



Trance Mediumship Takes the Stage

Reenactment and Heritagization of the Sacred in Urban Hà Nội

This article explores the recent on stage performances of trance mediumship (*lên đồng*) in some of urban Hà Nội's theaters and for organized tourist groups. Considered as superstitious by the communist government for many decades, over the course of the past twenty years *lên đồng* spirit mediumship gradually regained popularity. After the Socialist Republic of Vietnam submitted documents to UNESCO in 2014 requesting the recognition of the Mother Goddesses religion (*Đạo Mẫu*, also known as “Four Palace” (*Tứ Phủ*) religion) as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), professional theater groups started performing trance rituals on stage, thereby attracting tourists from all parts of the world. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among spirit mediums and their followers in urban Hà Nội, this essay argues that the heritagization of spirit mediumship and its reenactment in state-sponsored theaters results in de-contextualization and aesthetic flattening. However, heritagization does not inevitably lead to the secularization and disenchantment of culture. By focusing on the relationship between heritage studies and the anthropology of religion, the article contributes to recent debates on mediatization, remediation, and spectacularization of popular religious practices.

KEYWORDS: spirit possession—heritage—remediation—popular religious practices—spiritual tourism—Vietnam

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted in 2003 and includes movable objects, performative arts, crafts, and ritual practices (Brumann and Berliner 2016; Arizpe and Amescua 2013; Smith and Akagawa 2009).¹ Unlike World Heritage, which concentrates on sites and is therefore immediately connected to locality, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to performances, rituals, music, and cultural practices in general. This raises questions about the complex relationships between “heritage and the sacred” (Meyer and de Witte 2013), while the canonization of certain practices also implicates the intertwining of economic and political aspects, as well as debates about differences between “genuine” and “fake” heritage (Bendix 2009, 259). Notably, the question of “authenticity” plays a crucial role in discourses about the heritagization of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and hence considerations among various actors such as state authorities, scholars, the press, media, ritual practitioners, and mediums generate “new levels of debate and contest within nations and localities” (Macdonald forthcoming, n.p.). In particular, with regard to the ICH convention, the ratification “can give states new power over the dynamic resource of intangible culture” (Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2012, 12). Apart from power and control by states, the listing of non-elite cultural practices with UNESCO contributes to an “anthropologization” of heritage (Brumann 2014) more generally, particularly by involving material objects and ritual practices of everyday life and popular culture instead of exclusively focusing on monuments or natural landscapes.

Over the past two and a half decades, Vietnam has been quite successful in having its cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage. In this period, apart from monumental heritage such as the cities of Huế or Hội An, natural heritage sites such as Hà Long Bay also became UNESCO World Heritage, and therefore these places contributed to ever-growing tourism. Since the 2003 Convention on ICH, court music and the gong music of ethnic minorities, as well as various forms of singing, festivals, and the worship of the Hùng kings have all been inscribed. Starting in December 2012, the “Viet Nam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Nam Định province, and representatives of local communities and temple guardians met to discuss and agree on the detailed plan of the nomination” of the “Practices related to the Việt beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms,” known as *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in Vietnam (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

n.d., 11). Only in December 2016 were these practices inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Theatrical performances of *lên đồng* spirit mediumship, considered to be the oldest religion in Vietnam, started long before UNESCO inscription (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; Endres 2011; Norton 2006) and had been practiced in temples and private homes, although for decades the government condemned these and other popular religious practices as superstition.

In analyzing the spectacularization of spirit mediumship in Vietnam, Oskar Salemink argues that the heritagization of cultural sites, objects, and practices in contemporary Vietnam “effectively disenfranchises the cultural communities involved from the legacy that they formed over years of cultural and ritual labor, as other players—cultural experts and scientists, state agencies, tourist companies—effectively take over the management and organization of the heritage for their own benefit” (Salemink 2016, 314). Interestingly, as I will discuss below, since the UNESCO nomination other players also include theater directors and actors reenacting trance mediumship in a state theater and in a former working-class theater for organized tourist groups, who also visit the Phủ Dầy temple complex in Nam Định province, the place where a leading figure of *lên đồng* spirit mediumship is venerated.

In the following I explore processes of reenactment (Dreschke 2015) and remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) by investigating how the performance of *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in theater houses relates to other media, such as videos produced and distributed by spirit mediums, and by exploring actors’ and theater directors’ participation in “real” trance sessions to “learn more about mediumship,” as they told me, and to incorporate the mediums’ body gestures and dancing into the theater show. By going on stage in urban Hà Nội’s state theater and in a former working-class theater, the separation from their “authentic” setting in temples and pagodas contributes to a commodification of popular religious practices and to the transformation of the “sacred” character. Losing “authenticity” finally results in “disenchanted aesthetic forms” (Meyer and de Witte 2013, 278). However, as I will discuss below, the power of the spirits nonetheless affects actors and theater directors. Thus, heritagization not only inevitably results in the secularization and disenchantment of culture but also contributes to what has been described as the “re-enchantment of modernity” (Taylor 2007) in post-revolutionary Vietnam.

SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP IN VIETNAM

Lên đồng spirit mediumship has a long tradition in Vietnam and is associated with the religion of the Mother Goddesses. Only recently since the UNESCO nomination is *lên đồng* considered an element of Vietnam’s Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Vietnamese government. Although condemned for decades, the religion of the Mother Goddesses was practiced secretly throughout the north of the country and gradually regained popularity only in the past twenty years, after the initiation of economic reforms in 1986. Over the years, trance mediumship rituals were performed in some government-controlled pagodas, in particular at Phủ Dầy

temple, where Princess Liễu Hạnh, a leading figure in the Mother Goddess cult, is venerated. In addition, private shrines have been established, but these places were not controlled by the government. When I visited Vietnam in 2007 and in subsequent years, people alerted me to not participate in such rituals, as *lên đồng* was not approved by the authorities. Indeed, even in 2016 during my fieldwork in Hà Nội I watched police raids on the Vietnamese state TV, in which a medium was arrested and asked in intimidating ways why she had a red veil and for what it was used. In *lên đồng* rituals the red veil, which is put on the head of the medium, announces the “coming into presence” (Lambek 2010) of the spirit and its withdrawal. As this example illustrates, it is not clear what kind of trance performance is “legal” or “illegal,” as the authorities have a different way of looking at popular religious practices than ordinary believers. From the perspective of religious practitioners, however, who for decades have performed trance mediumship in private temples, only the spirits will decide whether somebody has “roots” to become a medium. Mediums then establish a sacred place and worship the spirits, which make up the pantheon of the Religion of Mother Goddesses, together with a group of followers.

Đạo mẫu practitioners worship the goddesses of the Four Palaces of the universe: sky, earth, water, and mountains and forests. Spirit mediums are possessed by up to 36 spirits during the ritual over a couple of hours. Trance mediums have a calling (*cần đồng*), and some have to perform these ceremonies several times a year. While being possessed by the spirits, mediums dance to music played by *chầu văn* (ritual music) musicians (Norton 2006), receive offerings, distribute *lộc* (blessed gifts) to the audience, and bestow blessings to cult members (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; Dror 2007; Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Endres 2011; Salemink 2015). *Lên đồng* mediumship rituals are performed in public temples in and outside Hà Nội, with some places controlled by caretakers, who cooperate with local authorities. However, *lên đồng* ceremonies also take place in private shrines in individuals’ homes. In Hà Nội, I participated in the rituals of a *lên đồng* cult group of 25 members, mostly female, that has existed for over 30 years. Within this group, several mediums perform rituals, and when not performing themselves, they act as ritual assistants for others. The mediums have established shrines dedicated to the Mother Goddesses in the upper floors of their homes. Spirit mediums invite *chầu văn* musicians, a ritual expert (*thầy cúng*), and members of the group as well as friends and relatives to participate in the ceremony.

Lên đồng, sometimes also called *hầu đồng* (medium’s service) or *hầu bóng* (service to the spirits), is an intrinsic part of the Four Palace religion or Mother Goddesses religion. Various colors are associated with the realms or palaces of the Mother Goddesses, such as red for heaven, yellow for earth, white for water, and green for mountains and forests. Colored costumes, linked to the realm to which the spirit belongs, have to be changed after the incarnation of a particular spirit. Colors apply to various votive offerings for the spirits as well. Up to 36 spirits of the Mother Goddesses descend, and most are incarnated by the spirit medium in a hierarchical order: Great Mandarins, Dames, Princes, Damsels, and Boy Atten-



Dressing the medium in a private shrine, 2016. Photo by author.

dants (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2003, 256). While some spirits have been associated with historical figures, others are legendary personages.

Accompanied by musicians and ritual music, by singing invocation songs (*hát vãn*) the medium calls different spirits and induces states of trance, in a ceremony lasting several hours. Four assistants—in the group in which I participated, the assistants are themselves mediums on other occasions—help the medium to change his or her clothes, hat, and jewelry with their back to the audience and face to the spirit shrine. After the incarnation of a particular spirit and while still in a state of possession, people from the audience, followers of the medium, will approach the spirit medium near the shrine dedicated to the Mother Goddesses to make monetary offerings to the spirit and receive back more than they donated from the medium's treasure chest. During this exchange the money is then considered blessed money (*lộc*). The worshippers ask the spirit for favors (such as success in business) and petition the spirit to have their fortunes told. After some individual followers have consulted the spirit for advice, the medium stands up and turns to the audience to distribute blessed gifts, such as cookies, Coca-Cola, beer, fruit, betel nut, cigarettes, and money, among other things, which are all taken home to be redistributed among one's family members. In particular, when the spirit

medium throws money at the audience, perceived as “lucky money,” participants scream at every catch, shout for joy, and appreciate the generosity of the spirit. Most followers told me they feel much better after the ritual, at ease and without any worries of everyday life. Importantly, they sense a kind of belonging to this particular group of religious practitioners, sharing one’s sorrows while receiving help and support even outside the ritual context throughout the year.

During my fieldwork I participated in different *lên đồng* rituals and created close contact with a group of women, some of them former factory workers, who had practiced the ritual in their homes since the early 1980s. I learned that there are numerous private temples in Hà Nội where networks of believers meet regularly to worship the Mother Goddesses while enjoying the performances of the mediums. The ritual involves music, singing, dance, colorful costumes, incense, fruit, alcohol, coca cola and beer cans, cigarettes, cookies, and votive paper offerings to be burned for the spirits (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2006; Hüwelmeier 2016). A common meal takes place with the medium/host of the ceremony, musicians, assistants, and religious practitioners before or after the event. In the course of the ritual, blessed money, considered as a gift from particular spirits, circulates between the medium/deity and religious practitioners. The costumes of the medium/



Spirit “in presence” in a private shrine, 2016. Photograph by author.

deity each have another color and and match the color of the votive offerings; for example green apples are distributed to the audience by the princess of the forest, dressed in green, which is considered the color of the realm with which the spirit is associated. Ngô Đức Thịnh, in his account of spirits' journeys, mentioned that "red cans of Coca-Cola are appropriate for the spirits from the celestial sky palace" (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2003, 261). Likewise, the color of the blessed food in the common meals in which I participated in private temples in Hà Nội is believed to be the favorite food of particular spirits, for example those dressed in white and therefore associated with water prefer fish.

