violations of custom must

FIGURE 4. Blurred attempt to document the gold fragment and amulets found inside the One-Eyed God. VME archive.

be approved by the government," and "any architectural change or renovation must be approved by the provincial people's committee or an equivalent body." The Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board's approval had circumvented this higher level review.

On 6 April, in response to criticism, the commune authorities claimed that the installation of the statue had been approved at a higher level, but when the villagers asked them for documentation, the commune authorities were not able to provide it. Two days later, a petition from the villagers of 4A hamlet informed the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Department of Preservation and Museums that the signers did not accept the explanation issued by the chairman and vice chairman of the people's committee on 6 April, reminding the Ministry that "The Họa communal house is national property." The petition again cited the 21 March 1991 decree governing cultural property, which prohibits any changes "without appropriate oversight." In a subsequent petition, dated 25 June 1996, Mr. Thìn invoked additional decrees regarding the safekeeping of cultural property.[18] The Ministry of Culture and Information received a total of five petitions from hamlet 4A, Họa village, through the Department of Preservation and Museums before the matter of the statue was resolved in July 1996. The Ministry delivered these documents to the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board with their own letter instructing this bureau to investigate and report to the Ministry.

In Họa village, participants on both sides of the issue describe an intensifying climate of opposition to the installation of the statue. Mr. Thìn saw himself as engaged in an act of consciousness-raising: "Our people have only a limited understanding of the law. When we talk to them about the law, they do not catch on in a single morning or afternoon. Eventually they understood, supported us, and participated in the removal of the statue. Of course, not all of them signed the petition sheet, just some people." According to Mr. Nguyễn Đức Lộc, the former

chairman of the commune People's Committee who had supported the installation, what began with a few dissident voices became, at peak, an opposition of about fifty or sixty people.

In addition to petitioning the Ministry, opponents of the statue availed themselves of a venerable rural tradition. They composed satirical verses critical of the statue and its advocates and posted the verses in public places or tossed them into people's homes. One verse, signed by the Veteran's Association, condemned those who had installed the statue: "Since the formation of our village, there was never any talk of evil spirits." Traditionally, the communal house was a place to venerate the tutelary gods and space for village meetings. Those who opposed the new statue argued that animated statues, like the statue of the One-Eyed God, should be venerated in temples (*đền*), places for petitioning the deities and for spirit mediums' performances. The verses imply that by effectually making the communal house into a temple, the communal house management committee would be in a position to line their pockets with the contributions of the faithful: "Owing to the market economy, they use their power to buy and sell the gods. They use the money of the party and the people." The Tuyên family, a focus of this critique, was described as exploiting religious activities, "By bringing the statue into the communal house, dog, you think you are in your own private temple where you can dance and perform (like a spirit medium) as you please."

Another verse underscored the Tuyên family's humble "newcomer" origins, "Dog, do you remember back when you had only buckwheat and yams to eat? You had to work hard to feed all your children. But now you have money and are showing off." Other criticisms of Mr. Tuyên's alleged aspirations appeared in village rumors that Mr. Tuyên intended to win membership in the communal house for his own ancestors by sneaking them inside via the cavity in the statue where amulets and other materials are installed prior to its animation. Even years after the statue was removed, villagers would claim, "the ashes of Mr. Tuyên's family members are inside the statue," or "Mr. Tuyên's family entered the communal house under the veil of the God."

The pro-statue faction, of course, saw things differently. Mr. Nguyễn Đức Lộc saw the source of the conflict in the "contradictions between the peoples who are inclined to believe in the spirits (*tâm linh*) and the others who don't have any such inclination." Mr. Tuyên said,

> Our sincere intention was to make a solemn place for prayer. This would benefit all of the villagers including my own family.… The Gods, the people, and the local government witnessed our sincerity. Then some people made legal petitions according to certain laws.… If they did something wrong or cruel they will receive karmic retribution.

The monk Thích Quảng Dũng summarized the situation as a "conflict between certain people in the village. They want to demonstrate that this family is more powerful than that family, this family is richer than that family; this family has a relationship with such and such authority."

