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

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Zusammenfassung

Spirited Dialogues: Umstrittene religiöse Landschaften in der zentralvietnamesischen Küstengesellschaft

Die vorliegende Arbeit ist eine Studie über Küstengemeinden in Zentralvietnam und die vielschichtigen Aushandlungen der religiösen Landschaft, die vor dem Hintergrund von Wandlungsprozessen in Ökologie, Ökonomie und Politik stattfinden. Religiöse Traditionen sind in Vietnam wieder in den öffentlichen Raum zurückgekehrt, wenn auch in neuer Form, nachdem sie lange Zeit unterdrückt oder sogar völlig verdrängt worden waren. Im Jahr 1986 stieß die kommunistische Führung der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam die Reform *Đổi Mới* (Erneuerung) an, die nicht nur zu ökonomischer Liberalisierung, Privatisierung und Kommerzialisierung des Alltags führte, sondern auch die staatliche Haltung in Bezug auf die ‚Volksreligion' [*tín ngưỡng dân gian*] verbesserte, die in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten den Status einer nationalen Kultur und Tradition erlangte. Als Ergebnis dieser Veränderung der staatlichen Haltung und dem wachsenden Wohlstand aufgrund der Modernisierung des Landes erfuhren religiöse Praktiken eine bemerkenswerte Wiederbelebung.

Gleichzeitig versucht der Parteistaat jedoch, religiöse Praktiken zu vereinheitlichen und sie zur moralischen und kulturellen Stärkung ihrer Politik zu instrumentalisieren. Seit Beginn der Reformen hat der Parteistaat seine starke ideologische Bedeutung im Leben der Menschen verloren. Dennoch versucht sie, die Stellung der Religion in der Gesellschaft mittels Marxistisch-Leninistischer Prinzipien zu regulieren. Meine Forschung konzentriert sich daher auf Prozesse, durch die der Staat eine einheitlichere und stärker institutionalisierte religiöse Landschaft zu schaffen versucht, wobei er durch alternative Formen von Religiosität herausgefordert wird, die in lokalen Gemeinden von Individuen oder Gruppen (z.B. religiöse Spezialisten, Lineages oder lokale Beamte) eingeführt werden.

In der aktuellen ethnologischen Forschung zu Beziehungen zwischen Staat und lokalen Gemeinschaften wird das Dorf nicht mehr als homogene, harmonische und geeinte Gemeinschaft betrachtet, sondern erscheint vielfältiger, autonomer und aktiver in Bezug auf

Alltagspraktiken wie Widerstand, Zusammenarbeit und Komplizenschaft. Meine Studie geht zudem über die Standarddichotomie von Herrschaft und Widerstand hinaus und geht von einer größeren Handlungsmacht (agency) der Menschen in lokalen Gemeinschaften aus. Auf der Grundlage von Studien, die den Gedanken nationaler Grenzen dekonstruieren und Grenzgemeinschaften entlang von Mobilität und Identifikation neu konzeptionalisieren, wird gezeigt, dass die gegenwärtige ,Dorfgesellschaft' viel dynamischer ist als es die meisten klassischen Dorfstudien nahelegen. Anstatt Religion, Politik, Ökonomie und die natürliche Umwelt als ,isolierte Einheiten' zu betrachten, zeige ich, inspiriert von Malinowski, Mauss und Condominas, dass diese Felder in Konfigurationen auftreten und ein ,soziales Totalphänomen' bilden.

Anhand lokaler Gemeinschaften lässt sich die Bedeutung von Religion für Individuen und ihre Strategien, sich vor dem Hintergrund der staatlichen Politik auszudrücken und zu positionieren, detailliert untersuchen. Bisher untersuchten ausländische Wissenschaftler zumeist Provinzen im Delta des Roten Flusses, während Studien zu Zentralvietnam noch weitgehend fehlen. Anstatt den Schwerpunkt auf Nordvietnam zu legen, erhob ich die ethnographischen Daten für diese Arbeit entlang der Küste des südlichen Zentralvietnam, einem Gebiet das vormals zu dem mit den USA verbündeten Südvietnam gehörte. Ich forschte in den beiden Fischergemeinden Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn in der Küstenprovinz Quảng Ngãi (Zentralvietnam), die ich aufgrund ihrer Lage auf einem dünnen Landstreifen zwischen Reisfeldern, Sanddünen, Strand und Meer als „Küstengesellschaft" bezeichne.

