



## A Thái Divination Kit in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

A Thái diviner's kit is assembled over a period of several years as the diviner gathers together unusually-shaped sticks that seem to have been sent to him from the gods. In 1996, the author, a Thái native scholar, collected a kit from an impoverished diviner in his native village in Nghệ An province. The diviner subsequently suffered personal misfortunes attributed not to his giving up the kit but to his having inadequately compensated the deities once resident within it. Studying the diviner's kit as a "biographical object" in HOSKIN's sense (1998), the author was able to describe the training and career of a diviner against the background of recent Vietnamese history. Through the strength of his relationship with the diviner, he was able to make unprecedented documentation of divination methods.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—museum—sacred—popular religion—material culture—divination

AS A RESEARCHER at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) and an ethnic Thái, I have made collections for the museum from the Thái people in Nghệ An province, my native place. Several of these objects were used in the religious life of the Thái people. In my view, the most precious of these is Mr. Tắm's divining kit (VME 97-04-1[1-32]) which I collected in February 1997 in Đốc village, Con Cuông district, in Nghệ An. In traditional Thái society, divination with divining kits was the domain of male ritual masters (*mo*) and essential for their work. Traditional healing begins with a divination. On the basis of the diviner's diagnosis, he would refer clients to a ritual specialist (*mo xơ*) who then invites the diviner to assist in the rituals. In Thái communities today, people express a range of opinions about the efficacy of divination, and diviners like Mr. Tắm respect the skills of medical doctors.

#### AN ACCESSION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As an ethnic Thái and an ethnologist I appreciated the importance of a divining kit in Thái ritual life and also knew how difficult it might be to collect one. Beginning in 1996, I approached several Thái diviners in my home village for interviews and to purchase divining tools for future research and exhibition at VME. Because these elders regard me as both a "grandchild" of the community and an educated civil servant working in the capital city of Hanoi, it was easy for me to interview them and take detailed notes. However, when I started to negotiate the purchase of a kit, it was suddenly not so simple because, in all of their experience, no one had ever dared to so much as mention purchasing a divining kit. Early in 1997, during my visit home to celebrate Tết, the lunar New Year, I approached Mr. Tắm, the most respected diviner in the community and the diviner whose kit was considered the most complete. I thought that I might have a chance because, in contrast with other wealthier diviners, he was kind and very approachable. Before raising the question of buying Mr. Tắm's kit, I tried to explain to him the purpose and significance of my buying a divining kit for the Museum. I emphasized that I did not intend to resell it, and that I was not "investigating" him as a practitioner of illegal "superstition" as had been the experience of diviners in the past; rather, I was buying this object to preserve it in the VME in Hanoi. If he sold me this kit, he would be making a small contribution to the preservation and exhibition of a unique cultural aspect of the Thái people, and the museum would carefully



FIGURE I. Preparing to divine, the diviner gathers the sticks in his right hand and rolls them back and forth against his left palm three times while saying “Hoa!” to awaken the spirits. Vi Văn An, VME archive.

maintain the kit. After a long pause, Mr. Tắm said, “Selling the divining kit is a very serious matter; let me think it over carefully and discuss it with my family and then I will decide whether I will sell it or not. Come back in a few days and I will give you my final answer.”

I returned to his home a few days later, thinking that he would turn me down. When I arrived, Mr. Tắm was asleep. His sons, who were in the middle of a meal, got up quickly and went to his room to wake him. Mr. Tắm looked very grave. While he put on his shirt, he told one of his sons to place the mat on the floor in front of the altar and poured me a drink of water, treating me like a respected guest. I was anxious and thought I might not be successful, but I tried to keep calm. After some talk, he lifted his tea bowl, drank a mouthful and said:

I have already discussed this matter with my relatives and with my children, but I am the only one who can decide whether to sell the kit or not. I agree to sell it to you, but you must remember one thing, *this is a very sacred object.*

No one before you ever dared to ask about its origins, not to mention talking about buying and selling it. You have dared to do what no one else could even imagine: that is, to buy it. Because you are highly educated, and you work at the Museum in Hanoi, you are an exceptional case. I will sell it to you, but you must promise not to tell anybody in the village (what I have done).

