Võ Thị Thường
Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Sacred Object, Artifact, or Cultural Icon?

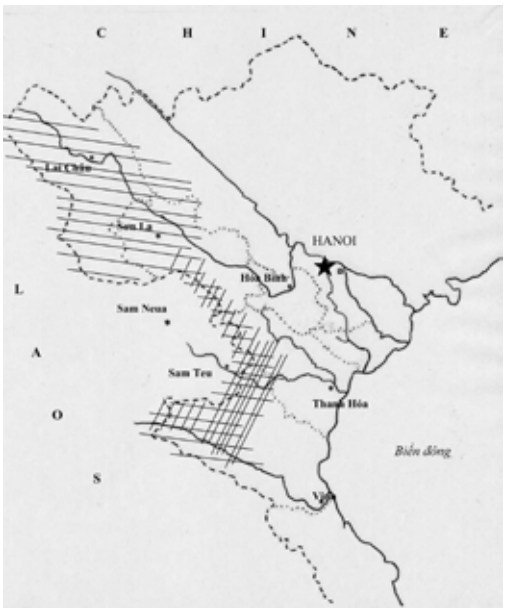
Displaying the *Xặng bók* Tree of the Thái People

The flower tree of the Thái shaman, an artificial construction, is erected when shamans hold periodic rituals of thanksgiving to the ancestors who give them the power to heal. When the author commissioned a similar tree from a Thái community in Thanh Hóa in 2000, she learned that a local performer rather than a shaman had made the tree, and that shamans avoided the new tree as a potentially dangerous object. After gaining general knowledge about the construction and power of flower trees by doing fieldwork in other Thái communities, the author returned to Thanh Hóa where she learned that the simulated tree was intentionally made to suggest but not precisely replicate the shaman's ritual tree. The simulated trees are used in secular performances and museum exhibits as a visual symbol of Thái culture in a compromise that both shamans and performers accept.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—museum—sacred—shaman—material culture—Thái ethnicity

Asian Ethnology Volume 67, Number 2 · 2008, 287–304

In 1998, on the occasion of the ASEAN summit held in Hanoi, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) organized a temporary exhibition, *Shared Traditions.*[1] In preparation for the exhibit, the Museum requested that Tãy Dọ people (a subgroup of the Thái ethnicity) from a village in Thanh Hóa province,[2] about two hundred kilometers south of Hanoi, make a ritual tree (*xặng bók*).[3] Ritual trees are used in a thanksgiving ritual performed by shamans and their disciples to honor the gods and ancestors of their shamanic line. The VME wanted to present a spectacular artifact of Thái culture to visitors and suggest the intangible context of ritual and belief in which the tree is used. The *xặng bók* tree is an impressive object, a "flower tree" (*co bók*) or "tree of flowers" (*bók mạy*) made with a bamboo trunk more than three meters high, perforated with holes for inserting "branches" of small bamboo strips that "blossom" with chains of colored beads. The beads are made from the soft core of a manioc tree and dyed in different colors. A flower carved from soft *tảng* wood[4] adorns the tip of each flower branch. Small colorful objects of woven bamboo, called "cicadas," dangle between the flower chains. People also decorate the tree with many other wood and bamboo animals, such as birds, frogs, fish, or snakes, and hang small cubes made of colorful threads (*cong may*) and small wooden tools, such as ploughs or ploughshares, and miniature representations of the rafts or boats once used by the Thái people.



Map of the distribution of Thái people in Vietnam and places and sites of research on the X*ặng bók* tree.

Like several other ritual objects displayed in the VME, the tree was specially commissioned for exhibition in the Museum. A skilled Thái woman, who was experienced in making similar trees, prepared the VME's ritual tree at her home. Under her supervision, young women in the village (mostly her relatives) found raw materials

and dyed and made the flowers. A male relative artfully constructed the other elements. The pole, completed within a month, was set up outside the woman's home. Before turning the tree over to the Museum, she held a party and invited people to drink, sing, and dance around the tree. The party was both a means of thanking people who had helped make the tree and a subject for film and photographic documentation by the VME.

At the time, the Museum assumed that the woman was a female shaman and that she had made a pole appropriate to her tradition. We also assumed that the celebration of the tree, recorded by VME researchers, was a recreation of the ritual that would normally be performed to set up a sacred tree, and the video was presented as such in the exhibition at the VME. The colorful flower pole attracted many visitors and tour guides, and when the temporary exhibit closed the tree was installed, with the accompanying video, next to a simulated Thái house in the permanent gallery. This was already an awkward compromise with tradition since the shaman and his followers disassemble the tree at the end of a thanksgiving ritual, and sacred trees do not normally stand in front of Thái houses. The display of the anomalous tree occasioned inaccurate and often fanciful commentary from Museum tour guides.