In some of the private temples, most of them situated on the top floor of the house, the location was divided into a "sacred" space—where the altar was established and decorated and where the medium, assistants, and *chầu văn* musicians were—and a "secular" space, where the audience was sitting on the floor, sometimes chatting, exchanging news about family events, or displaying photographs from their mobile phones to one's neighbor during the long hours of the ritual performance. However, the separation between sacred and secular space is permeable: the audience approach the medium in the "sacred" space for bringing donations and asking for advice, and, conversely, the medium enters the secular space by distributing blessed gifts to the audience and to throw money at the worshippers. The symbolic separation, however, is marked by a theater curtain and to the outsider, at first glance, the "sacred" space strongly resembles a theater stage. While these performances took place in private homes, in 2015, after *lên đồng* was nominated for Intangible Cultural Heritage, a trance mediumship performance was staged in a state theater in Hà Nội, which I visited at that time. Moreover, in spring 2016, before the inscription of the "Practices related to the Việt beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms" on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, I attended a performance in a former working-class theater, where spirit mediumship was reenacted by a group of professional actors.

LÊN ĐỒNG GOES ON STAGE IN A STATE THEATER

In March 2015, my host family invited me to visit a traditional *Chèo* (satirical musical theater) performance in the nearby Chèo Hà Nội Theater (Nhà Hát Chèo Hà Nội). This is not the only place where "traditional culture" is performed in Vietnam's capital but one of the very popular places. *Chèo* is a form of satirical theater, encompassing music and dance. Originally a folk tradition performed by peasants in northern Vietnam, its origins date back many centuries. Like the *commedia dell'arte*, well known as Italian folk theater in the West, *chèo* often transposes a message of satirical criticism of the existing social order. Unlike *commedia dell'arte*, however, the characters are not masked. Accompanied by a traditional musical ensemble, the *chèo* performance uses sparse costumes and makeup while appropriating some of the elements that are today known as mime and physical theater.

Upon arrival I noticed a bus stopping in front of the theater, and a group of about 30 tourists from Taiwan got off, visiting the show as well. A brief written announcement in Chinese on the screen explained the framework of the show,



Remediation of medium's dressing on the theater stage, 2016. Photograph by author.

which was a combination of traditional theater such as *chèo* and a water-puppet show, the content being scenes of rural life, mostly involving narratives about everyday life such as gender issues. The most important character, Chú Tễu, is a jester, commenting on political and social topics, in particular on authorities' practices of corruption.²

As part of the theater program, the mimicry of a *lên đồng* spirit mediumship session was performed. A female actor, playing the role of a medium, entered the stage. Together with two male assistants/actors, the "medium" performed three different spirits. The medium changed her costumes, hats, and jewelry with the help of the male actors/assistants while dancing to the music of the *chầu văn* musicians and moving her body according to the music. No votive paper offerings were presented on the stage, and no altar dedicated to the Mother Goddesses was established like in the "authentic" trance-mediumship rituals. Instead, an altar with Mother Goddesses, decorated with fruit and incense, was displayed on a screen situated behind the actors and musicians. In anthropological terms, we can speak not only of the mediatization of mediumship by displaying photographs of altars from sites where authentic *lên đồng* trance mediumship was performed, but we can also talk about mimetic practices, mediated through circulating representations such as photography, websites, and videos depicting elements of trance-mediumship rituals. Appropriated by the actors, processes of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) are expanded through the performance of bodily practices, such as certain gestures, known from "real" mediums. Furthermore, remediation and reenactment (Dreschke 2015) take place via costumes and dancing according to *chầu văn* music, performed not by traditional musicians, but by students from the academy of music in Hà Nội, as one of the singers told me later. At the end of the performance, the medium/actor left the stage and came down to the audience while distributing sweets to the spectators.

After the show, I had the chance to talk to the director of the Chèo Hà Nội Theater, who played the role of the jester in another part of the performance—and so he was the one to tell the "truth" about problems in society. He explained to

me that only recently, four weeks ago, the *lên đồng* performance became part of the program in this state-sponsored theater. After the government accepted *lên đồng* or *hầu đồng* as national cultural heritage in 2014, he developed the idea to implement *lên đồng* as part of “traditional Vietnamese culture” into the show of the theater. “As this is the first time that *lên đồng* goes on stage in a state-sponsored theater,” he stated, “we do not know yet whether the audience will accept this part of the show.” He encouraged me to come back when there was more time to discuss some issues in detail, and when it was clearer whether *lên đồng* was successful in the theater throughout the year.

When I returned to Hà Nội in early 2016, I met the director again, a man in his 50s, in the entrance hall of the Chèo Hà Nội Theater. Being quite enthusiastic about the success of the *lên đồng* performance in his theater house, he told me that mainly tourists visit the theater, most of whom travelled from Taiwan and South Korea. He would love to have some people also from Europe visit, but more than this, he wanted to welcome young people to the theater. However, he was quite pessimistic about attracting the youth, as in his opinion Hà Nội youth seem to be more interested in European culture. In order to inspire young people’s interest and enthusiasm for traditional music, he visited various schools throughout the year (around 70 times) to introduce *chầu văn* and musical instruments to young students.