The higher authorities respond

The petitions prompted a meeting of the relevant local authorities on 16 April 1996. The meeting included the director of the district's Department of Culture and Information, representatives of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board, the chairman and vice-chairman of the People's Committee of Họa commune, the chairmen of the commune People's Council, the chairmen of the commune Front for the Fatherland, and the head of the commune Department of Culture and Information. The minutes of this meeting record how, after rejecting the idea of holding a referendum on the statue in each hamlet of the commune, this body was unable to find a satisfactory resolution and decided to hold a scientific seminar where history researchers and representatives of related bureaus would discuss the appropriateness of installing a statue of the One-Eyed God in the communal house. The seminar never took place, owing to the swift and vehement opposition of the people of hamlet 4A who submitted another petition organized by Mr. Thìn: "We do not accept the rubric of a 'scientific seminar' as an appropriate means of resolving the issue of the statue. Why? Because the time has passed for such a seminar, and holding it now will only show the deep-rooted and stagnant conservatism of those we consider good-for-nothing."

On 24 May, the pro-statue faction responded with a document of their own, sent to the Hanoi Department of Culture and Information, the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board, and the district Department of Culture stating that,

> The Commune affirms that the Party Committee, the People's Committee, the Front for the Fatherland, and the majority of Bureaus and villagers in the commune highly valued the installation of the statue, and appropriate procedures for securing permission were carried out respectfully and with solemn purpose by the end of December 1995.... Once more...(these parties), affirm the induction of the statue into the communal house as a good and righteous act that enhances the preservation and promotion of this valuable cultural monument for the future descendants of this community.... Some individuals in the commune have now petitioned and motivated some other people to sign petitions, calling themselves "representatives of the villagers." Because they did not support the induction of the statue, they circulated their petition. This petition contains incorrect information, which is not consistent with the wishes of the majority of people in the commune, and it opposes the freedom of religious belief and practice of others.

The very next day, Hanoi Television broadcast a report on the architecture of the Họa communal house, including images of the newly inducted One-Eyed God. Mr. Thìn, along with the vice head of the hamlet and the customary Overseer of Religious Rites in the commune, sent a letter to the directors of the Hanoi Department of Culture and Information and Hanoi Television, objecting, in the name of the residents of hamlet 4A, that the broadcast was an attempt to "legitimize the incorrect veneration of a statue in the communal house." These sentiments were repeated in a separate complaint sent by a resident from hamlet 5.

Mr. Thìn accompanied a delegation of elders from hamlet 4A to the Office of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board on 4 June. The director, Mr. Thân, treated the group shabbily, regarding them as ignorant country people, and denied that he had given permission for the statue to be installed in the communal house. The next day, this same delegation went to Mr. Thân's home to confront him with a copy of the document that he had signed. Mr. Thìn flourished his old policeman's identification card. This theatrical display of authority, proving the lie to Mr. Thân's denial, brought the desired results. On 6 June 1996, Mr.Thân signed a document authorizing the removal of the statue from the Họa communal house. The document attempted to respect the position of both sides, stating that although the statue would be removed, it must be preserved to reflect the will of the local people and respect for their beliefs. Despite this official decree, and another from the district level, the local authorities dragged their feet, and it was rumored that they were going to organize a referendum over the statue. On 28 June, Mr. Thìn petitioned the commune authorities and sent another petition on 9 July, signed by his neighbors, to the Hanoi People's Committee and related bureaus criticizing the Họa village Peoples Committee's inertia.

Finally, on 31 July 1996, the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board, the Từ Liêm District Department of Culture and Information, the Họa Commune People's Committee and the Họa villagers held a ritual to remove the One-Eyed God statue from the Họa communal house. After five months, the struggle over the statue officially ended, but its resolution indicated an area of ambiguity in the relationship between animated and consequently sacred statues and the laws and regulations governing the preservation of historical relics.

The statue desacralized

Once a statue has been animated and set in place in the "palace" (*cung*) of the communal house, it is venerated as a sacred object, a divine presence requiring all of the proprieties that obtain between people and animated statues (cf. Gell 1998, 115). Popular religion holds that the god resident in the statue will punish those who violate the terms of this relationship. Removing the statue was a sensitive and delicate act requiring a ritual that would restore the One-Eyed God to his original condition as an empty wooden statue. For this, the People's Committee selected the experienced eighty-two-year-old ritual master Phạm Mục.