Was the tree ever a shaman's sacred tree?

In 2000, on a trip to order a similar tree for another exhibition, I was surprised to learn that the woman who had made the Museum's tree was not a female shaman but a performer in the local folk art troupe who had modeled it after the ritual trees of male shamans. Female mediums do not erect trees. When I contacted some *một* (female mediums) they denied that the tree in my photograph was part of their tradition; female mediums put their flower offerings directly in a jar. They explicitly stated, "A *một*'s flowers do not have a base and branches but are put directly in a jar." A ritual master in a community further to the north confirmed this: "Women do not erect the ritual flower tree; they [female mediums] just make a tree for themselves." In the thanksgiving ritual (*chà chiêng*) in Hòa Bình province, the women's main job was to prepare foods. Spiritual children (clients who have been helped by the shaman's spirits) prepare offerings such as wine, sticky rice, and chicken, and their husbands make the flowers.

The family that made the pole for the Museum directed me to the house of a male shaman in the next village who welcomed me with some hesitation. The shaman was willing to share important information about the trees he had used in the past, his previous participation in rituals organized by his teacher, and about the trees used in his teacher's rituals. For the last several decades, an official ideology of anti-superstition, combined with improved health care, has dampened the villagers' enthusiasm for organizing expensive shamanic rituals in this area. They no longer erect flower trees to thank the shaman's spirits and only a few shamans retain remnant branches of past trees.

In order to learn more about the tree and have the shaman explain its elements firsthand, I invited him to the house of the woman who had just completed a

FIGURE 1. Celebrating the completion of the *Xặng bók* for the VME, Thường Xuân district, Thanh Hoá province, 1998. Phạm Lợi, VME archive.

second commissioned tree for VME. The ritual master agreed and I left his house satisfied that I would see him the next day. However, he did not come as promised. I asked people to look for him but we did not find him. Later, we learned that he did not dare to come see the erected tree, because he feared that he would be "visited" by the spirits who had descended onto the tree and would encounter bad luck. The woman who had made the tree opined, "He said 'yes' in order to finish the conversation, but he was afraid to come. None of the shamans dare to come near this flower tree. They are afraid of it."

When I returned to VME with this new information, we changed the label copy and removed the video. I was now anxious to expand my research. Our tree was not unique because similar trees and ritual dances had been part of stage performances in cultural festivals. What do the shamans who used the flower tree as part of their own tradition think of these developments? Was it even appropriate for the VME to have commissioned such a simulated tree? I wondered what Thái people thought when they stood in front of the tree in the museum, a tree presented out of ritual context and displayed in a way that would have been unthinkable in a Thái village.

Cultural symbol or sacred object?

It is not unusual for Thái people in Thanh Hóa province to present the *xặng bók* tree as a symbol of Thái culture decontextualized from the shaman's ritual. As early as 1975, participants in a provincial festival in Thanh Hóa province simulated a ritual tree and recreated some ritual dances of the Thái and the Mường for research purposes (see Vũ 1975). In recent years, the *xặng bók* tree almost inevitably appears when village troupes organize dance performances for Thái cultural festivals in various localities and at different administrative levels.[5] Performers show great enthusiasm for these events that, in addition to traditional dances, include singing and competitive sports such as volleyball or badminton. Cultural performances also mark such events as International Women's Day, the anniversary of a social organization, or ceremonies held to initiate a campaign to become a "cultural village" (*làng văn hóa*).[6] Some villages organize a procession and carry the

xặng bók tree to the stage during the ceremony, and then keep it on the stage as a centerpiece for the subsequent performances. The woman who made the ritual tree for the Museum is active in these situations. She made *xặng bók* trees for public events in her village and organized a troupe of young people to perform with a flower tree in cultural festivals. As of 2005, she had made six flower trees and organized her troupe to participate in fifteen local and regional festivals. She also performed outside the province, with dances around her ritual tree in the National Festival of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands in 1986.

FIGURE 2. Dancing around the tree before bringing it to the VME, Thường Xuân district, Thanh Hoá province, 1998. Phạm Lợi, VME archive.

While Thái people now use the *xặng bók* tree as a widely recognized cultural symbol, and some Thái shamans participate in cultural performances with their fellow villagers, Tãy Dọ shamans avoid these events even when the trees are used during cultural performances organized by their own villages. According to Thái tradition, the ritual tree is a special ritual object that shamans make and use in unique circumstances and for a sacred purpose. The ritual tree, as well as many other ritual objects, cannot be bought or sold, exchanged, given or loaned, and can only be used in a proper ritual context.