Mein Fokus auf Religion bestimmt auch den Charakter der ethnografischen Forschung, die ich zwischen September 2006 und September 2007 durchführte. Bevor ich die Feldforschung in den beiden Fischergemeinden begann, recherchierte ich zunächst für zwei Monate in Bibliotheken in Hanoi und in Ho-Chi-Minh-Stadt. Zu meinen Quellen zählen Zeitungen, wissenschaftliche Literatur und staatliche Dokumente. Darüber hinaus habe ich historische Primär- und Sekundärquellen wie etwa Akten und Umfragen der früheren Kolonialregierung ausgewertet. Diese Vorarbeit erlaubte es mir, die Provinz Quảng Ngãi in einen größeren historischen und politischen Kontext einzuordnen und die auf der Mikro-Ebene basierenden Ergebnisse meiner Feldforschung zu Konstruktionen des religiösen Raums aus einer breiteren Perspektive zu betrachten. Ferner erlaubt es diese Vorgehensweise, bestimmte historische Praktiken mit gegenwärtigen Praktiken in Verbindung zu bringen. Die verbleibenden zehn Monate intensiver Feldforschung in Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn stützten sich methodisch vor allem auf nicht-strukturierte Gespräche und teilnehmende Beobachtung.

Nicht-strukturierte Gespräche erwiesen sich als besonders geeignet, die verschiedenen Dynamiken des Dorflebens zu enthüllen, da ich hier die Interaktion und auch Unstimmigkeiten zwischen meinen Gesprächspartnern beobachten konnte. Die teilnehmende Beobachtung ermöglichte mir nicht nur, verschiedene Aspekte der dörflichen Lebens zu untersuchen, sondern individuelle Äußerungen vor dem Hintergrund von Beobachtungen dessen, was Menschen glauben bzw. sagen und tun, zu verstehen..

Inspiriert von innovativen Arbeiten, deren konzeptueller Rahmen versucht, Brücken zwischen Ethnologie, Geschichtswissenschaften, Humangeographie und Ökologie zu bauen, werden in der vorliegenden Arbeit die physischen und kulturellen Welten der Menschen im Feldforschungsgebiet miteinander verwoben. Kapitel 1 widmet sich der Auseinandersetzung mit den führenden theoretischen Diskussionen zu Dorf und Staat, Mensch-Umwelt-Beziehungen, und Territorialität. Auf dieser Grundlage formuliere ich im Anschluss meine zentralen Forschungsfragen und drei eng miteinander verbundene analytische Konzepte: *Küstengesellschaft*, *religiöse Landschaft* und *die sich wandelnde und wandelbare kosmologische Landschaft*. Diese drei Konzepte sind nützliche analytische Werkzeuge, um zu untersuchen, wie Menschen, die in unterschiedlichen ökologischen, ökonomischen und politischen Nischen situiert sind, Sinn aus ihrer Küstenumgebung schöpfen und so den Raum um sich herum schaffen, neu erfinden und in Frage stellen, wobei sie ihre Handlungsmacht und ihre Kreativität ständig neu unter Beweis stellen.

Kapitel 2 stützt sich auf die ‚Mittelmeer-Analogie' und die Idee, dass Regionen in Asien, einschließlich Süd- und Südostchina sowie Südostasien, durch das südchinesische Meer verbunden sind. Am Beispiel der Dörfer Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn wird gezeigt, dass Küstenbewohner das Meer nicht als Barriere, sondern als ‚Verbindungszone' ansehen. Auf Verbindungen fokussierend werden in diesem Kapitel Wechselwirkungen und Entleihungen untersucht, sowie Kontinuität und Wandel jenseits verordneter ‚politischer' und ‚administrativer' Grenzen. Das Meer stellt sich dabei als einigender und integrierender Faktor dar. Die beiden Feldforschungsorte – Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn – wurden nicht ausgewählt, um sie zu vergleichen, weil beide Orte zu einem kosmologischen Bereich gehören und eine miteinander verbundene ‚Küstengesellschaft' bilden, für die das Meer als Überträger des Glaubens fungiert. Die Untersuchung zweier Orte liefert ein detaillierteres Bild der vielschichtigen Aushandlungen der religiösen Landschaft vor dem Hintergrund von Wandlungsprozessen in Ökologie, Ökonomie und Politik.