Mr. Tắm explained that a diviner vows to never sell his divining kit. A kit should be used to help others, and if a diviner breaks this vow, the founding ancestor of the diviners' profession will punish him; the diviner will become ill or die young. Hence, before giving the divining kit to me, Mr. Tắm had to make a desacralizing ritual, setting out offerings of betel, areca nut, and wine, and report his intentions to the founding ancestor. This would remove the power associated with the objects in the kit, desacralizing the objects, to avoid bad luck.

Mr. Tắm held the small ritual, and I provided offerings including two bottles of rice wine, a dish of betel and areca nuts, and some cash. The offerings were displayed on a small bamboo woven shrine for the founding ancestor of the diviners'



FIGURE 2. Placing the sticks between the fingers of his left hand to make a divination. Vi Văn An, VME archive.



FIGURE 3. Reading the divination result from the configuration of divination sticks placed between the fingers of the diviner's left hand. Vi Văn An, VME archive.

profession that hung close to the ceiling in Mr. Tắm's bedroom. As I tried to focus my attention and observe his gestures, I sensed a rush of emotion on the part of the diviner. He respectfully put the wine bottles and the dish of betel and areca nuts on the altar of the founding ancestor of diviners. His eyes were full of sorrow as he respectfully addressed the ancestral diviner. He spoke of his regret and offered self-criticism about this "unavoidable circumstance." His feelings were conflicted; on the one hand, he wanted the Museum to have his kit and on the other, he was violating his code as a diviner and also ending his practice. He slowly poured the wine into two cups and whispered to the ancestor that he was selling the divining kit that had been a part of his life and work for so long.

After the ceremony, Mr. Tắm invited me to sit down near the ancestral altar and poured wine into a cup for me, still treating me like an honored guest. Then he started to tell me about the origins of the belief in divination and about the history of the divining kit. I opened a notebook and meticulously wrote down the whole story, promising to keep the sale of the divining kit secret. He seemed

to trust me because he thinks of me, a civil servant working in a museum, as a representative of the nation. I gave him the small amount of money that he had requested for the kit, put the objects into my bag and left. I intended to write a paper for *Dân tộc học* [Ethnology] journal about the divining kit, using information provided by Mr. Tắm and other diviners in the village, but I was busy with various projects and several years passed.

In 2001, I went home to welcome the New Year and learned that Mr. Tắm's wife had passed away and Mr. Tắm had suffered an accident. After celebrating the New Year and drinking wine at his son's house, Mr. Tắm returned home and fell from the high veranda of his house to the ground nearly six feet below. The villagers understood that he had fallen because he was intoxicated; however, his sons and other kin thought that the real cause of the fall was Mr. Tắm's selling of the divining kit that he had inherited from his father. They believed that the diviners' founding ancestor was exacting a punishment.

I went to visit Mr. Tắm, bringing New Year gifts. When he greeted me, he tried to act happy to see me, but I could sense by the look in his eyes that he would be raising the issue of the divining kit that he had sold to me several years earlier. Taking a mouthful of water, he began,

After I sold the divining kit to you, many people who were not aware of it still brought offerings and asked me to make divinations for them. I told them that I had given up the job. Although before giving the divining kit to you, I reported my intentions to the founding ancestor, I didn't know whether the founding ancestor agreed or not. Since then, my family has declined, my wife died, I myself fell off of the veranda. It's as they say: misfortune never comes alone. My livelihood is worse than before. I didn't say this to you before, but my relatives and sons think that all of this is because I sold the kit to you.

His sorrow was written on his face. He seemed to regret his action. I could read his thoughts, and even though he did not explicitly ask for the object back, I tried to allay his fears:

It is good that you still value the divining kit and still think of yourself as a diviner but it would be difficult to return the object to you because your kit has now become the state's property. It has been catalogued and given a number and it is kept in the Museum's storeroom where it is well preserved. In addition to your divining kit, the Museum has three more that were purchased from our Thái people. This is a very rare and precious collection. You are one of the people who made it possible.

After my explanation, he finally said what was on his mind and asked me to give him additional money so that he could make offerings to the founding ancestor one more time. I agreed and gave him the money. After the ritual, Mr. Tắm recovered and was healthy. When I visited him again to resume my suspended research project on divining kits, he was glad to see me, ready to discuss the divining kit and willing to provide me with whatever information I needed.



