

Spirited Dialogues: Contestations over the Religious Landscape in Central Vietnam's Littoral Society

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This thesis is a study of coastal communities in Central Vietnam and the multi-faced contestation over the religious landscape taking place against a backdrop of changes in the ecology, the economy and in politics. In Vietnam, religious traditions returned, albeit in a novel form, after a long period of being restricted or even erased from the public sphere. The reforms of *Đổi Mới* or *Renovation* initiated in 1986 by the communist leaders of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have led not only to the political liberalization, privatization and commercialization of everyday life but also resulted in a more favourable approach to “folk religion” [*tín ngưỡng dân gian*], which in the last two decades gained the status of national culture and tradition. As a result, religious practices, invigorated by growing economic prosperity of the modernizing country and a noteworthy shift in the state attitude towards culture and tradition, have experienced a phenomenal revival.

At the same time, the Party-State, which ceased to play the strong ideological role in people's lives that it did before the reforms, still tries to regulate the place of religion in society through Marxist-Leninist principles and to standardize and instrumentalize religious practice to provide moral and cultural reinforcement for its policy. Therefore, in my thesis, I seek to highlight the process in which the state, aiming to create a more standardized and institutionalized version of the *religious landscape*, is challenged by alternative forms of religiosity introduced by individuals and

various groups of people (such as religious specialists, lineages and local officials) within local communities (see also Kipnis 2001; DuBois 2005; Hann and the "Civil Religion" Group 2006; Chau 2006, 2008; Pelkmans 2009; for Vietnam see e.g. Do Thien 1997; Endres 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008; Malarney 2002, 2003; 2007; Taylor 2004; Kwon 2006, 2009; Roszko 2010; Salemink 2010). By *religious landscape* I understand a process in which a local community transforms and controls their environment through daily ritual tasks. Rather than establishing a dichotomy between state and society or between the central and the local, I demonstrate how various groups of actors intersect with each other in everyday life and how individual meanings of landscapes emerge through particular engagements and negotiations.

The current ritual intensification in Vietnam inscribes itself in a wider phenomenon of religious revival all over Asia, proving that secular theories which predicted that religion will disappear in an era of modernization and rationalization were wrong (Durkheim 1995; Weber 2001; Marx 1986; for the critique of secularization theories see e.g. Asad 1993; Evers and Siddique 1993; Casanova 1994). Actual attempts to detect patterns of religious revival through East and Southeast Asia led a number of anthropologists to couple the recent religious revivalism with an attempt to overcome the pressures of modernization (Evers and Siddique 1993; Kendall 1996; Lee 1993; Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre 1994; Weller 1994, 1998). More recently, many scholars have also pointed out that capitalist hegemony significantly influences religious and ritual practices by playing a role in the process of individualization and commercialization of religious preferences (Boyd 1985; Gates 1987; Iannacone 1990; Finke and Stark 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 2006; Barro 2004; Kitiarsa 2008; for Vietnam see e.g. Taylor 2007; Salemink 2010).

Although the recent efflorescence of religion in Vietnam could be linked with a general trend across all of Asia (see e.g. Van der Veer and Lehman 1999), Vietnam provides a compelling case study because religious activities have been revived under both circumstances of rapid socio-economic change

and a Party-State which, in various ways maintains a firm grip on power by stimulating, standardizing, managing and co-opting popular expressions of religion. Since the Vietnamese Communist-led State integrated the country into the global economy and abandoned socialist practices, the threats of immersion in foreign culture and foreign versions of modernity have posed a challenge for the state's legitimacy. To fill the void created after withdrawing from socialist modernity, the Party-State attempted to create its own version of modernity in which national identification played its main role (Salemink forthcoming). Anthropologists working on post-Soviet Central Asia single out a comparable phenomenon, since Islam has been connected to the nation-building process there and is considered to represent national culture and tradition (Hann 2006; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006; McBrien 2006; Pelkmans 2009). Consequently, the appropriation of religious practices as the embodiment of culture, tradition and nation has far-reaching implications, since it requires from people a kind of momentary and strategic conformity with the state agenda.

The contemporary meaning of religion for individuals and their strategies to articulate and position themselves against the backdrop of the state policies could be explored in-depth by taking into consideration local communities. The vast majority of rural studies carried out by foreign scholars in Vietnam took place in a few provinces (e.g. Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh) in the Red River Delta, but not in Central Vietnam. Against this tendency of focusing on Northern Vietnam, the main ethnographic material for this dissertation was collected in selected fishing communities of the coastal province Quảng Ngãi (Central Vietnam) that I refer to as a "littoral society" due to their location on the narrow strip of land between fertile rice fields, sand dunes, the beach and the sea.

The coast itself occupies an important place in state discourses, since it constitutes a border zone of the modern Vietnamese state and is located close to the disputed area of the South China Sea. As a consequence of the state claims, some parts of the South China Sea—"East Sea" in

Vietnamese—and their inhabitants are engaged in an official strategy to claim sovereignty in the face of international competition, including from China, for control over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. Because of the sensitive border location and proximity with the islands, inhabitants of Quảng Ngãi Province directly suffer the effects of the South China Sea dispute since they are barred from historical fishing grounds now claimed by China.

Yet, access to fishing grounds is not the only concern of people in the littoral society. At the same time, due to decreasing resources to secure a more stable socio-economic position on the seashore through agrarian and marine resources, villagers look for new sources of income and, as a result, have become integrated into a wider economic context (see e.g. Kleinen 1999a, 1999b). On the other hand they have also been caught up in new programmes of development and modernization through which the government justifies its intervention into rural areas. Anthropological debates in the last few decades opened the space to think about local communities as partly constituted by the demands of the modern state actively reworking their local forms. I shall argue that communities in border zones could provide significant data about the state's agenda and the ways in which people actively engage and challenge their peripheral status. In recent years, a number of scholars have shown that particularly such places – often considered the weakest points of the state – are the target of the political and cultural programme of the state (see e.g. Tsing 1993; Scott 1998; 2009; Li 1999; Duncan 2004). Therefore, an excellent location to analyze such a process is coastal Quảng Ngãi Province of Central Vietnam.