Kapitel 3 beschreibt die historischen, ökonomischen und Umweltfaktoren, welche die beiden Orte Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn prägen, und geht auf die kontinuierliche Verbindung der Kinh [Việt] Volksgruppe mit der Cham-Kultur und deren Seefahrertradition ein. Es wird auf die Anstrengungen vietnamesischer Migranten eingegangen, die sich im 17. Jahrhundert in Zentralvietnam ansiedelten, um ihre neue Umgebung in einen Raum zu verwandeln, der durch Religion und Rituale zugänglich und formbar ist. In Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn wurde das durch die Pazifizierung von Cham Göttern, den Bau von Tempeln auf Fundamenten von religiösen Stätten der Cham sowie durch die Aneignung von Geistern der früheren Landbesitzer erreicht. Diese Prozesse führten zu einer interessanten Vermischung der Việt und Cham Kultur, was bis heute an den lokalen Glaubensvorstellungen erkennbar ist. Die Betonung der komplexen und vielschichtigen Einflüsse auf die Genese der Gemeinden Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn in diesem Kapitel bildet die Grundlage für tiefere Einblicke in die lokalen religiösen Praktiken. Dagegen liefert die Darstellung der gegenwärtigen ökonomischen Aktivitäten einen Rahmen für alltägliche Belange sowie potentielle Konflikte und Probleme in der gegenwärtigen ländlichen Umgebung.

Kapitel 4 beschreibt die beiden wichtigsten Subsistenzgrundlagen in den Küstengemeinden: Landwirtschaft und Fischerei. Genauer gesagt bilden diese beiden Bereiche die Grundlage für die soziale und rituelle Dichotomie zwischen Land und Meer in Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn. Es wird auf die sozialen Unterschiede zwischen Bauern und Fischern eingegangen, die in religiösen Zeremonien und dem Bau separater Tempel ihren Ausdruck finden und entlang derer spirituelle und hierarchische Grenzen zwischen Dorf [*làng*] und Fischergemeinschaft [*vạn*] gezogen werden. Diese Unterscheidung zwischen Land- und See-Aktivitäten, die durch die soziale und religiöse Organisation der Küstengesellschaft aufrechterhalten wird, schließt jedoch nicht aus, dass beide Aktivitätstypen dynamisch und wandelbar sind. Durch die gemeinsame Untersuchung von Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn wird deutlich, dass Dorfbevölkerung und Fischergemeinschaft keine permanent stabilen Identitäten sind, sondern dass sie sich abhängig vom sozialen Kontext dem Einen oder Anderen annähern können. Die Aussicht auf beispielsweise Einkommen oder Migration können eine Neigung zur „Segmentierung" hervorrufen, und in einer solchen neuen Situation könnten sich verschiedene soziale Einheiten als Eins betrachten. Die wirtschaftliche Situation der Fischer hat sich gegenüber jener der Bauern durch die steigende lokale und internationale Nachfrage nach Fischereiprodukten in letzter Zeit verbessert. Die Ergebnisse der Feldforschung zeigen, dass die Fischer nicht mehr nur eine benachteiligte Gruppe sind sondern ihre neue Situation

ausnutzen, um ihren wachsenden sozialen Status zu zeigen. Die Fischer widersetzen sich der exklusiven Kontrolle von Ritualen durch privilegierte ‚Ältere' im Dorf an Land und verkehren dadurch alte Hierarchien.

In Kapitel 5 beschreibe ich, wie der Staat auf die plurale religiöse Landschaft in Vietnam reagiert und wie er diese umdeutet. Religiöse Praktiken sind dabei besonders gut geeignet, um Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit und Narrative zu nationalen und revolutionären Märtyrern im modernen Vietnam neu zu gestalten. Zunächst wird die Konzeptualisierung der Kategorie Religion in den vietnamesischen Kontext gesetzt. In Vietnam ist die religiöse Sphäre weder als ein geeintes und stabiles System von Glaubensvorstellungen im Sinne Geertz' zu sehen, noch entspricht sie westlichen Ideen einer monotheistischen ‚Religion'. Diverse Formen religiöser Ausdrucksweisen und Glaubensvorstellungen bestehen nebeneinander, interagieren und überschneiden sich; sie bilden jedoch keine universelle und immerwährende autoritative Instanz. In Anlehnung an Asad, DuBois und Mandair, die gezeigt haben, dass das Konzept von Religion vor dem Hintergrund des Christentums historisch gewachsen ist, argumentiere ich, dass die Konzeptualisierung von ‚Religion' in Vietnam durch den westlichen intellektuellen Einfluss geformt wurde, den Vietnam durch die französische Kolonialmacht erfahren hat. Es wird ferner gezeigt, dass der gegenwärtige vietnamesische Parteistaat ebenfalls eine moderne Definition von ‚Religion' übernahm, die in Comaroffs (1994: 301) Worten als "living survival of an archaic order" verstanden werden kann, und auf deren Grundlage der Staat versucht hat, seine auf die Etablierung einer pluralen religiösen Landschaft zielende Politik zu institutionalisieren. Die Strategien des Staates, die religiöse Landschaft zu standardisieren, zu vereinheitlichen und zu kontrollieren werden detailliert analysiert, aber auch die umgekehrten Prozesse werden genau untersucht, nämlich wie die Menschen in den Küstengemeinden dem Staat begegnen. Das Kapitel gibt somit einen Überblick zur Beziehung zwischen Staat und Dorf und zu den Strategien der Menschen, auf offizielle Kulturpolitik zu reagieren.