THE *MỖN* AND HIS FLOWER TREE

Unlike Thái people in Thailand, Laos, and South China, Thái people in Vietnam are not Buddhist. They have an indigenous system of religious specialists, including male shamans, called *mỗn* (or *mũn*), and female mediums, called *một*, both of whom mount rituals intended to chase away evil spirits and cure people from diseases caused by invisible forces.[7] Although they both engage in healing, female *một* and male *mỗn* belong to discrete traditions and practice differently. Male *mỗn* are disciples of *phi mỗn* (celestial spirit *mỗn*) who use the magical power bestowed by the latter, as well as the assistance of spirit auxiliaries, to ward off evil spirits.[8] To do this, male *mỗn* usually engage in a "battle" to expel the evil spirits

from a human body, and as a consequence of this engagement with dangerous forces, shamans are at risk of being sick or having bad luck. Female *một*, as disciples of *phi một*, perform rituals where their dancing and chanting gently persuades spirits to keep their distance and stop harassing their human clients. In contrast to the often violent magic that *mỗn* use to threaten evil spirits, *một* perform beautiful lithesome dances with seductive songs that are highly compelling. A *một* is usually a skilled singer and dancer who enjoys performing.

When people are healed, either by male shamans or female mediums, they present offerings in order to become the "adopted children" or "spiritual children" of the practitioner and gain the protection of his or her *phi*. The more respected the ritual specialist, the more of these grateful followers he or she has. Additionally, having many followers signifies the ritual master's superior abilities. Shamans attribute their powers to the *phi* and show their gratitude by organizing rituals of thanksgiving. The shamans also use the thanksgiving ritual to ask the *phi* to bestow even greater power upon them. During the ritual, the *phi* descend to the altar on long chains of flowers called *xai mưỡng* (*mưỡng* string), made from the core of the manioc tree, that serve as a bridge between earth and sky. The owners of ritual trees described in this paper are all male *mỗn* for, as we have learned, female mediums honor their spirits with different offerings. A male shaman's ritual of thanksgiving to *phi*, *xặng khăn*,[9] always takes place around the ritual tree and is his most important ritual; however, in many regions it is rarely held now due to the high cost of offerings.

The timing of a thanksgiving ritual depends on both a family's circumstances, such as whether they enjoyed a bountiful harvest and good livestock, or if they experienced serious bad luck, and whether a busy shaman can accommodate the ritual to his schedule. Many shamans indicated that in the past, a shaman might perform a *xặng khăn* ritual every three, four, or five years. As a shaman said, "We would like to organize it more often so that *phi* can help us, but it is costly. We have to slay some pigs, dogs, ducks, and many chickens, as well as providing rice wine and sticky rice… and also make a ritual tree. I heard of people sacrificing a buffalo, but I haven't seen it myself." Some people organize this ritual after an interval of many years, "For example if a family has experienced several years of bad luck or if the ritual master has organized many weighty rituals, engaging with particularly brutal malevolent spirits, then they have to make this ritual to avoid bad luck in the future." One shaman explained,

> I've organized three rituals that had a ritual tree. The first time was the *păn mưỡng* for initiation. About three years later, I held the *xặng khăn* after important healing rituals for others. My last *xặng khăn* was about seven years later. I haven't had any more rituals since then. Why? Because there have been no serious mishaps in my family and doing it is very costly. We have to afford both the ritual itself and the feasts and singing and dancing for several days, not to mention the preparation of the ritual tree.

Since 1960 and particularly in the years between 1970 and 1990, rural people did not organize big ceremonies, especially rituals for chasing away spirits, healing, or a shaman's thanksgiving. Many experienced ritual masters who are now in their sixties have had only a few *xặng khãn*. Some shamans only conduct small rites and have never held a *xặng khãn* and erected a ritual tree. However, all ritual masters that I met knew about the *sang khaan* ritual, which they described as the "ritual of the ritual tree" or "the ritual that has a ritual tree." I met with several ritual masters from villages in different regions in my attempt to learn why this tree has such a special role. What is the significance of the tree for the shaman and the spirits? The following summarizes what they told me.

The flower tree

A ritual tree must have three, five, or seven layers of branches. Each layer is formed by three holes in the bamboo trunk, and each hole must contain three, five, or seven branches. Each branch holds one, three, or five chains of flowers. These odd numbers are "permitted" numbers—numbers associated with living people—whereas even numbers are for the other world. The beauty of a ritual tree is enhanced when the shaman's followers hang its branches with baskets of ginger, bunches of bananas, bundles of rice stalks, corncobs, or dried fish as "delicacies of the Thái," and chickens, arranged as if still alive, to "announce time." Some wine jars are arranged next to the tree, wine being an essential element of many ethnic

FIGURE 3. Children of *phi mon* bearing "flower branches" for the ritual as a gift to *phi mon*, Mai Châu district, Hòa Bình province, 2004. Võ Thị Thường, VME archive.