Before implementing the new part into the show, the director told me that he and the actors visited several *lên đồng* trance mediumship rituals. Together with the actors, he studied the bodily movements and gestures of real mediums and later copied what he saw. He mentioned the many DVDs and videos displaying mediums and *lên đồng* performances in various temples. Everybody can buy these media in special shops, and videos are found on the internet. Moreover, some of his relatives and friends are spirit mediums as well, and so he collected information from many angles about trance mediumship in Vietnam. At this point in our conversation, questions came up concerning the differences between playing the role of the medium in the theater and performing as a medium in a real trance mediumship setting. The director admitted that this is difficult to answer, as according to his observations, in some *lên đồng* rituals the medium has no *căn*, no “root,” no calling from the spirit, and therefore is only interested in making money. Compared to *lên đồng*, he continued, where the spirit enters the body (*nhập đồng*), in the theater the actor enters the role (*nhập vai*), but in some cases the role dominates the actor. However, this is only the case when excellent actors play a role, when they forget everything around, like the family, wife, or husband. One of his observations concerns the role of *chầu văn* in the *lên đồng* theater performance: sometimes the actress, while playing the role of the medium, “really” got lost in her role (*thăng hoa*, to lose oneself), and it even happened that the medium/actress became a “real” spirit medium. In this moment, he said, the music has to intervene in order to retrieve the actress. In other words, the songs and sound control the actress/medium and when the actress identifies too much with her role, the *chầu văn* musicians call her back to the stage, by suddenly interrupting the sound.

Staging *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in a state theater can be understood as reenactment, in the sense of both an entertaining and educational activity in which

the actors recreate aspects of historical figures, such as brilliant military generals fighting for national independence from the Chinese several centuries ago. The reenactment of *hầu đồng* points to the national history of Vietnam, and therefore contributes to imaginaries of a strong nation state and a new nationalism in the Socialist Republic. Reenactments refer to cultures or historical events in time and space (Dreschke 2015; Dreschke et al. 2016, 14), while reenactors never had immediate contact with the past. In the theater show, the actors' knowledge was mediated by media technologies such as videos of "authentic" spirit medium ceremonies, photographs, or observation of and participation in trance mediumship rituals in temples and pagodas. In the context of the appropriation of spirit mediumship in the theater show, the concept of remediation is of crucial interest (Bolter and Grusin 1999), as it refers to the transformation of "old" media (TV, movies, videos) to "new" digital media (Behrend and Zillinger 2015), for example using the screen in the theater show to depict an "original" place such as a pagoda. Furthermore, as part of "real" *lên đồng* ceremonies, "old" media such as horses and elephants made from paper are crucial elements in the ritual, as these material objects are considered gifts for the spirits as well as vehicles for their journeys and have to be burnt after the incarnation of particular spirits (Hüwelmeier 2016). In the state theater, however, these offerings were not part of the show.

Remarkably, many of the "authentic" mediums order professional film teams to record their trances in order to circulate the videos among friends and other mediums. I saw a number of young people participating in *lên đồng* mediumship in private temples recording the most spectacular trance elements with their smartphones and immediately sending the recordings to friends and followers. While senses and embodiment play a crucial role in both the temple and the theater, *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in the state theater and its separation from the religious context may nonetheless contribute to states of possession by the actor/medium. In this case, the concept of "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009) provides an understanding of the power of images, sounds, and body gestures over the actor/medium. Mass-mediated images, such as photographs of religious shrines of Mother Goddesses, videos displaying authentic *lên đồng* spirit mediumship performances on the theater screen, as well as the sound of *chầu văn* music, are appropriated by actor/mediums and incorporated into the show. Aesthetic qualities of media, in particular the material (costumes), bodily (dance), and sensory (music) aspects are the modes "through which imaginations materialize and are experienced as real" (Meyer 2009, 7). However, while the reenactment on the theater stage should be considered a creative process of appropriation, mimicry, and mimesis, the difference between "real" spirit mediumship and "inauthentic" trance mediumship in the state theater concerns not only the offering of gifts to the deities, but also the relationship between the actress/medium and the audience. The affective power of the sound predominately affects the actress and to a lesser extent touches the audience with its touristic gaze on "Vietnamese culture and tradition." Again, the missing spiritual tie (a strong connection in the real *lên đồng* performances) between the spectators and the medium/actress in the show refers to what has been labelled "disenchanted aesthetic forms" (Meyer and de

Witte 2013, 278), which raises questions of authenticity. My friend, a spectator in the theater performance as well, commented that she experienced the show as “not real” *lên đồng* but “fake,” and therefore perceived the show as “inauthentic,” which implies “a deviation from the originality and hence uniqueness of the genuine” (Bendix 2009, 259). Nonetheless she enjoyed the performance, in particular the sound of the *chầu văn* musicians. Likewise, the theater director highlighted the importance of *chầu văn* music and the audience being involved in the show, especially by supporting the actress/medium by jeering and clapping according to the sound.

THE FOUR PALACES SHOW IN A WORKING-CLASS THEATER

While the show in the Chèo Hà Nội Theater was conceptualized with different elements of folk theater traditions, such as water puppets and *chèo*, with *lên đồng* mediumship performance as an additional aspect of the show, the Four Palaces show in the working-class theater (*Công Nhân* Theater), which is close to the Opera House and Hoàn Kiếm lake in the city center, was exclusively about the Four Palaces or Mother Goddesses religion. I visited the show in early March 2016, after I saw an advertisement on the sidewalk. Accompanied by my friends, two sisters who knew the place when it still was a cinema, and their 85-year-old mother, we were very much impressed by the life-size replica of two horses made from bamboo and paper placed on the stairs at the entrance to the theater. Paper votive offerings are part of the real or authentic spirit mediumship performances and considered as gifts for the deities, and they have to be ordered by the medium in advance and burned after the incarnation of a particular spirit (Hüwelmeier 2016). As mentioned above, the offerings are not only considered as gifts, but also as vehicles for the spirits to depart to the otherworld. In the theater show, however, the gifts for the deities were used as props and of course, the burning of offerings did not take place in the theater. Upon entering the foyer, we were surprised to see a huge “quasi altar” (about 4 meters high) in the entrance hall of the former working-class theater, decorated with paper votive representations of Mother Goddesses, elephants, and boats, among others. The arrangement of beautiful offerings and therefore the decoration of the entrance hall attracted many visitors. Mr. Việt Tú, the director of the show, whom I met in the entrance hall, explained to me that he had participated in numerous *lên đồng* performances in the past years and so he knew quite well what kind of “props” are necessary to conduct a proper Mother Goddess worship ceremony. In between welcoming other guests, he told me that it was his greatest wish to bring this part of Vietnamese culture to the people. But only after the government submitted *lên đồng* spirit mediumship to UNESCO could he fulfill his desire. The show has been part of the program in the theater since 2015, and he reported that since then nearly 100 shows have taken place, attracting Vietnamese and foreigners alike. As he rented the place for the show, his dream, he told me in our conversation, was to have his own theater.