In Kapitel 6 präsentiere ich einige idiosynkratische Erzählungen, die in das größere Bild passen und Einblicke in die Aushandlungen der religiösen Landschaft geben. Es werden die antireligiösen Maßnahmen skizziert, die in der ländlichen Gemeinde kurz nach der sogenannten Befreiung von 1975 ergriffen wurden sowie die Reaktionen der Dorfbewohner auf die wechselnden kulturellen und politischen Projekte des Staates. Hier wird deutlich, dass die Dorfbewohner staatliche Maßnahmen nicht nur passiv erduldeten und im Sinne ihrer Götter und heiligen Stätten handelten, sondern zugleich ganz bewusst Kompromisse

eingingen. Selbst lokale Beamte, die mit der Durchsetzung der staatlichen Politik beauftragt waren, hatten Bindungen zu religiösen Praktiken und beteiligten sich daher nur zögerlich an einer heftigen Kampagne gegen Aberglauben. In dem Kapitel wird darauf eingegangen, dass Aushandlungen der religiösen Landschaft nicht nur zwischen Staatsdienern und Dorfbewohnern stattfanden, sondern auch religiöse Instanzen miteinbezogen, so z.B. buddhistische Geistliche, die häufig gegensätzliche Ansichten im Hinblick auf die ‚echte, wahre' Religion haben. Die Kombination offizieller Rhetorik, religiöser Glaubensvorstellungen und lokaler Weltsichten ermöglicht es den Dorfbewohnern im Alltag, die Überreste ihrer religiösen Landschaft wieder erfolgreich zusammenzusetzen und durch das Hinzufügen neuer Bestandteile neue symbolische Räume zu schaffen. Die neu ‚verzauberte' religiöse Landschaft wird in den Augen der lokalen Gemeinschaft kraft- und wirkungsvoll, weil sie in der Weltsicht der Dorfbewohner Sinn und Bedeutung gewinnt, auch wenn sie nicht mit der staatlichen Perspektive oder der einer stärker institutionalisierten Religion – wie etwa dem Buddhismus – konform ist.

Kapitel 7 beschreibt die Komplexität der Aushandlungsprozesse der religiösen Landschaft, die auf nationaler, Provinz- und lokaler Ebene stattfinden. Die lokale Gemeinschaft und der Staat können hierbei nicht als monolithische Einheiten gesehen werden. Vielmehr sind sie heterogene, in komplexen Beziehungen verflochtene Allianzen, die sich durch die Verhandlung internationaler, nationaler und lokaler Interessen selbst formen. Es werden staatliche Gedenkmaßnahmen untersucht, die an die von den Nguyễn-Herrschern im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert aufgestellte Paracel- und Spratley-Flotte erinnern. Zum Gedenken an diese Zeit sollten alle Tempel und Relikte der Flotte auf der Insel Lý Sơn erhalten werden. Die Reaktionen in der lokalen Gemeinschaft zeigen, dass die Aneignung von Lý Sơns Erbe durch den Staat die Inselbewohner dazu antrieb, die lokalen Überlieferungen so zu verändern, dass diese gleichzeitig staatlichen Forderungen, Gemeindeinteressen und den Zielen ihrer eigenen Lineages gerecht wurden. Der Schwerpunkt liegt hierbei auf den Prozessen der Aneignung und Veränderung von nationalen Narrativen durch die Inselgemeinschaft. Eben jene Prozesse eröffnen den ausgegrenzten Fischern von Lý Sơn neue Möglichkeiten, die durch die staatlichen Gedenkmaßnahmen zu Ehren der Paracel und Spratley Seeleute manifest wurden. Ein weiteres Thema ist die zögerliche Haltung zentraler und regionaler Behörden, Frauen in die Kategorie der ‚verdienstvollen Toten' aufzunehmen, weil deren Beitrag außerhalb des kommemorativen Moments der Paracel und Spratleys lag und nicht zu den vorherrschenden Narrativen des nationalen Erbes passte. Im Rahmen des vietnamesischen

neokonfuzianischen Verwandtschaftsmodells konnten allein Männer vollwertige Mitglieder der Patrilineage werden und damit die Interessen ihres Lineage oder auch das allgemeine Interesse der Gemeinschaft vertreten. Die religiöse Landschaft ist geschlechtsspezifisch strukturiert, da der Staat festgelegt hat, welche lokalen Helden zu den nationalen Narrativen passen und somit Teil der religiösen Landschaft werden konnten.