FIGURE 4. Bead flowers and decoration on the *xặng bók* tree, Thường Xuân district, Thanh Hoá province, 2004. Võ Thị Thường, VME archive.

celebrations in Vietnam for serving guests at a feast and offering to the ancestors and the spirits in important ceremonies. Around the tree are banana trees, sugar cane, and plants which, like bamboo, have a single shoot (*nó*). According to a female medium, a *nó* symbolizes "the steady rise and growth of the *phi*'s followers." The shaman also includes a mandarin orange tree (*Dillenia indica*) and *bók mạ* (*Saraca indica*),[10] trees which are often evoked in descriptions of the *phi mỗn*'s heavenly landscape. The *mỗn*'s invocation invites *phi mỗn* to descend and attend the ceremony, to "eat *bók mạ* flowers, eat *chà* (festival), and eat *chiêng* (New Year festival)." After the ceremony, some of these trees are planted in a small garden of sacred trees called *xuôn mĩnh xuôn nẽn*, where their growth symbolizes the shaman's own life. If insects eat a tree or if its branches droop down, it means that the shaman might have bad luck. If a tree dies, the shaman reads it as a sign of a major misfortune.

Each detail of decoration, whether it is the miniature objects or animals, the artificial flowers, or the real plants, has a relation to the shaman's life. Any deviation from the conventions of making a sacred tree could cause danger to the shaman.

FIGURE 5. Fashioning the branches for the VME's tree, 1998. Phạm Lợi, VME archive.

FIGURE 6. After the ritual, branches from the tree are kept in the rafters under the house roof and the two *sai mương* are always tied to the altar. Võ Thị Thường, VME archive.

All shamans affirmed that the tree itself was sacred not solely because it was used in a ritual setting. Each stage in the process of making a tree is sacred, including looking for material, assembling and erecting the tree, the ritual itself, and subsequently the tree's dismemberment and the distribution of its branches. Looking for materials in the forest is a young person's job because it is hard work; however, the shaman often participates or at least makes the symbolic first cuts in the wood before turning the task over to his "children," the shaman's special followers. According to one shaman, "I make just a few symbolic gestures so that the *phi mỗn* will know that I tried very hard to look for the materials to make the tree and offer it to the *phi*. Moreover, along with these gestures, I have to invoke *phi* to enlist their help in this work." Thus wood from a *tảng* tree, usually used as thoroughly quotidian firewood, becomes "sacred" when it has been collected to make the ritual flower tree. In addition, a shaman explained, the cutting of the wood was not done in the usual, everyday way. People have to follow ritualized gestures, at least when making the first cuts on the tree. According to one shaman, the shaman whispers spells that no one else can hear and cuts down the first tree before allowing other people to help him.[11] It is important that the *phi*'s disciple (the shaman) make the sacred flower tree that he offers to *phi*. "If I do not make a tree when I offer thanks to my spirits, the ritual is meaningless. If I give things made by other people, it is not my own work, and that is not satisfactory. If your children offer you a scarf, don't you want it to be a scarf that they have woven with their own hands?" Another ritual master described the complex activities that follow cutting the pole:

> Once we have the *tảng* tree, we have to cut it into pieces to fit the ritual tree that we are going to make. We have to make the bamboo strips to weave fish, birds, and frogs for the tree's decorations; we also have to dye flowers different colors

> so that the tree is beautiful. It is a lot of work. If we want to make a big tree, we have to have many people who help us and it takes several days.

However, according to a different shaman, "we just do some symbolic gestures. We are not the main people who make the tree. Moreover, I don't know how to weave birds and frogs. 'Using magic' means both 'doing a little' and 'making ritual.'" Thus according to this shaman's understanding, even though he has done little actual work, he is the one who makes the tree and can claim it as his own when he hosts the ritual to present his tree to the *phi*.

The *mỗn* divines an appropriate day for the thanksgiving ritual, and on the preceding day he makes a small ritual called *tẳng cốc* (erecting the bottom part), or *tẳng bók* (erecting the flower tree) and sets a bamboo pole as the tree trunk into the floor in front of his *phi mỗn* altar. The base of the tree extends through the floor, and the top is tied to the house beam. The shaman fixes the branches of flower chains in the holes on the trunk of the tree and adds the other decorations. Then the *mỗn*'s disciples bring branches of flowers to decorate the tree, making their own offerings to thank the *phi* and show their gratitude to the shaman as a "foster father." The more disciples the shaman claims, the more beautiful the tree.