FIGURE 4. Reporting to the house spirit before giving the divining kit to the staff of the VME. Vi Văn An, VME archive.

#### THE DIVINER AND HIS TRADITION

The diviner of my story, Mr. Vi Văn Tắm, eighty-two years old in 2004, is a poor farmer with eight children, four sons and four daughters, and several grandchildren. He is among the most skilled diviners (*thầy bói*) in the village. Before 1945, Mr. Tắm learned to practice as a *mo môt*, *mo môn* (ritual masters who cure people by both magic and herbs).<sup>1</sup> His first teacher, Mr. Xum, was his father's brother-in-law. Later, Mr. Tắm learned divination practices from his own father and from a diviner in another village. After his father's death in 1952, Mr. Tắm began to work as a recognized diviner in his own right.

Although his father was a diviner, it was not inevitable that Mr. Tắm would assume this role. When he was thirty years old, on a trip to Laos, a monk diviner said that if Mr. Tắm wanted a long life, he would have to learn divination. Otherwise, he would not live past the age of fifty-one. Believing in the monk's words, Mr. Tắm decided to learn divination. In order to become an apprentice, Mr. Tắm had to pass the "introduction" ritual called *xích* in his teacher's home and be accepted by the diviner ancestor as a future diviner. In anticipation of this ritual, he prepared the requisite offerings including a blunt knife, a ball of thorns, five betel leaves, and five areca nuts. Mr. Tắm said that most diviners or ritual masters come to this profession because they are either fated or selected by the founding ancestor. If they did not accept their fate, they would become ill or die young unless they could make some accommodation with the spirit. Others divined following traditions passed down from their fathers. Whoever practiced magical and herbal healing had to know divination as a part of his practice. The only distinction among diviners was their relative skill, which was based on experience.

In order to do their work, diviners and other ritual masters observe certain taboos; they are prohibited from eating certain animals like snake (because snakes assist the ritual master in his work) or dog (because dogs eat dung and are therefore

polluted). If the ritual master and diviner are in a state of ritual purity, their magic will be effective. On the fifteenth and thirtieth days of the lunar months, they must present wine to the ancestral diviner. If they forget to hold this ritual, the founding ancestor's spirit will be furious and make them ill until they offer compensation.

#### ASSEMBLING AND USING THE KIT

Mr. Tắm told me the origin myth of divining kits that every diviner heard during his or her apprenticeship:

When the world was in chaos, people still ate each other. One day, villagers made a roof together. Following custom, it was now necessary to kill and eat a man. Terrified, the intended victim hid himself in the jungle. He climbed up a tree and hid in the leaves and put sand on *môn* leaves and covered his head with them as a disguise. Not seeing him, people spread out to search for him, but they could not find him. They took out the divining kit for a divination. The kit's spirit said: "that man both sits in the stream and on the earth, on the sand and in the tree." Even so, people could not find the man's shelter and thought the spirit spoke in error. They decided to burn the kit and returned to the village. Understanding that the kit's spirit had spoken the truth, the man waited until everyone had left and descended from the tree. He retrieved the half-burned kit from the fire, cut off the burnt parts, and brought it back to the village. He explained to the villagers that the kit's spirit was right about his shelter. No one could guess where it was. Since then, villagers believed in the effectiveness of divination and people stopped eating each other.

Diviners assemble their kits according to the following formula: "[When] doing divination for young people, use less than twenty-seven sticks, and for old people, more than thirty sticks [*mò pơ nưm xao cầu, mò pơ thầu xám xíp*]." Most diviners spend many years searching for appropriate sticks—sticks with unusual and mysterious shapes—but there are those who inherit the divining kit and sticks from their master or their father. In the case of Mr. Tắm, his divining kit had been used by his father Vi Văn Ôn for many years before Mr. Tắm inherited it on his father's death in 1952. Diviners usually accumulate sticks during their apprenticeship, but it is also possible to add sticks when one is a master. A diviner does not need a full kit to practice because diviners can borrow divining kits from one another for their practice, and only some basic numbers of sticks are particularly important (up to twenty-seven or more than thirty). The original kit owned by Mr. Tắm's father held twenty-seven sticks. Mr. Tắm acquired four more sticks during his own practice, having learned from his teacher how to collect them. The more experienced the diviner, the more powerful sticks he owns and the more skillfully he can manipulate them.