In a newspaper interview two weeks later, Mr. Việt Tú mentioned that once one of his relatives asked him to watch a *hầu đồng* ritual and this was the reason why

he was allured by this kind of “traditional culture.” His mother was an actress in water-puppet theater, and therefore he understood the attractiveness of traditional culture from childhood. Before he started producing the Four Palaces show, he prayed to the deities because he thought that such performances are related to religion. With the help of an experienced medium he prayed 18 times before the deities approved his efforts to make “Four Palaces.” However, although he was chosen by the deities to do the show, the medium told him there would be many difficulties. According to the medium, the difficulties refer to thoroughly understanding *hầu đồng* by learning from the practitioners, and also by realizing that *lên đồng* was already performed on stage by other theaters. Finally, Mr. Việt Tú was convinced that *lên đồng* would be approved by UNESCO, as it is one of the most important ceremonies in Vietnam and “helps people to see how traditional culture impacts modern culture and art activities” (Việt Nam News 2016b, n.p.).

When we entered the audience area, I observed that about 70 seats out of around 450 were occupied. I was not allowed to take photographs, some assistants told me, because the copyright must be guaranteed and furthermore, UNESCO was still in the process of considering *lên đồng* as Intangible Cultural Heritage. The show started by projecting a video with a short introduction on the screen, pointing to the cultural meaning and historical dimension of spirit mediumship. Then, the audience watched a medium in the video, who was dressed by two male assistants. Afterward, a curtain was drawn up and the medium/actress and two male actors/assistants entered the stage. Six *chầu văn* singers and musicians accompanied the actors, and while singing they “commented” on what was happening on stage while simultaneously “calling” the spirits by the sound. On the screen a video displayed burning incense, as a substitute for the visual experience. Although crucial elements during real *lên đồng* rituals, no smoke from incense was permeating the theater space.

Instead of an altar stood a small table, the actress/medium sitting in front of the wooden desk and facing the audience, with the two assistants sitting to the left and right, dressing up the medium in green colors, as the incarnation of a princess associated with the realm of the mountains and forests (Bà Chúa Thượng Ngàn) who, as it is said, rules 36 districts of the highland. Information about the spirit was given in English and Vietnamese on the screen. After the assistants dressed the actress/medium they threw a red cloth over her head, and the audience watched a twitching body under the red cloth. When the spirit had entered her body the actress/medium danced with torches, like in the real *lên đồng* spirit medium ritual, symbolizing the presence of the deity.

After drinking some wine behind fans—again like in the authentic ritual—the red cloth was once more thrown over the head of the actress, and her body began shaking, representing the “ascending” of the spirit. Suddenly the actress left the stage, and when she returned she was already dressed in another costume, now playing the role of the Tenth Prince (Ông Hoàng Mười), who is associated with the realm of the earth, thus dressed in a yellow costume. He is considered to be the defender of the Nghệ An region in the northern part of Vietnam, and according to the legend he is reputed to be a literary connoisseur (Ngô 2003, 268) and is

therefore represented as a spirit that is writing poems. In the real *lên đồng* sessions this spirit is considered to be quite generous and distributes money to the audience. When the dance performance of the Tenth Prince was over in the show and the “spirit” withdrew, the actress/medium left the stage while distributing betel nut, tea, and cigarettes to some people in the audience. The gift giving part is a crucial element in the authentic *lên đồng* ritual, but in the theater setting, however, it was a minimized aspect of the show.

The last personage in the Four Palaces show represented a damsel from an ethnic group (Cô Bé), a little princess, and, as the audience learned from the screen, the little princess is distributing favors. A red cloth, symbolizing the presence of the spirit, was not used anymore, and the actress/medium was already dressed when she came on stage. While the actress/medium was dancing, the actors/assistants were enthusiastically clapping their hands, now directing their view to the audience and inviting the crowd to clap hands as well, according to the rhythm of the music. Finally, the actress/medium again left the stage while approaching the visitors and throwing sweets into the audience, as spectators grabbed for “gifts.” When the performance came to its end, theater assistants threw red rose petals into the crowd; some of the assistants were standing on the gallery, so spectators imagined the rose petals were raining from above. The audience was enthusiastic by the end of the show, many of them with a smile on their face.

After the performance, Mr. Việt Tú, the director of the show, was waiting in the entrance hall, talking with some visitors while saying goodbye to others. While bidding farewell to me and my friends, he asked us to come back any time and bring along friends. He was also interested in my opinion of the show. I told him I enjoyed the performance and I found it quite interesting, in particular when comparing the show to the real *lên đồng* rituals I had participated in. I mentioned that I missed some crucial elements, such as the distribution of money, which is important in strengthening the relationship between the spirit and its followers in authentic *lên đồng* trance mediumship ceremonies. Well, yes, he confirmed, money is a big issue, and therefore, he continued, the government is still quite critical about spirit mediumship performances in Vietnam.