Neighbors also participate in this important event in the life of the *mỗn*'s family. A person from each neighboring family contributes rice and wine or, in recent times, cash to congratulate the tree owner on this occasion. Contributions on special family occasions are a well-established Thái tradition, and no significant event in a Thái village passes without this acknowledgement; the *sang khaan* ritual is no exception. Neighbors also join the feast at the end of the ritual. However, no one other than the ritual master, his disciples, and his spiritual "adopted children"—those he has healed—offers flowers to the *phi mỗn* by decorating the tree.

FIGURE 7. Carrying the sacred tree to the sky (the realm of *mường mỗn*), Mai Châu district, Hòa Bình province. Võ Thị Thường, VME archive.

FIGURE 8. *Mỗn* pose in front of a *xặng bók* tree with their flutists, Mai Châu district, Hòa Bình province. Võ Thị Thường, VME archive.

Once the tree is set up, but before the ritual can proceed, the ritual master formally examines the tree. "The *mỗn* who is the master of ceremonies invites *phi mỗn* to check the offerings to see if there is anything missing and verify that everything is beautiful and that the *phi* are pleased with the flower tree," a shaman explained. The shaman circumambulates the tree, carefully examining each and every detail to verify that traditional procedures have been honored and that the spirits are satisfied with the offerings from their human disciples and accept the tree. "It is not always the case that the *phi* accepts the offerings right away. Sometimes the spirit finds that something is missing and the house owner has to add it immediately," a shaman explained. "Sometimes *phi* descend and possess me and my human disciples to tell us that we have neglected something." The shaman also said that if someone did not make the tree beautifully or if they wove ugly animals and were careless about making the flowers, it would displease *phi mũn*. However, "*Phi* often forgive their human disciples. Sometimes we have to add things, but I haven't heard of any case in which the ceremony was postponed because *phi* was not satisfied," another shaman added. "*Phi* usually say that the tree is beautiful, that the human disciples are skillful and have made a lot of flowers, animals, and objects," another shaman observed. Shamans describe the flower tree as the fruit of this world that is offered to extra-worldly forces. "The more beautiful the tree, the more colorful our world and the fresher our plants. The more elements the tree has, the more prosperous our world is."

All rituals of the *xặng khãn* ceremony take place around the flower tree, which acts as a *phi* altar. The ritual master invites *phi* to descend along the two long *xai*

mưỡng chains of flowers hung from the top of the tree to the floor to participate in the ritual, witness the respect and gratitude of their human disciples, and enjoy the offerings. Around the tree, people perform different rites—praying, presenting offerings, and requesting aid from the spirits to purify the *phi mỗn*'s celestial domain. Between rites, people perform ritual dances portraying scenes of normal community activities such as ploughing, hunting, gathering honey, teasing women, and singing.

As the ceremony ends, after several days and nights, the shaman leads a group of disciples and the shaman's spiritual "adopted children" as they transport the tree into heaven and give it to the *phi*. Participants enact a metaphoric "journey" to the other world as they circumambulate the tree. A shaman describes their journey: "Many people carry the tree because it is very heavy with the offerings. They have to go very far. They have to spend the night outside, so they bring a rooster to wake them up in the morning and send them on their way." Two or four shamans "carry the tree," periodically putting their shoulders to carrying poles and lifting the tree skyward. Women who are spiritual children of the *mỗn* clap bamboo tubes together, sending music to the sky, while flute players accompany the procession. The leader of the delegation, a man called *Nhỗm,* holds a rooster from the tree. Sometimes *Nhỗm* pauses and mimics the sound of a rooster to evoke the night. People incline their heads toward the tree and sleep. Later, *Nhỗm* makes a crowing sound signifying that it is time to wake up and the people continue their journey, transporting the tree to the sky. This sleeping and waking is repeated several times. In fact, the people carrying the tree become exhausted, but the entire delegation is happy because they are "ascending into the heavenly domain." At their destination, the tree is symbolically "planted" in the celestial territory of the *phi mỗn*.

Once the sacred tree is successfully planted in the sky, the shaman has the material tree disassembled. Some spiritual children or disciples bring a few branches home to venerate in their houses, but most of the tree's elements are kept above the shaman's *phi mỗn* altar, which hangs under the roof and above the head of the shaman's bed. The *xai mưỡng* strings, which enabled *phi*'s descent from the sky, now run from the crossbeam of the shaman's house to the altar. These elements are left to deteriorate naturally and no one is allowed to displace them for any reason.

Shamans hold that any small act of carelessness to the tree or its component parts can displease the spirits, bringing blame on the shaman and a visit from *phi*. Not only would the perpetrator of the offence suffer but also the shaman and his family. A villager told me Mr. Tun's family in the next village has had such experiences several times. His child was sick and his buffalo was lost because in his ignorance he had thrown away his father's flower branches and given away his father's sword. He had to request the return of the sword, gather the flowers, and put them on top of his father's grave.