Sticks with special associations are particularly powerful divination tools, such as sticks from the coffin-carrying poles of ritual masters, famous mandarins (and



their modern equivalents), or childless people. Of the four sticks that Mr. Tắm acquired on his own, one stick was cut secretly from the carrying pole of the coffin of the former Canton Chief who died in 1968, and one stick was from the carrying pole of the coffin of Mr. Êm, Mr. Tắm's matchmaker who had no children. The third was from the coffin-carrying pole of Mr. Hà Văn Lượng, a very powerful ritual master from the same village. The fourth stick was from the carrying pole of the ritual master Quang Văn Thành, the most renowned ritual master specializing in sending off the souls of the dead (*mo tàng nhào*).

When Mr. Tắm gave his kit to the Museum, it held thirty-one sticks, each approximately 22 centimeters long, which were put in a bamboo tube 2.2 centimeters in diameter and 11 centimeters high. The rim of the tube was laced around with a rattan string to keep it from being broken when the bamboo split. The differently shaped sticks were made of various species of bamboo, wild areca tree, and *tặng xan* tree. Nine sticks had notches.<sup>2</sup> Six of the sticks were more important than the others because there were spirits residing in them and they had been given to Mr. Tắm by his teacher.<sup>3</sup> The four sticks that Mr. Tắm had acquired by himself from coffin poles were also considered special.

The special species of bamboo (*núa*) that the container is made of and the wild areca tree and *tặng xan* tree used to make the sticks are rare materials and difficult to find. Diviners spend much time and effort searching for them, and many people have never seen these trees. In addition, the container comes from the large single joint at the base of a *núa* that grows on top of a termite mound; only one in nine termite mounds might have such a tree. Ritual masters describe their hardships during the process of looking for important sticks with the saying "one has to pass nine termite nests, nine snake pits, and nine streams to get one stick [*cần chum puốc, cần bước ngư, cần bu huôi*]." They search in secret and can acquire just one stick from each stream or forest they visit, slowly assembling a basic set of sticks (twenty-seven or thirty-one). The strange shapes of divining sticks also give them special properties. According to the ritual masters' explanation, the snakehead form on the end of a stick chases away evil spirits while the notches convey coded information to aid the diviner.

Usually a diviner keeps his kit on the altar of the founding ancestor or in a bag in the bedroom. Except for the diviner, no one is allowed to touch the bag or look inside it, especially women who might pollute the kit and cause it to lose its power. When someone brings offerings and asks the ritual master to do a divination, the ritual master alone brings down the divining kit. First, he places the client family's offerings on a tray that he sets on a mat under the founding ancestor's altar. Then the ritual master petitions the ancestor to enjoy the offerings.

Only other diviners understand the diviner's gestures during the divination. First, the diviner gathers the sticks in his right hand and rolls them back and forth against his left palm three times while saying "*Hoà!*" to awaken the spirits. Then he divides the sticks between his two hands and puts the sticks in his right hand in the space between his thumb and index finger. He pulls subsequent pairs of sticks

and places them between the index and middle finger, middle finger and ring finger, and ring finger and little finger of his right hand. According to the conventions of their profession, diviners call the space between the ring finger and the little finger *tin* (leg), the space between the middle finger and the ring finger *chor* (heart), and the space between the forefinger and the middle finger *bua* (head). The diviner repeats the procedure of sorting sticks into these spaces until only one or two sticks remain in his left hand. If two sticks remain, he repeats the whole procedure, but if one remains, he may proceed. He places this last stick between two fingers on his right hand. The original sticks, those he placed between his thumb and index finger, he sets down. Now the diviner moves the sticks from between the fingers in his clenched right hand to his left hand shielding them with the palm of his right hand to awaken and inform the ritual master's ancestor that he is calling on their help for a divination. The ritual master scrutinizes the configuration of sticks without revealing the contents of his hand to his client, divining on the basis of the configuration. For example, when determining the cause of an illness, if each of the finger spaces has five sticks, a spirit did not cause the illness. If the space between the forefinger and the middle finger has five sticks and the space between the middle finger and the ring finger has six sticks, or the space between the middle finger and the ring finger has six sticks and the space between the ring finger and the little finger has five sticks, then the problem is caused by a malevolent demon. Using his own secret knowledge, the diviner reads the notches on the sticks and determines the identity of the spirit that is causing the illness and what offerings the client family must make. In the case of lost property, the diviner determines whether or not the lost property will be found.