MAKING HERITAGE

On 22 March 2016, two weeks after I visited the show, a group of 30 ambassadors and representatives of Francophone countries visited the theater to watch the *Tứ Phủ* (Four Palaces) show, which was part of the celebration of the International Francophone Day in Vietnam. In the newspaper interview cited above, Mr. Việt Tú mentioned that many foreign spectators stood up and danced after the show ended. He highlighted that “it is like being in a real *bầu đồng* ceremony, where the medium throws sweets around for good luck, and nobody can sit still at the end of the ceremony” (Việt Nam News 2016b, n.p.). Confirming that most of the spectators did not understand what was going on, they nonetheless enjoyed the show and one foreigner even wanted to know more about this “unique culture.”

In analyzing the efforts of the Vietnamese government to promote the Intangible Cultural Heritage of spirit mediumship and its growing popularity, we have to bear in mind that the gradual resurgence of religious practices in Vietnam since the late 1980s, a period known as economic renewal (*đổi mới*), has to be embedded into a booming capitalism in the socialist country, which has been underway since the 2000s. Simultaneously, neoliberalism contributes to increasing poverty, and insecurity forms part of these processes for most of the country's citizens. These are but some reasons why many Vietnamese today turn to temples and pagodas. As the Vietnamese government cannot stop the mass movement toward popular religious practices, it seeks to control the places of worship and, moreover, pushes religious practices in terms of a new nationalism (Salemink 2016). In the context of "making heritage" (Cox and Brumann 2010), the Vietnamese government enhances patriotism and a new nationalism such as the promotion of worshipping the Hùng Kings, long considered to be the national ancestors. In the case of making the veneration of the Hùng Kings an Intangible Cultural Heritage, the government uses its power by pointing to their long and glorious history, fighting against foreigners a long time ago. Generating a sense of national belonging also applies to the veneration of national heroines such as the Trưng Sisters. While military leader Trần Hưng Đạo (13th century), to whom several shrines are dedicated in contemporary Vietnam, once moved from a secular realm into the realm of spirit mediumship (Phạm 2009; Salemink 2008; Ngô 2003, 258), today trance rituals are "transferred" from the realm of the temple to the domain of the secular, namely the theater. Likewise, new national heroes are recently worshipped in temples and pagodas, namely Hồ Chí Minh, president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and Võ Nguyên Giáp, the famous military leader who besieged the French in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ (Hüwelmeier forthcoming). Some followers in the *lên đồng* spirit mediumship networks told me, while discussing the role of Trần Hưng Đạo, they are convinced that military leader Võ Nguyên Giáp will become a future spirit in *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in Vietnam and will be deified like other successful defenders of the nation.

Hence, the promotion by the government in making *lên đồng* spirit mediumship an Intangible Cultural Heritage contributes to elicit nationalism, by underlining the heroic role of national, regional, and local heroes, such as generals, princes, and princesses of the past, who are "coming into presence" (Lambek 2010) in the course of the ritual by incarnating the medium. Followers of this popular religious practice, mostly women from lower middle classes such as small traders, domestic helpers, or former factory workers, are looking for spiritual security in increasingly insecure surroundings. In an atmosphere of anxieties about the future, such as losing jobs, taking care of husbands, children, and grandchildren, paying for the doctor and the hospital, and bribing state officials for everything they need, many people have gradually lost trust in the government and turned to sacred sites and auspicious rituals.

In order to further highlight the "making" of heritage (Cox and Brumann 2010) and to point to the "powertool of heritage" (Macdonald forthcoming, n.p.) used by governments, I will focus on the important role of scholars in the context

of making trance mediumship an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Vietnam. Second, I will point to spiritual tourism, which is not only practiced by millions of ordinary believers every year, but also by government officials.

THE ROLE OF SCHOLARS

Condemnation of *lên đồng* spirit mediumship by state authorities notwithstanding, there are numerous high-level and low-level politicians participating more or less secretly in trance mediumship rituals in temples. Politicians' wives also seem to be involved in the Mother Goddesses' worship practices, as I was told by a lady producing paper votive offerings in a village near Hà Nội. She recollected that recently the wife of a high-ranking politician ordered a huge spirit shrine composed of deities made from paper, horses, elephants, boats, and other material objects in order to donate this group of representations of deities and animals as an offering to the spirits in an initiation ritual into *Đạo mẫu* religion.

Apart from politicians and their relatives being engaged in Vietnam's spirit world, scholars are likewise involved in the making of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Oscar Salemink, anthropologist and leading expert on cultural heritage in Vietnam, was part of various meetings and workshops on Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and worked as an advisor for the UNESCO-sponsored research project on "Safeguarding Intangible Heritage and Development in Vietnam." In his recent work he focused, among other topics, on the "space of gong culture," pointing to ritual events such as funerals, various life-cycle rituals, and agricultural feasts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands, highlighting the trance-like state of the dancer and the listeners generated by the rhythms of the gongs. At the same time, he critically reflected on the consequences of making the gong culture an Intangible Cultural Heritage, by analyzing the different interests of various groups such as local authorities and evangelical Christian highlanders, the latter condemning the gong culture as "pagan" after conversion (Salemink 2016, 322). By referring to Guy Debord's analysis of the "society of the spectacle" (Debord 1994), Salemink pointed to the spectacularization of the former ritual practice of the gong culture, emphasizing that "aesthetic and performative aspects are privileged over substantive signification as ritual" (Salemink 2016, 324). While I agree that popular religious practices may lose their "sacred" character by becoming an Intangible Cultural Heritage, I nonetheless suggest to take a closer look at cases of reenactment and remediation, which are themselves creative processes of appropriating folk beliefs, and moreover, to analyze the role of scholars and government institutions, such as state theater shows, in promoting "sacred" heritage.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền, associate professor of the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Art Studies and director of the Center for Cultural Heritage Data, was involved in the making of heritage as a member of the UNESCO Consultative Body for the examination of the nomination for inscription on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in need of Safeguarding. An anthropologist of religion herself, she published a dissertation on the "Religion of the Four Palaces: Mediumship and

Therapy in Viet Culture.” She has collaborated for many years with anthropologists, some of whom are leading experts on trance mediumship in Vietnam (Fjellstad and Nguyễn 2006, 2011; Nguyễn 2006) and in Vietnam and South Korea (Kendall 2008, 2015; Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010). Anthropologist Laurel Kendall worked collaboratively with the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and the Vietnam Women’s Museum on issues related to museums, sacred objects, and religious practices such as *lên đồng* spirit mediumship (see, for example, the special issue of *Asian Ethnology* 67/2, 2008, guest edited by Laurel Kendall).