I had learned that the ritual defines the tree, that shamans everywhere identified it as "the tree of the ritual," whatever the local terminology. When the ritual is over, participants disassemble the tree and disburse its branches to show that it no longer exists. Cautionary tales, such as the story of Mr. Tun's misfortunes, made

me wonder whether the shaman who had avoided contact with the VME's tree thought that the Museum's commissioning and exhibiting the tree would harm the local people, the shamans, the tree maker, and the Museum itself. Could a better understanding of the Thái ritual masters' flower tree help me to resolve the problem of the Museum's flower tree?

A "THÁI-STYLE" POLE

I sought the answer to my dilemma in several different Thái communities, not only in Thanh Hóa where the tree originated but in Hòa Bình, Nghệ An, and Sơn La provinces as well. Before this fieldwork, I assumed that civil servants and youth, in a radical departure from local culture, might say, "there's no problem," ordinary villagers would say, "there might be a problem," and shamans and their followers would declare that "there will be a problem." When I showed villagers and shamans in these different areas images of the Museum's tree and collected information from them, I learned to my surprise that the flower tree in our exhibition hall is not really a sacred tree of the Thái but only a "Thái-style pole" made to resemble a tree. I then showed my photographs to Thái outside the region, even Thái of subgroups other than the Tãy Dọ.[12] These male shamans immediately identified it as a flower tree, associated it with the thanksgiving ritual, and gave me more or less consistent information about the role of the tree in the ritual. However, after closely examining the photographs of the Museum's tree, they found elements that were different from the flower trees of their own experience and speculated that these discrepancies might be typical of groups living in other areas. A Xinh Mun[13] ritual master in Sông Mã district, Sơn La province, noted the absence of wine jars around the tree. "It is impossible to erect a flower tree and organize the thanksgiving ritual without rice wine. Inviting *phi* to come down to drink wine when there is no wine, that means the invitation is fake, doesn't it? We would be mortally guilty and *phi* would not forgive us." Some other ritual masters shared this concern: "There must be at least one jar of rice wine. I haven't seen any ritual that lacks wine. If people erect a tree without providing wine, it would be a big catastrophe. Isn't this true in other places?" Another ritual master in Sơn La was surprised by the tree's location, saying, "In our area, this ritual tree is never erected outside the house." A ritual master from Hòa Bình province, north of Thanh Hóa, expressed surprise at my photograph of the female performing artist who had made the tree: "In our area, women do not erect the ritual flower tree. In the thanksgiving ritual, the women's main job is to prepare food." In general, shamans were inclined to attribute these differences to regional or sub-group variation.

When I returned to the Tãy Dọ in Thanh Hóa province where the tree had been made, one male shaman, on first glancing at my photograph, commented, "This flower tree must belong to a very skillful *mỗn* who has many spiritual children. The tree is very high and it has many branches." But when he looked at it more closely and asked how the branches were displayed, he became skeptical,

saying, "It is impossible, the flowers are not correctly displayed, how could this *mỗn* be so careless?" Another Tãy Dọ shaman responded similarly, first attributing the tree to a high-ranking shaman but then expressing confusion because he could not find the long strings of bamboo that hang down from the top of the tree, stating, "It can't be. Is there no *xai mưỡng?* This is the most sacred element, *phi*'s road to our world. It is all right if there are some frogs or fish missing, but it is impossible not to have *xai mưỡng*. Can you invite *phi* to enjoy the ritual without making the road for *phi*?" But then he too attributed the absence of *xai mưỡng* to regional differences: "Maybe people do not make *xai mưỡng* in Nghệ An. There are Tãy Dọ there as well."

The lack of *xai mưỡng* was intentional. When I collected the second tree, the woman who was responsible for making it told us, "It is exactly like the real one, even more beautiful. When I was a child, I used to see *mỗn* making rituals and saw many flower trees. I just did not do the two *xai mưỡng*." When I asked her why, she explained, "Before, when I made ritual trees for use in festivals in the province and in the Central Highlands, I never made *xai mưỡng*. These were not ritual flower trees, we were not inviting *phi* to descend, and thus it was not necessary to make a road for *phi*." She also affirmed that she is not a shaman and that she had no relation to *phi mỗn*. She said, "I have never made any ritual. I called in my relatives, cooked for them, and went to search for the tree. One person made all the birds and frogs. I taught people how to do everything else. We wrapped everything up so that the colors would not fade and we waited until the Museum collected the tree." Although she "had no relation to *phi mỗn*," in fact, she still excluded the most sacred and risky elements of the flower tree so as not to create an actual ritual tree. In addition to not including *xai mưỡng,* she did not place branches on the tree in accord with sacred (odd) numbers, as one of the shamans noted when he saw my photograph.