Normally, Monk Thích Quảng Dũng would have been invited to perform the deanimation, but as the ritual master who had performed the animation, he refused to perform this ritual, as it would be an admission of the impropriety of the first ritual. Early in the morning on the day of the deanimation, people came to the communal house to burn incense in front of the statue. Normally, the ritual master would select an auspicious hour for the ritual, but Mr. Mục accepted the decision of the local government and the Department of Culture and Information and held the ritual at the hour they requested, minimizing, insofar as possible, his

involvement in the conflict. Wearing a black tunic and turban and seated on the ritual mat in front of the altar, Mr. Mục recited appropriate prayers that could be summarized as:

> We petition the Buddhas and Gods. The Tuyên family who live at [address] were willing to present the statue to the communal house, but because they did not ask the villagers' opinion, the villagers have now petitioned to bring the statue out. After a period of deliberation, the commune People's Committee and the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board have issued a document requiring that the statue be taken out of the communal house. Today, the villagers make offerings and ask your permission to bring the statue out.

After prayers, Mr. Mục recited the *Đại bi* sutra three times as a means of asking the Buddhas and Gods to support and protect him during the potentially dangerous act of deanimation. He burned votive papers at intervals during his recitation and then divined the God's intentions by throwing coins. The first time, he failed to secure the God's permission, but his second toss was successful. Mr. Mục prayed and then invited the representative of the local government to petition the gods to permit the removal of the statue. According to Mr. Mục, representatives of the local government are uncomfortable around spiritual matters and tend to hide their faces. This is also the most dangerous moment in the deanimation ritual, the moment of transformation from a sacred image animated by a resident god to an empty statue. No one knows for certain whether a statue has been effectively deanimated. Did the One-Eyed God really agree to have people carry the statue out of the communal house? If not, what would happen to those who tried? It was a moment of great tension. The ritual master recalled:

> After I prayed and received a successful divination, I invited the representatives of the local government to venerate the statue but no one came forward. I called many times but no one came forward. I was angry and had to scream, "Whoever is in charge has to come and venerate!" They were afraid and tried to pass the responsibility from one to another. Finally Mr. Chung, the chairman of the commune Front for the Fatherland came forward as their representative to bow and ask the God's indulgence on being removed from the communal house.

At 10:25, Mr. Mục recited the appropriate incantation and members of the Front for the Fatherland carried the statue out of the communal house and into the courtyard. Once the statue had been carried outside, Mr. Mục removed from the cavity in the statue's back a gold foil-wrapped packet of amulets, five-colored strings, and fragments of gold, jade, and cinnabar. It was the sort of packet one would expect to find in the cavity of an animated statue, and evidence against the claim that Mr. Tuyên had improperly installed his own ancestors in the statue.[19] With the agreement of the villagers, the amulets, string, and foil wrapper were burned, "transformed by fire," neutralizing their magic properties. The rest was sealed in an envelope and given over to the commune cultural office for

safekeeping. Museum employees carried the statue to a waiting car. According to ritual master Mục, the statue had "returned to its original state, just as it was at the time of its manufacture. If the cavity is emptied, then there is nothing." But had the ritual returned Họa village to its original state?

Ten years later

In the intervening decade, Họa village and its inhabitants experienced many changes, but when we talked to the villagers about the One–Eyed God statue, the emotions they had experienced at the time of the conflict returned to them. Some people grew pensive, others became angry, and some expressed a sense of triumph. Mr. Đỗ Văn Thìn is still pleased with the outcome: "What we said was the truth, and I believe that sooner or later the truth comes to light." According to Mr. Thìn, the rift between his family and Mr. Tuyên's family persists. Ritual master Mục also spoke of a continuing estrangement from Mr. Tuyên: "Before the incident, Mr. Tuyên and I were close friends but that is no longer the case." Mr. Tuyên and his family are still angry. In his words, "All of the things that I presented to the communal house over ten years belong to the God. My family now has nothing." Mr. Tuyên has kept all of the documents and papers related to the statue. He allowed us to look at them in his home but would not permit us to borrow them for photocopying. He said that he will take these documents with him when he "dies and descends to the Yellow Springs."