Aufbauend auf den Darstellungen vorangegangener Kapitel bietet Kapitel 8 eine Analyse dazu, wie Frauen im wirklichen Leben mit dem exklusiven Anspruch der Männer auf das Recht zur Gestaltung der religiösen Landschaft umgehen. Neben den Fischern wurden auch die Frauen als Gruppe im religiösen Raum des Dorfes diskriminiert, und auch sie nutzten die staatliche Kulturpolitik zu ihrem Vorteil. Die Angriffe des Parteistaates auf die religiöse Sphäre des Dorfes – in der männliche Verwandtschaftsbeziehungen eine große Rolle spielten – schwächten die Position der Patrilineages durch die Landkollektivierung, die (zumindest theoretische) Gleichstellung von Söhnen und Töchtern im Erbrecht, den teilweisen Ersatz der Ahnenverehrung durch nationale Gedenkfeiern und den Zugang von Frauen zu Bildung. Diese Umwälzungen der traditionellen Dorfordnung bot den Frauen die Gelegenheit, ihren sozialen Status sowohl innerhalb der Familien als auch in der vietnamesischen Gesellschaft allgemein zu stärken. Frauen sind daher als wichtige Akteure im Dorfgeschehen, aber auch in Bezug auf Aushandlungen in der religiösen Landschaft zu betrachten. Die Männer monopolisierten die prestigeträchtigsten religiösen Rollen, einschließlich geistlicher Ämter, in den Tempeln in Sa Huỳnh und Lý Sơn für sich, führten Ahnen- und Gemeinderiten durch und behielten sich die Definitionsmacht über religiöse Inhalte vor. Weibliche Dorfbewohner widersetzten sich der Dominanz der Männer zwar nicht offen; sie versuchten jedoch durch verschiedene regelwidrige Verrichtungen ihre Alltagsrealität, ihr Wissen in Bezug auf übernatürliche Mächte und ihre Beziehungen zu den Geistern aufzuwerten. Sie schufen sich dadurch ein Umfeld, das sie als Frauen einbezog, und konstruierten ihre eigene religiöse Authentizität – „die kulturelle Produktion der Wirklichkeit". Diese ‚Legitimierung' der weiblichen religiösen Identität ist eine geschlechtsspezifische Praxis, die auch Machtbeziehungen involviert, da die Frauen ihre neue rituelle Identität konstruierten und validierten und dabei die Grenze zwischen ‚dieser Welt' und ‚jener Welt' vom Standpunkt ihres eigenen Geschlechts überschritten hatten. Diese Schlussfolgerung ergänzt frühere Debatten, die – infolge des Sozialismus und postsozialistischer Reformen – einen Wandel des sozialen Status von Frauen innerhalb der Familie und der vietnamesischen Gesellschaft allgemein verzeichneten.

In Bezug auf weiter gefasste theoretische Diskurse zu Dorf, Gemeinschaft und Staat lässt sich feststellen, dass Menschen in lokalen Gemeinschaften im Bereich von alltäglichen Praktiken, die nicht der direkten Kontrolle des Staates unterliegen, nicht zwangsläufig mit Widerstand oder Anpassung reagieren. Vielmehr wenden sie Taktiken wie Ungehorsam und fortwährendes Neuverhandeln und Neuerfinden an. Mbembe nennt diese Taktik ‚indiscipline' als Gegensatz zu Foucaults Konzept der ‚discipline'. Ich wende hier ein, dass die Beziehung zwischen Staat und lokaler Gemeinschaft über die übliche Dichotomie von Widerstand und Dominanz hinausgeht und sich komplexer darstellt, als die dualistische Sichtweise vermuten lässt. Diese Konzeptualisierung der Beziehung zwischen ‚Herrschern' und ‚Beherrschten' ermöglichte es mir, letzteren mehr Handlungsmacht zuzuerkennen und deren Position gegenüber dem Staat neu zu überdenken.

Die Untersuchung einer ‚marginalen' Zone der südlichen zentralvietnamesischen Küste – dem Grenzgebiet nahe den umstrittenen Gebieten im südchinesischen Meer – hat gezeigt, dass der vietnamesische Zentralstaat nicht etwa schwächer wird, sondern mithilfe moderner Technologie und Kommunikation seine Präsenz verstärkt und auch abgelegene Territorien genau kontrolliert. Die räumliche und oft auch ökonomische Marginalität der Küstengemeinden erregte auch bei der Regierung in zunehmendem Maße Besorgnis, und man versuchte sie mittels verschiedener Entwicklungs- und Kulturprogramme einzubinden. Die lokalen Gemeinschaften verweigerten sich dem Staat hier nicht, sondern sie erprobten Wege, wie sie ihre *lokale Identität* mit dem Staat und seinen Kulturprojekten in Verbindung bringen konnten.