To summarize, no male shaman (*mỗn*) or female medium (*một*) agreed to make a ritual tree outside of its ritual context. They were even afraid of approaching such a tree. The woman who made the ritual tree for the Museum was an ordinary villager who used the trees she had made for secular cultural festivals as her prototype. In the past, the making of the sacred flower tree and the holding of the related ritual were considered "superstition." When many rituals were still considered superstitious and organizing them was difficult, shamans did not speak up when people brought the flower tree onto the stage. One villager observed that because the woman who made the tree "was the wife of a cadre in the district she could do as she pleased."

Today, Thái people have mixed feelings about using the tree and the dances associated with the tree ritual as a folkloric element in festivals. Administrators who work in cultural and performing arts fields want to present special features of local culture in minority cultural festivals and see dances around the tree as one way to do this. Most rural Thái accept these developments, valuing the opportunity to see their own cultural representatives on the stage and on television. When they win prizes for their efforts in festivals, they are delighted. Even when the winners are

not from their own villages, they celebrate them as "our Thái people." However, some shamans are uneasy with these innovations. Some people said, "Would you want to put your father's death anniversary ritual on the stage? Would you invite him to come (to the ancestral altar) without any reason? Our *phi mỗn* are our fathers. I don't know whether those people (who perform rituals in festival settings) suffer any consequences, but I would never do that."

Most of the ritual masters I met were initially opposed to the idea of using the flower tree on stage as an element of a "play." However, once they had heard more about how these theatrical trees were made, that no rituals were performed and critical elements of the ritual flower tree were missing, they concluded, "people can do what they want, because it is not a ritual tree." The tree-maker herself confirmed, "It is not a sacred tree," and consciously tried to avoid "sacred elements." She had reason to emphasize this:

> There are those who look for this reason or that reason (for their misfortunes). They said it was my fault, that their family experienced bad luck because I had made the tree for the Museum, but I defended myself. The Museum's tree was more beautiful than festival trees. It had more animals and flowers, just like the trees of *mỗn* that I saw in the past, but even so, it was not a tree of the *mỗn*, not a tree of the *phi*, so why blame it?

In other words, Thái people in other areas, Tãy Dọ shamans in the area where the tree was made, and the tree-maker herself all affirmed that the Museum's pole was not a sacred tree. On the other hand, our pole is not a "fake," an inauthentic artifact of Thái culture pretending to be a Thái flower tree. The residents of a Thái community made it "with precise attention to detail" as they often said, even though it was never used in a ritual and was not made for ritual use.

Continuing odyssey of the thái festival pole

The Museum's pole attracts not only casual visitors but also specialists. When the tree had been on exhibit for some time, we received a loan request for a similar tree for an exhibition in a museum of contemporary art in Germany.[14] This time the pole was presented to the public in a vastly different exhibition context than at the VME. In the German museum, all of the objects on display are presented as works of art and the labels give information about the artists or makers. The pole's ambiguous identity and its association with a sacred and possibly dangerous object were irrelevant.

In the Museum today, many visitors stop at the pole, read texts, and look at the pole's details, such as the frogs and birds that hang from its branches. In the past, when the pole was more colorful, many people took pictures of the pole with the Thái house as a backdrop, and Museum guides chose the Thái pole as a "highlight" in their tours. Over time, the tree has faded and decorative elements have fallen from its branches as its natural materials deteriorate. The video of the staged ritual, with its mistaken assumption that this was really a sacred flower tree

set up in a ritual context, has been removed to improve the scientific quality of the exhibit. Outside tour guides are now less inclined to pause in front of the tree and elaborate on an object for which they might have no more knowledge than other people in the tour. However, the VME pole has taken on a life of its own, inspiring further artistic and cultural representations. During a six-month period as an artist-in-residence at the VME, an Australian artist created an installation exhibit in March 2003.[15] The exhibit presented sculptural works inspired by objects in the Museum, including the Thái pole. The artist created a pole that was similar to the one on exhibit but with fewer details. This object was popular with visitors. The most recent development in the odyssey of the Thái pole was the creation of a pole by students from The National Cultural College. These students organized a small festival in their college and created a simpler version of the VME pole to represent Thái culture.

How are we to understand the VME's pole, situated as it is between ethnography and art? Ideally, an ethnographic museum would combine both aspects in a harmonious way, accurately conveying the context of origin. For example, we could restore the video depicting young girls dancing around the colorfully decorated flower tree under the command of the middle-aged woman who supervised its construction. A label would relate: "When the Museum collected the pole, villagers staged this celebration of the ritual tree of the Thái in Thanh Hóa province for museum photographers. Additionally, for the pole maker, the performance was a chance to thank her neighbors who helped make the object. Local people regarded the performance as a community activity and an opportunity to have their dancing recorded on video." This statement would explain both the pole's origin and the behavior of the Thái villagers depicted in the video, people who did not consider this pole as a sacred flower tree but acknowledged belief by organizing a theatrical thanksgiving ceremony when they had completed it.