The statue itself, the physical remnant of the dispute, remains in the storeroom of the VME. Mr. Thìn and others would like the Museum to burn the statue or cast it away in the river as is customary when a statue is no longer used, a fitting end for something they see as not worthy of further discussion. The monk Thích Quảng Dũng, who animated the statue, said, "The statue and the question of exhibiting it are not matters for discussion. If a statue is not venerated, people usually bury it or burn it.... Exhibiting it would cause damage to the village." For his part, Mr. Tuyên would like the Museum to write a catalogue entry for the statue stating, "This statue was taken from Họa village. It was presented to the communal house by Mr. Tuyên from hamlet 1A, Họa commune, but some unrighteous people removed it. My family presented the statue to the god."

Some people in the village continue to speculate on how the One-Eyed God himself responded to these events. Two years after the deanimation of the statue, Mr. Tuyên's family experienced unanticipated accidents. His eldest daughter-in-law died. His son Mr. Uyên, who had given Mr. Thìn the money to make the statue, visited the One-Eyed God temple in Sam Son to photograph its statue, and oversaw the new statue's manufacture, has been ill and bed-ridden since the removal of his family's statue from the communal house. Many people still recall how, on the day of the deanimation, Mr. Tuyên's daughter-in-law spoke out in the communal house, cursing by name twenty people who had opposed the installation of the statue. She said that the god would punish them, but her curse

seems to have boomeranged. Villagers whisper to each other that this is karmic retribution because the Tuyên family improperly inducted the statue into the communal house and the God is punishing them.

Conclusion

Our research leaves us with a "Rashomon" effect; that is, there are three different possible readings of the events in Họa village. From the perspective of what Mr. Thìn and his supporters accomplished, the removal of the statue could be read as a victory for democratic forces in rural Vietnam during the *Đổi Mới* era. A local protest, argued on the basis of both law and village custom, succeeded in overturning decisions imposed by the authorities and restored a solemn and respectful atmosphere to the communal house. In the past, few people would have dared to challenge the decisions made by the party committee, the local government, and the Front for the Fatherland.

For Mr. Tuyên and his faction, "unrighteous people" undermined an act of piety, a legacy of anti-superstition campaigns and pre-*Đổi Mới* attitudes.[20] The anonymous verses and rumors that circulated in the village permit an alternative reading of the conflict as a playing out of the tension between old village families (Mr. Thìn, Mr. Mục) and those newly wealthy (Mr. Tuyên) or politically prominent villagers (Mr. Cương) who were formerly low-status outsiders. The sum of these possible interpretations suggests the complexity of rural life in contemporary Vietnam.

Notes

1. The current communal house sits on a large piece of land near a dyke on the Red River about ten kilometers from central Hanoi.

2. We received this object before the VME opened to the public and before the general public became aware of the VME's work in preserving the material culture and intangible cultural heritage of the country. As a result of an introduction through Professor Ngô Đức Thịnh, Director of the Institute of Folklore, the leaders of the Từ Liêm District Department of Culture and Information telephoned the Museum Director (Nguyễn Văn Huy) expressing their willingness to give the One-Eyed God of the Họa Communal House to the Museum.

3. Mr. Đỗ Văn Thìn, age sixty-five, remembered the last festival in Họa village as having taken place in 1953, one year before the liberation of Hanoi.

4. One member of the Phạm lineage made a notable contribution of thirty- to thirty-five million VND, enabling the replacement of processional as well as couplet boards and other fittings for the communal house.

5. To counter these claims, Mr. Tuyên asserts that his family temple has only seventy-two followers, all family members in Họa Village, and that outside mediums, not Mr. Tuyên, initiated them.

6. This evidence suggests that while most communal houses contain one resident tutelary god, the Họa communal house was built to venerate three auspicious deities: the One-Eyed God (celestial god *Độc Cước chân nhân*, also known as "St. Fire"); *Lê Khôi,* who is concerned with human affairs; and the earth god, *Thổ địa*, *Thổ thần*, who is considered to have been the original tutelary god of the village although documentary references to him have been

lost. As tutelary gods (*thành hoàng*) the three protect the village, secure a good harvest, and chase away disease and evil spirits. The earth god is considered particularly efficacious against accidents. Many villagers explain their unusual simultaneous veneration of these three deities representing the unity of sky, earth, and human beings as an expression of hope for a developed and enlightened future.