Die vorliegende Untersuchung zeigt auch, dass *Marginalität* ein Ausgangspunkt für Innovation sein könnte. Lokale Gemeinschaften neigen dazu, ihre Marginalität zu konstruieren. Sie berufen sie sich zum Beispiel auf ‚einzigartige spirituelle Traditionen', um so durch die staatlichen Kulturinitiativen Status und Prestige zu erlangen. Marginalität ist nicht nur relativ und umstritten, sie ist auch ein Konstrukt bestimmter Diskurse und Prozesse, in denen Individuen, Gruppen oder Orte als ‚marginal' erscheinen. Die Versuche des Parteistaates, eine stärker institutionalisierte und standardisierte Version von Religion zu schaffen, ist ein gutes Beispiel für einen solchen Prozess. Die religiöse Landschaft hat sich dabei als kreativer Raum mit lebhaften, ‚spirited' Dialogen, Verhandlungen und Aushandlungen erwiesen, in dem verschiedene Individuen und Gruppen ihre Handlungsmacht über Widerstand und Anpassung hinaus ausüben und ihre eigenen „kulturellen Projekte" zu verwirklichen suchen.

Eines der wichtigsten Ergebnisse der Untersuchung ist, dass Dorfbewohner der offiziellen Staatspolitik und nationalen Debatten nicht gleichgültig begegnen sondern dazu feste Meinungen haben. Die Aushandlungen der religiösen Landschaft beinhaltete das Geltendmachen lokaler Ansprüche in der Neugestaltung nationaler Narrative. Die Menschen in den Küstengemeinden schufen ihre Landschaft selbst und erfanden sie neu als einen wieder erkennbaren und religiösen Raum, indem sie sich vor dem Hintergrund von ständigem Wandel diskursiv und rituell ausdrückten. Wenn lokale Gemeinschaften sich – wenn auch nur zeitlich begrenzt – an komplexen nationalen Debatten beteiligen und eine soziale und politische Kraft darstellen, so ist dies nur möglich, wenn sie eine gewisse, vom ‚Zentrum' ausgehende Autorität akzeptieren, wie diese Arbeit zeigen konnte. Andererseits sind die Aktivitäten der Staatsmacht für diese Gemeinschaften nur dann von Bedeutung, wenn sie mit lokalen Vorstellungen verbunden werden können. Abschließend ist festzustellen, dass der Staat und die vietnamesische Gesellschaft gemeinsam Produzenten jener verhandelten und umstrittenen Praktiken und Narrative in der rezenten Wiederbelebung von Religion sind. Konfrontationen zwischen der Staatsmacht und Dorfbewohnern sind auf ganz bestimmte Bereiche der Verhandlungen und Aushandlungen beschränkt, abhängig sowohl vom Zentralstaat wie auch von lokalen Initiativen. Jene Bestandteile der lokalen und nationalen Geschichte, welche die vorherrschenden nationalen Narrative nicht untermauern, werden stillschweigend übergangen.

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My initial interest in Vietnam began in 2002 when I went there as part of a postgraduate program arranged by the Polish Ministry of Education and Sport. Since then, many individuals and institutions have helped me throughout this project. Before I thank them and acknowledge my gratitude and indebtedness for their constant support and patience, I will briefly describe how it happened that I decided to do research in Vietnam.

Some failures turn out to be our best friends. When in 2001 I failed to win a scholarship to China, I thought that I would have to give up my dream of doing research in the country which had long fascinated me. I was learning Chinese and wrote my master's thesis on Buddhism in China with a view to doing research there. During the same year, I began attending seminars on South-East Asia organized by Dr. Małgorzata Pietrasiak at the Institute of International Relationships (University of Łódź). "Why you don't apply to go to Vietnam?" she asked me. I had never thought about going to Vietnam and I knew very little about this country. Moreover, it was my last year of study at University and theoretically I was no longer eligible to apply. When I had almost given up the idea, my thesis supervisor Prof. Sławoj Szynkiewicz exclaimed: "More go-getting energy, Ms. Roszko!" Their enthusiasm, encouragement, support and trust helped convince the Dean of the University to allow me to submit my application. Ten months later, after my graduation, I received the reply from the Polish Ministry of Education and Sport in Warsaw that I had won! Without Prof. Szynkiewicz and Dr. Pietrasiak's help I would not be where I am now.