Conclusion

Thus far, commissioning ritual objects for exhibition has proved an effective strategy for the Museum. This approach avoids the possible risk of storing or exhibiting an animated ritual object when we do not understand the proper treatment that cultural agents might enjoin on us, and some sacred objects, like a real Thái flower tree, should never be placed on permanent exhibit. Thanks to the flexibility of specially commissioned objects, the Museum has been able to successfully exhibit sensitive elements of the different cultures of Vietnam's peoples. In addition, this study demonstrates the value of careful research for understanding the exact nature of the objects the Museum has collected.

Notes

1. Held between 1998–2003 at the VME, Hanoi, Vietnam.

2. In Vietnam, people speaking Tày/Thái languages live in northern mountainous areas.

Most Thái live in valleys west of the Red River and practice wet rice agriculture. The Thái ethnicity is further divided into several subgroups including Black Thái, White Thái, Tãy Đanh, and Tãy Dọ. The object presented in this paper is from the Tãy Dọ in Thanh Hóa province.

3. Also called *xặng khãn* or *bók chà*.

4. A small tree, similar to a mulberry, that grows near bushes. Its wood is white, light, and easy to carve. Its Latin name could not be located.

5. Thanh Hóa province is particularly active and holds a Festival of Ethnic Minorities' Performing Arts every two years.

6. Cultural Village campaigns aim to improve the quality of cultural life in the community as measured by economic, hygienic, and environmental criteria, for example, poverty reduction, no drug addicts, and no thieves. These campaigns are carried out at the district and provincial levels and villages must register to participate.

7. Shamans who have successfully held a *păn muỡng* ritual and have practiced for many years are considered higher-ranking shamans than others without these experiences.

8. Shamans believe that they are chosen by *phi mỗn* independent of human volition. They learn of their calling when they experience a long and unusual illness or their families encounter bad luck "sent" to them by *phi mỗn*. Most of the shamans I interviewed recounted such experiences. Even so, they were usually continuing the shamanic work of a grandfather, father, uncle, or brother. Some shamans indicated that select individuals were recognized as potential shamans from an early age owing to the hour of their birth or another special sign. They also said that most shamans were selected by *phi* as adults. The shamans I met were over fifty and very experienced in their work.

9. Alternatively called "flower of *xặng khãn* ritual" (*xặng bók*), "flower tree of *chà* ritual" (*co bók chà*), or "ritual of the wine and shoot" (*co lảu nó*) depending on the locality.

10. The *bók mạ* tree grows near forest streams and its yellow flowers blossom after the lunar New Year (around February or March).

11. Shamans in other regions also recognize the importance of searching for appropriate materials. In his dissertation on the *xặng khãn* ritual among the Thái people in neighboring Nghệ An province, Hoàng Văn Hùng says that "*pay tóc tảng*" (looking for the *tảng* tree) is the first important ritual of the ceremony and, therefore, it must be done on an auspicious day. Before the search, the family head has to open a wine jar to report to the house's spirit and ask it to assist him." The author also recorded the prayers for cutting the tree, including the phrase "asking permission to bring the *tảng* tree home to make offerings for the Gods" (Hoàng 2000, 35).

12. Thái Đen (Black Tai), Tãy Đanh, or Tãy Dọ.

13. This Xinh Mun village is near Thái villages, belongs to the same administrative system, and its people speak Thái with outsiders. When I traveled to the neighboring Thái villages to do research on the thanksgiving ritual of ritual masters, some Thái people pointed me to this ritual master. This ritual master not only conducts rituals for Xinh Mun people but also for Thái people in the area.

14. Altäre—Kunst zum Niederknien, museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf, Germany, exhibition held from 9 September 2001 to 6 January 2002.

15. Clare Martin, "Freedom," VME, Hanoi, Vietnam, exhibition held from January to March, 2003.

References

Hoàng, Văn Hùng
2000 Lễ hội *xăng khan* của người Thái ở miền tây Nghệ An [The *xăng khan* ritual of the Thái in western Nghệ An province]. MA thesis. Hanoi Cultural College.

Vũ, Ngọc Khánh
1975 Niềm tin cuộc sống dưới cây hoa (của người Mường và người Thái) [Belief under the flower tree of the Mường and the Thái]. *Tạp chí Dân tộc học* [Ethnology] 3: 42–49.