#### UPS AND DOWNS OF THE DIVINING PROFESSION

After the August Revolution in 1945, the Revolutionary government promulgated policies intended to establish and strengthen itself. Aimed at reforming cultural life, the Revolutionary government equated folk religious beliefs with “superstitions,” and religious practitioners experienced a period of hardship. They were subjected to frequent criticism because they were seen as fostering religious activities that ran counter to wholesome cultural life as it was then defined. For two years (1948–1949), a campaign to eliminate superstition consumed the region. Temples were destroyed and ritual masters were pressured to relinquish their tools. In 1956, another anti-superstition campaign accompanied policies intended to reform social life (*cải cách dân chủ*). An official on the staff of the cultural department<sup>4</sup> of Nghệ An province personally visited the minority communes to collect ritual tools such as ritual masters' swords and divining kits and brought the objects back to the provincial headquarters. Some ritual masters in the district voluntarily submitted their tools.<sup>5</sup> In order to protect his divining kit, Mr. Tắm secretly hid it in a safe place. At that time, many people came to his home to ask for divination but he refused, especially if they were people in local positions

of authority. In 1968, the government carried out another campaign to eliminate superstition. On two occasions, most of the ritual masters and diviners were assembled in the district headquarters and lectured about the new cultural policy. Then the commune committee began to confiscate divining tools, including divining kits. Even then, Mr. Tắm kept his kit. After a short time, the commune authority returned the tools that they had confiscated.<sup>6</sup> Once again, in 1976, a campaign to destroy superstition and build a new cultural life was launched. Although most activities related to religion and folk beliefs were banned, in some places people did not follow these regulations strictly. Ritual masters and diviners still practiced, honoring popular belief and personal need; however, they practiced in secret. This situation lasted until 1986 and the advent of the State's open door policy (*chính sách mở cửa*).

Presently, thanks to a new way of thinking that distinguishes spiritual needs and positive folk customs from superstition and backward practices, divination continues, although it is not as popular as it once was. Socio-economic and cultural policies intended to raise the standard of living in mountainous and minority areas, including the spread of electricity and the building of roads, schools, and clinics, have improved people's standard of living and brought a change in their consciousness. In general, farmers still ask for help from diviners and present offerings to the spirits, but they also go to the clinic. Cadres and teachers have mostly given up divination; they go to the clinic when they are sick or combine Western and traditional medicines.

#### THE LONG CAREER OF A DIVINER

Mr. Tắm cannot remember the number of divinations he has performed in his long career as a diviner. He said that people most often come to see him in the summer. Sometimes four or five people come in one day. His clients are primarily his fellow villagers and others from surrounding villages, mostly Thái people, but sometimes a few Kinh (Việt) people come as well. He claims that most of his divinations and cures were effective, but in a few cases he could not divine successfully due to the agency of evil spirits. One successful divination occurred in 1959 when Mr. Lò Văn An from Tổng Chai village wanted to repair his father's tomb in the Việt way, making a permanent tomb rather than allowing it to deteriorate over time according to Thái custom. He could not locate the original tomb because so much time had passed, so he consulted Mr. Tắm. Very early in the divination, Mr. Tắm described the tomb's location to Mr. An. Returning home, Mr. An had a kinsman dig in the place that Mr. Tắm had described and they found the bones.