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Notes of Transliteration and Translation

Vietnamese is a tonal language. Formerly, the Vietnamese language was written using original Chinese characters—called *chữ Hán*—and a system of newly created and modified characters called *Hán-Nôm*, which rendered Vietnamese pronunciation. Through the 16th and the 17th centuries a romanized system called *Quốc Ngữ* was invented by Portuguese Christian missionaries and then developed by a French Jesuit, Alexandre de Rhodes. Under French colonial rule, the script became official and was required for all public documents, but it only became universally used when nationalists saw it as a tool in the fight against French colonial power. Present-day *Quốc Ngữ* consists of the standard English alphabet plus extra letters such as â ă, ê, ô, ơ, ư, đ. Diacritical marks indicate tones and particular vowel sounds. This means that six words, which could be identical but differ in tone, bear different meanings. For example, *tinh* means "sharp-witted," *tính* means "temper," *tình* means "affection," *tỉnh* means "province," *tĩnh* means "quiet" and *tịnh* means "absolutely." To avoid any semantic confusion, I chose to transcribe Vietnamese terms with diacritical marks. The only exceptions are Vietnamese words which will be familiar in English to the reader. Thus, I used Hanoi instead of Hà Nội, Ho Chi Minh City instead of Hồ Chí Minh, and Vietnam instead of Việt Nam.

In the text, terms in languages other than English are rendered in *italics*. The only exceptions are personal names and places. Each term is followed by an indication of its language and then by an English gloss of its meaning, or vice versa. Most of these words are Vietnamese, but some are Chinese. In addition, any foreign term in titles or subtitles is written in italics. Except for the names of the lineages and historical and public figures, all personal names are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise stated, all translations herein are mine.

Introduction: The Vietnamese Coast as Social and Cultural Landscape

Figure 1. Landscape of the coastal community of Sa Huỳnh, Central Vietnam, 2007

Imagine that you grew up in a village in Vietnam, and let's assume that it is the village located on the South Central Coast which I visited and where I ultimately decided to live for a year. Although I have ascribed you the role of someone who grew up in it, I am the one who is gradually uncovering particular fragments of the village setting. You are a villager and my knowledge of the landscape would be impossible without your familiarity with the place: this is how I learned to know the local world. Upon my arrival you take me to the hills from where I can look out across the rice fields, separated from the shoreline by a railway track, to the sea and the mountain above the water's surface which designates the entry to the village at the mouth of the river. At first glance this landscape seems static, even though my eyes capture a passing train, cars on the highway and ships leaving the harbor. It is difficult for me to see people, but beyond a doubt they are there, busy with their daily tasks. Knowing my interest is Vietnamese religious traditions, you point in the direction of the Forbidden [Cấm] *Mountain where a temple dedicated to the local goddess is located. You encourage me to go there and you offer yourself as my guide.*

You take me first to the place where the communal house or đình *stood. In the pre-colonial and colonial period it was the most important building of the village, where elders conducted communal ceremonies and discussed village matters. You remember from your childhood that you played with other children in the yard of the* đình, *which forms a wide square perfectly suited for all kinds of outdoor games. As a curious child, if a door was ajar, you often peeped through at the inner hall; your parents explained to you that the red altar embellished with curved ornaments you saw there was a seat for the village founders who had been venerated by subsequent generations. You know that the village elders for a long time were proud of preserving a royal certificate bearing the emperor's edict to promote the local deity* [sắc phong], *and through this document your community gained village status in the past. Once a year this certificate, with other sacred objects of the* đình, *was displayed during the village procession. Unfortunately, the villagers lost the royal charter in the chaos of the First or the Second Indochina War; no one remembers exactly when it happened or how. The* đình *was destroyed by villagers themselves in military operations and later during an anti-superstition campaign.*

Since you grew up in a coastal community, the seashore in your village must have a lăng *or temple of the fishermen's guardian spirit, colloquially called Mr. Whale, whose full title is High-ranking Spirit of the Southern Sea* [Nam Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Lân Thượng Đẳng Thần] *or Great General of the Southern Sea* [Nam Hải Đại tướng quân]. *Fishermen are proud*

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of another royal charter certifying their fishing community by the Emperor Gia Long who granted a royal title to the Whale Spirit. Perhaps you heard exciting stories about beached whales for which fishermen organize elaborate funerals. If you were lucky, you might have seen the burial of such a whale in the temple's yard. A few years later fishermen would take its bones out of the ground, clean them of any remaining flesh, and put them into a red wooden coffin. That is why the villagers call the temple lăng, *which means "tomb."*