7. Mr. Nguyễn Văn Cương, the former director of the Họa Village communal house management board, recalls that during 1995 and 1996, many people wanted to dedicate statues of both the One-Eyed God and Nhân Thần, the son of the hero Lê Lợi's second elder brother who helped Lê Lợi in the resistance against the Minh army. He is one of the three tutalary gods of Họa village. The communal house of the Họa village is different from other communal houses in that it venerates three tutelary gods simultaneously—Thiên Thần or Độc Cước; Nhân Thần or Lê Khôi, and Thổ Thần or earth god—rather than the single tutelary. Mr. Tuyên wanted to carve Nhân Thần as well but since there was no existing statue to serve as a prototype, he commissioned only Độc Cước, the One-Eyed God.

8. As related by the monk Thích Quảng Dũng, "Animation takes place at night according to the law of 'no light' (*triệt đăng*). According to this principle, time in the spirit world is the reverse of ours. That is why when we do the animation, we have to do it during the spirits' daytime, which is our night time." The monk Thích Đức Tâm of Keo pagoda from Gia Lâm district, Hanoi, offered yet another explanation: "This is the time when the General is on duty and no evil spirits dare to show themselves."

9. This account of animation is based on our own interviews with knowledgeable persons in Họa village. We also gratefully acknowledge information provided by Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm from her interview with a knowledgeable ritual master in Yên Phong district, Bắc Ninh province.

10. The offerings for this rite must include sticky rice, chicken, a pig's head, and petition sheets (*sớ*) asking the gods to protect the ritual space.

11. The ritual master faces east and writes the word *tinh ngục*, chants *úm ma ni bát minh hùm* (*om mani padmi hum*), and puts his fingers downwards to press on the "jail." In Nam Định province, the ritual master circulates the perimeter of this space to temporarily restrain any malevolent spirits.

12. He reads *Tam kinh* three times, then *Tinh pháp giới chân ngôn* (to be purified), followed by *Tinh khẩu chân ngôn* (cleansing mouth and body), *Tinh tam nghiệp: thân khẩu ý* (body and mouth should not be distracted by other things) to concentrate, then *Văn thù hộ thân ngôn* to evoke Van Thu Bodhisattva, and, lastly, *A di đà tam chân ngôn* to orient himself to the Buddha.

13. The *Đại bi* is considered the most important text in this ritual because it is written only in the original Sanskrit and thus considered highly efficacious because this is the language that the gods and Buddhas read.

14. Officiants recite the *Phổ môn* and *Đại bi thập chú* three times.

15. In the past, he would have held a hundred coins as well.

16. During this rite, he would have also read an invocation called *An tâm tượng* to set the statue's mind at ease.

17. In this and other petitions, Mr. Thìn substantiated his claim by citing the document of the Đông Ngạc People's Committee, 11 December 1995, on which the head of the Greater Hanoi Relics Management Board had written, "We found the statues appropriate so we approved of the commune's installing (the statue) in the Họa communal house." This section is based on petitions and other materials maintained in Mr. Thìn's personal archive.

18. Specifically, the induction of the statue "violates the decree safeguarding cultural heritage 14/LCT of 31 March 1984 promulgated by the President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Articles 15–18 of the ordinance safeguarding cultural and historical relics

issued by the State Council on 4 April 1984, and Article 12/17 of the decree 288/HDBT of 31 December 1985 by the State Council."

19. We interviewed monks and ritual masters about the contents of the packet and received a fairly standard explanation: The jade symbolizes the light of Buddhas and Gods, the silver symbolizes wealth and prosperity, the five-colored thread symbolizes the five elements of the cosmos, and cinnabar has healing properties. These elements have two purposes: the precious metals and jade enable the magic that animates the statue, and the five-colored threads and cinnabar prevent evil spirits from approaching the statue so that the animation is efficacious. All of the individuals with whom we spoke affirmed that there was nothing unusual about the packet extracted from the statue.

20. Mr. Thìn does not believe in spirits but claims that he tries to respect local traditions.

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