According to Nguyễn Thị Hiền, the worship of the Mother Goddesses includes various spiritual, ritual, and cultural elements. In an interview, she underlined that *lên đồng* spirit mediumship is only one practice among others, and is part of festivals and pilgrimages, implicating systems of knowledge and traditional culture³ (Vietnamnet 2016, n.p.). *Lên đồng* is noted by UNECSO for its “pulsating rhythms, and attractive and mystical body language,” she stated. In her view, *lên đồng* “is a practice of folk culture, which combines many elements: belief, music, ritual activities, costumes, and the giving of blessings.” Followers of *lên đồng* have various motivations for participating in this kind of popular religion. Some of the practitioners, according to the professor, are believers who pray for blessings from divine entities, others like the music, and still others find it joyful or interesting. When she was asked by the reporter about the performance of *lên đồng* in theaters and even fashion shows, she answered that, on the one hand, the artistic presentation will enhance the value of the ritual, but, on the other, the mix of theater and ritual are offensive and violate the folk ritual. Hence, she suggests that “ritual elements should be removed and only artistic elements should be kept,” adding that “rituals should be performed in a proper way, otherwise performers will be ‘punished’ by the spirits.”

As I have illustrated in the case studies of my visits to the theater shows, it is not clear who makes the decision about what is a ritual element and what is an artistic one. Is the distribution of money a ritual element and for this reason not reenacted in the theater? Or is it because the government considers this practice as wasteful? And what about consuming and burning paper votive offerings as crucial elements in worshipping the Mother Goddesses? Who is deciding on the gift-giving elements in *lên đồng* trance mediumship, on the expenses of the beautiful costumes and jewelry? And who makes the decision about whether a medium has *căn* (roots) and is therefore able to incarnate the spirits? In past decades the government declared some elements such as the consumption of paper votive offerings as wasteful and condemned *lên đồng* to be a superstitious practice, thereby warning others against following the Four Palaces religion. But as various players told me, such as religious practitioners, mediums, people producing paper votive offerings, and traders involved in selling the offerings, nobody can choose to become a medium or not. This is the decision of the spirits, and if people have *căn* and *duyên* (positive relationship) with the goddesses, they have to accept to serve the Mother Goddesses as long as they are living. Mediums I met as well as followers still have to go through difficult life situations; following the spirits will relieve their burden.

SPIRITUAL TOURISM

Besides the crucial role of scholars in the process of making Intangible Cultural Heritage, the recognition of certain places as national heritage by UNESCO has contributed to an increasing tourism industry, as scholars have noted with regard to several sites worldwide (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell 2010; Macleod 2006). In Vietnam, a growing tourism industry developed not only in places of tangible cultural heritage such as Hà Long Bay in the Gulf of Tonkin, which includes some 1,600 islands forming a spectacular seascape of limestone pillars. In addition to such places, and due to the promotion of the Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO, there is a growing popularity of sites such as the Phủ Dầy temple complex located in the Nam Định province, about 100 km from Hà Nội, which is considered to be a sacred place, as a number of trance rituals connected to the Mother Goddesses' worship take place at the temple complex. When I visited the locality in 2007, *lên đồng* performances were already conducted there.

Tens of thousands of worshippers visit the place every year after the New Year festival to bring offerings to the deities, pray for health, happiness, and successful business, and to receive blessings from the spirits. The locality includes more than 20 temples and shrines scattered throughout the place. As mentioned above, Princess Liễu Hạnh is worshipped in the temple area. Lately, since spirit mediumship was nominated as a cultural heritage at the national level, not only masses of ordinary worshippers visit Phủ Dầy temple: in March 2016, a group of 22 ambassadors, 50 representatives of embassies in Vietnam, and researchers took part in a cultural and religious tourism tour including the Phủ Dầy temple complex (Việt Nam News 2016a, n.p.).⁴ Organized by the Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO, the spiritual tour started at this sacred space, which is considered to be the birthplace of the *lên đồng* ritual. Impressed by the trance-like singing and dancing of the medium, the ambassador of Venezuela commented: "It is an honor for us to come to this sacred place to watch such a solemn yet joyful ritual, where the gods are incarnated in mediums to shower blessings on the followers." And the Minister Counsellor of Nigeria was convinced that UNESCO would recognize this colorful ritual: "This belief system has great traditional cultural values that show gratitude to one's ancestors, predecessors, and national heroes.... There's also perfect harmony between the costumes, music, and dance. I am proud to be here where I can learn more about Vietnamese history." At no point in this newspaper report was it mentioned that the government had condemned the performance of trance mediumship for many decades (Salemink 2016). Most interestingly, however, *Đạo mẫu* religion was considered one of the "three religions in Vietnam" in the newspaper report, besides Catholicism and Buddhism.