In the late 1950s, Mr. Tắm had another success with Mr. Vi Văn Hợi of Đình village, who was very sick. Mr. Hợi had been sent to the hospital and not cured, so one of his kin brought Mr. Hợi's shirt to the diviner. After making a divination, Mr. Tắm said that the family had to hold a ritual to chase away bad luck. On an

auspicious day, Mr. Hoi's family organized the ritual. After that, Mr. Hoi recovered and has been healthy ever since. More recently, in November of 2003, the daughter of Mr. Tắm's relative, Chúc, cried during the night. Mrs. Chúc brought a piece of the child's clothing to Mr. Tắm. Since he had already sold his divining kit, Mr. Tắm had to borrow one from another diviner in the village.<sup>7</sup> After making the divination, Mr. Tắm said that the ghost of a dead boy followed the little girl because she was the reincarnation of his wife from a previous life and he was trying to take her back. Mr. Tắm told Chúc that she would have to prepare offerings equivalent to those served at a child's naming ceremony to send off the ghost. Chúc made offerings of an egg, a bowl of rice, and a bunch of wild eggplant, and the child recovered. There were also times when Mr. Tắm was too tired to do a divination, so he gave his clients instructions. They followed his instructions and their family members recovered.

Among those who practice divinations, the most competent diviners have the most experience, and while they have successes there are also failures. In Mr. Tắm's experience, if a spirit disturbs someone, a divination and a ritual with offerings are very effective, but these procedures would not cure difficult diseases such as cancer. When asked whether he believed that divination and ritual were more effective than cosmopolitan medical treatment, Mr. Tắm answered:

I do not totally believe in it because I am just like a pair of chopsticks (believing on the one hand and doubting on the other). There are times when we just make a divination and hold a ritual and the clients are cured. But there are also cases where medication cured people. I myself use both. I do divinations when clients ask me for it, just to make merit. If I were required to work with each and every client until they were completely recovered then I would never do divination. If people ask me for help, then I do what they request. For example, Mr. Tien from Đình village was sick and had to be carried to the hospital. After he was sent back home, a family member brought a piece of his clothing to me for divination. After they held a ritual and made offerings, he recovered and has been well to this day.

However, Mr. Tắm also acknowledged the greater medical authority of doctors in the hospital because they can recognize symptoms and know how to do surgery. It is impossible for Mr. Tắm to precisely identify a disease based solely on his experience and herbs. Despite his modesty, a female and a male diviner in the village both told me that they considered Mr. Tắm among the most skillful diviners in the village. Many of his cases ended successfully and he had a lot of clients.

#### CONCLUSION: THE DIVINING KIT IN THE MUSEUM

Before the divining kit was sold to the VME, it was sacred. As a consequence of the ritual that Mr. Tắm held to inform and apologize to the founding ancestor, the kit was no longer a sacred object. Even so, Mr. Tắm hoped that it would be respected and kept in a high place because it was usually put in a hanging bag or

kept on the founding ancestor's altar. In particular, it is forbidden to swear when holding the kit or cleaning it. Mr. Tắm said that these cautions were diviners' ethics. A diviner who violated them would not be able to give a successful divination, and he or someone in his family would meet unforeseen bad luck. Mr. Tắm said that it would make him very happy to be able to see his kit on exhibition in the museum.

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NOTES

\* I would like to thank the several diviners who helped me with this research and especially Mr. Vi Văn Tắm whose knowledge and generosity are deeply appreciated.

1. The ancestor of the former is female, the ancestor of the latter is male, but their disciples may be of either gender. In Thanh Hoa province, where the Thái have been influenced by the Muong, *mo môt* are all female (see VÕ in this issue).

2. One stick had one notch, three sticks had two notches, one stick had three notches, one stick had seven notches, one stick had ten notches, one stick had eleven notches, and one stick had thirteen notches.

3. The spirits residing in the sticks are named *tạo mo*, *con tạo mo*, *phnha mo*, *phìa mo*, *tạo xanh ta* and *phnha xeng*.

4. It was called the “cultural service” (*ty văn hóa*) at that time.

5. Decades after these events, diviners could recall the names of the seven men who had relinquished their tools.

6. According to an eighty-three year-old ritual master and diviner in Chi Khê commune, Con Cuông district, Nghệ An province.

7. Although Mr. Tắm intended to stop divining when he sold his kit, when his kin are in difficulties, they insist that he help them. He does this only in extreme circumstances, since if he borrows repeatedly, people will wonder why he does not use his own kit.

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REFERENCE

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