Although development projects, environmental conservation, tourism prospects and maritime boundary disputes are not the main foci of this thesis, it cannot escape our attention that contemporary religious practices of littoral societies are inscribed in the rich texture of everyday concerns, national debates and international negotiations. The value of my approach lies in the attempt to bring littoral society and state, nation and religion, and

tradition and transformation into one coherent vision, and to explore how these categories intersect with each other in everyday life. As a result, my focus on religion led me to emphasize local negotiations over social and economic marginality of coastal communities in the frame of *contestations over the religious landscape*. I argue that people in the littoral society of Central Vietnam are engaged in “spirited dialogues” with the state, which they experience through local officials, scholars, and journalists who often have different aims and aspirations, but also with each other as they are entangled in complex relations in which they situated themselves within and across international, national and local interests. Their engagement in these dialogues, occasionally taking the shape of contestations and negotiations over the issue of what could be considered proper religious practice, suggests that people in Vietnam do not remain indifferent towards official politics and have strong opinions about them.

More generally, this thesis is in accord with the current anthropological studies exploring the religious resurgence in Vietnam. It is no surprise that the relationship between state and religion constitutes one of the subjects that cannot pass silently in most ethnographic accounts, especially referring to those countries where the state plays an active role in shaping the religious domain. Southeast Asian states try to encourage homogeneous, monolithic practices of religion in their efforts to build the nation. Therefore, the statement that religion in the Asian region is a dynamic factor in the nation-building process and significantly influences national culture is particularly relevant (Hann 2006; Van der Veer and Feuchtwang 2009; for Vietnam see e.g. Endres 2001, 2002; Taylor 2001, 2003; Malarney 2002, 2007; Salemink 2007; Kwon 2009).

However, the study of religious revival and a growing role of religion requires, above all, taking into consideration the issue of local communities engaging with religion and the state’s cultural agenda in diverse ways. At this point it is necessary to say a few words about the notion of “village community” that occupies an important place in anthropological debates.

Reading Vietnamese colonial sources, there is much talk of village political autonomy, economic autarchy, social homogeneity and harmony, and mutual assistance among villagers (e.g. Gourou 1940; Mus 1970). The most renowned example of a contemporary discussion that to some extent evokes such a picture of co-operation and mutual interdependence in the framework of the village community is a classic work by James Scott (1976), *The Moral Economy of the Peasants*. Scott's concept of moral economy drew on the idea that traditional village communities maintained moral standards, economic practices and social exchanges that guaranteed benefit for the members of the community by minimizing (individual) risk.

Samuel Popkin (1979), in *The Rational Peasant*, forcefully criticized Scott's "romantic" image of harmony and mutual assistance among villagers and emphasised that in rural Vietnamese society, contradictory interests, internal conflicts and differentiation existed. He argued that peasant behaviour was guided by calculation and profit rather than by moral standards that aimed to minimize economic risks.

The so-called Scott-Popkin debate on moral and political economy opened the space for rethinking the concept of the village, seen as a community. In present-day anthropological studies, a village is no longer depicted as a homogeneous, harmonious and unified community (Shiraishi 1984; Breman 1988; Papin 2002) and appears to be more diverse, autonomous and active in everyday practices of resistance, collaboration or complicity (Comaroff 1985; Scott 1985; 1990; Mitchell 1990; Mbembe 1992a, 1992b; Tsing 1993; Li 1999, 2010). Jan Breman (1988: 19-21) aptly points out that in the case of Southeast Asia villages, the cliché of a "small-scale collectivity within very restricted spatial boundaries" was maintained due to colonial ideology, which sought to understand and control distant societies. Along the same lines as Breman, John Kleinen (1999) offers a critical overview of the literature including both Asian and Vietnamese studies of "village society." He contests the concept of "the Vietnamese village" and argues that the village presented as "a corporate community" and

“autonomous entity” must be examined in historical context. He points out that villages in Vietnam underwent a colonial transformation which lasted more than a half a century and then they were the subject of a Marxist experiment with cooperatives, to say nothing of three wars that did not leave the village as such unaffected. While he notes the disintegration of the village economic and cultural community brought about by *Đổi Mới*, he also underlines that the dynamic reforms of *Đổi Mới* led to a gradual growth of wealth in Vietnamese society but at the same time deepened inequality and differences between various strata of people. Due to fewer incentives to secure a more stable socio-economic position in the village through land and agrarian resources, the village looked for new sources of income and, as a result, became integrated into a wider context.

Kleinen’s description of a contemporary Vietnamese community that ceased to be determined by territorial borders due to acute socio-economic changes such as increasing mobility, weakening communal ties, solidarity and mutual obligations corresponds to Zygmunt Bauman’s (2005: 361) revision of Durkheimian notions of society. Bauman argues that the Durkheim’s understanding of “society” as a co-operative company with a shared purpose, joint interests and common destiny has vanished in the postmodern era. Bauman’s sociological conceptualization of modern society as “liquid” is perhaps one of the most extreme visions of post-industrial societies, but nevertheless in the wider context of anthropological debates forces us to re-think the village concept and look at the village not only as a “locality” in closed territorial borders, but also as an entity increasingly involved in “expanding market forces” (Kleinen 1999: 26-27).

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