The group had also visited a famous catholic place, Phát Diệm cathedral, built at the end of the 19th century with a combination of European and Vietnamese architecture, as well as the Bái Đính Pagoda, quite popular as well, and the newspaper article pointed to the importance of the country's tourism authorities, who have considered encouraging spiritual tourism over the last few years. Referring to the first "International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development" in 2013, which took place in the Bái Đính Pagoda, the journalist

emphasized that the conference explored “ways in which living culture, traditions, and belief systems could be integrated into tourism while respecting the four pillars of sustainability: the environment, economy, society, and culture.” He underlined the speech of vice president Nguyễn Thị Doan, who stated that Vietnam “considered spiritual tourism a kind of cultural tourism and an important factor in strengthening economic growth and boosting patriotism and national identity.” In her speech, she continued by saying that “Viet Nam always encourages and creates favorable conditions for international co-operation in tourism development and for the private sector to participate in developing the industry in general, and spiritual tourism in particular, since cultural belief links the Vietnamese people and their foreign friends,” adding that “spiritual tourism would only develop in a sustainable way if countries co-operate closely to support each other.”

As the Vietnamese government is obviously increasingly linking the religious landscape with spiritual tourism for sustainable development, travel agencies are spreading like mushrooms. They organize different tours to pagodas and temples, thereby serving the needs of many ordinary believers in visiting as many places as they can afford in the weeks after the New Year festival, in order to pray for health and wealth. These trips are quite expensive due to renting a small bus, preparing chicken, fruit, flowers, and incense as offerings, buying paper votive offerings to be burned at the locality of the temple, and donating money in front of the shrine of each deity—and there are many.

The cultural and religious tourism tour illustrates what the subsequent speech of the vice president points to: the instrumental use of heritage by also focusing on heritage as commodification, connecting it to sustainability and to “bringing jobs for local people.” While the interests of the government and the tourist industry seem obvious, there are thousands of handicraft families and small traders that for decades have been producing and selling votive paper offerings (Norton 2006; Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; Fjelstad 2010; Endres 2011). However, after the UNESCO nomination, when I visited some of them in a handicraft village near Hà Nội in 2015 and early 2016 (Hüwelmeier 2016), they were impatiently waiting for a positive UNESCO recognition of *lên đồng*. Those families would no longer have to live in insecurity as they did in the past, because the “spiritual” commodities they produce, namely paper votive offerings, could be manufactured more openly and not only in remote villages. A producer of horses made from paper, ritual products to be burned during *lên đồng* ceremonies, told me in 2015 that he did not feel his hard work being recognized by society. He was hoping that after the UNESCO decision the material objects he creates will no longer be devalued and considered wasteful by the government.

This is but one example of how fieldwork-based anthropological research complicates “the assumptions made in the instrumentalist perspective about how heritage operates at the local level” (Macdonald forthcoming n.p.). Adjusting the argument that only powerful agents, such as state representatives, make use of heritage in the sense of political instrumentalization, my contribution has illustrated how theaters, actors, and musicians in late Socialist Vietnam appropriate the debate about Intangible Cultural Heritage, by reenacting popular religious rituals while

simultaneously becoming important players with regard to the commodification of trance mediumship. Interestingly, however, it is not the authentic *lên đồng* spirit mediums going on stage in the state theater to “sell” popular religious practices, but state-sponsored actors and musicians, who contribute to the evocation of the nation’s history by performing Intangible Cultural Heritage for tourists and foreigners.

CONCLUSION

Lên đồng trance mediumship is but one form of popular religious practice performed in Vietnam for centuries. Condemned by the communist state in past decades as superstitious, backward, and wasteful, the UNESCO nomination of the “Practices related to the Việt beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms” and its inscription on the UNESCO “Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” in late 2016 has contributed to the transformation of *lên đồng* spirit mediumship into a spectacle of consumption, profit, and political legitimization for the government. One consequence was an increase in theatrical performances of the ritual. Separated from its authentic setting in temples and pagodas, going on stage in urban Hà Nội’s state theater and in a former working-class theater resulted in not only commodification of a popular religious practice but also transformation and devaluation of its “sacred” character. When *lên đồng* spirit mediumship lost its “authenticity,” it yielded “disenchanted aesthetic forms” (Meyer and de Witte 2013, 278). Remediated and reenacted in Hà Nội’s theaters and even in fashion shows, crucial elements of the popular religious practice have been lost, transformed, and shortened. In this way, the theater directors, state officials, tourist industries, and other players authorized trance mediumship. However, this is only one side of the coin. As has been illustrated, the distinction of secular/sacred is crossed when theater directors and actors/actresses pray to the spirits for help with their productions and performances. Furthermore, while remediation and reenactment may separate the secular from the sacred on the one hand, these processes simultaneously allow for the “real” possession of actors/mediums in theater shows on the other. Hence, the power of the spirits in the secular space of a state theater and the heritagization of spirit mediumship could also be seen as re-enchantment of a society on its way into market socialism.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Birgit Meyer and Catherine Wanner for critical comments on an earlier version and the two anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions and advice. This essay is based on results from research projects I have directed since 2005: “Transnational Networks, Religion and New Migration” (2005–10), funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/2-2), and “The Global Bazaar: Marketplaces as Spaces of Economic and Social Inclusion” (2011–15), funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/3-1). My current research project on “Religion, Media and Materiality: Spiritual Economies in Southeast Asia” (German Research Foundation, 2015–18; HU 1019/4-1) explores the relationship between religious practices, market socialism, and booming capitalism. Since 2006 I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Hà Nội and other places in Vietnam as well as among transnational Vietnamese in Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague.

2. In my former research I explored a performance of a theater play by catholic nuns. On stage, their female ancestor was considered a “fool of god,” acting like a jester, thereby telling the truth by criticizing a member of the male church authorities in the mid 19th century (Hüwelmeier 2001).

3. The citations in this paragraph are based on an interview in *Vietnamnet*, 13 March 2016.

4. In the following, I refer to an article in *Việt Nam News* (13 March 2016a) reporting on the visit of the ambassadors; quotes are taken from this article.

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