The fact that your community worships whales does not exclude its participation in other cults. In the village, various religious traditions naturally overlap. For example, your grandmother on occasion might ask you to accompany her to the nearby Buddhist pagoda or chùa *where she chants sutras with other village women. Imagine that you are inside sitting with her in front of the main altar surrounded by numerous smaller ones. You feel overwhelmed by the variety of sacred statues gathered under one roof. If you are patient, a monk or nun explains to you that the ten thoughtful looking statues are the ten Kings of Hell who watch over the punishment of sinful souls in underworld, while two other images with menacing faces are the guardians of Buddhist teachings. The figure on the right, who watches over the offerings brought by the faithful, is the virtuous magistrate Ông Táo known as Kitchen God and messenger from Heaven. On the left side is the Earth Spirit, who protects the pagoda. And this is only the entrance hall. If you look around, among numerous images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats, you will see the Taoist Jade Emperor and his daughter, who is an assistant to the Goddess of Mercy* [Quan Âm], *the Golden Child who brings good luck. There is also a posterior altar nearby, where offerings are made for the souls of those who died recently or died without a family.*

If it was the first or the fifteenth day of a lunar month your grandmother would still take you to burn incense in the temple of the Thiên Y A Na goddess, which is located on the steep cliff of the bushy hill, right in front of the entrance to the village port. To get there you have to cross the channel, so she would ask the temple's gatekeeper to transport both of you. You might be a bit scared of the trip in a tung, *a sort of light round bamboo basket covered by pitch, which serves fishermen as a simple boat. But you make it safely to the other side. You climb up the slippery, seawater-washed rocks and gradually a view of the area emerges as you approach the gate leading to the Buddhist-Daoist and the Cham pantheon.*

In the vicinity you find worshiping platforms, graves and shrines [dinh miếu] *scattered along the seashore where worship of the cult for anonymous dead* [thờ âm hồn; âm linh; cô hồn; cô bác] *is carried out. In such places people from your village usually make regular*

offerings for those who died unexpectedly in an accident, did not have relatives to worship them, were killed in battles, and who died due to a natural calamity, an epidemic or died prematurely. Villagers are particularly concerned to establish peaceful coexistence with such souls because if neglected, they can turn into angry ghosts and harm the living. But there is never a guarantee that the modest offerings placed there will be sufficient for the suffering souls passing by. You explain to me that if their torments pass all bounds, they become demons or devils [ma; quỷ] who punish the living for being neglectful. That is why you never go alone to the seashore at dusk, as it is full of ghosts, especially the slimy phantoms of drowned bodies called Ma Da.

Another good example of how various local religious traditions do not naturally exclude each other is the presence of diverse religious specialists in the village. Your father once in a while visits a local "master in warding off perverted spirits" or thầy đuổi tà ma. *He is one of the few men who practices self-cultivation [tu thân]. Rumor has it that a fatal illness which he overcame radically changed him. Since then he acquired knowledge and developed a supernatural ability to cure illness and exorcise evil spirits. He is best known for creating amulets and talismans for small children, pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers. Your father brought such an amulet and now you are wearing it around your neck. Your father also believes that his talismans protect fishermen against storms, bad luck at sea, ensures good catches and prevents fatal illness. There are still a few other masters active in the village to whom your father and your neighbors might turn if they find themselves in need. One of them is a geomancer [thầy địa lý] who works with earth spirits [ông thổ Địa)] and on the basis of one's age and horoscope determines the proper direction and terrain for building a house or a tomb. There is also a "master in reading the future from the leg joints of the chickens" [thầy đóng đón chân gà]. He can predict whether a coming month or year will pass smoothly without incident.*

Recently, on New Lunar Year's Eve, a woman from your neighborhood was possessed by the Buddha Mother or Bà Phật Mẫu, the same one who is worshiped in the syncretic Cao Đài religion. Your mother remarked on groups of people waiting in front of her house. One of them said that the woman can cure sickness and writes charms dictated by the female deity. She is not the only spirit-medium in the village; there is another woman, much older than your neighbor who is also a "seat" for the Buddha Mother, as folks describe those possessed by a spirit. You do not know too much about the female deity who has power over the two women but your mother respects her a lot and has an altar with her image at home. She and

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your uncle follow the Cao Đài religion, worship deities of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, or even Victor Hugo or Sun Yat Sen and sometimes attend ceremonies in one of the few Cao Đài temples in the village.

In daily life religious activities center around the domestic cult of ancestors [tổ tiên] which are venerated with incense, flowers, fruits, food and prayer. In Central Vietnam each family has an ancestor altar that is located in the middle room of the house. For a long time, as in Chinese beliefs, women in Vietnam followed the patrilineal line of their husband and worshiped their husband's antecedents. However, in recent times ancestor worship is not restricted to male-dominated patrilineage, but might extend to other relatives such as daughters and daughters-in law. This week is special for your family: the anniversary of your paternal great-grandfather [giỗ cụ nội], organized in the house of your father's older brother [bác]. The old photos of your great-grandparents are displayed on the middle altar together with ancestor tablets, an incense bowl and other ritual objects. On the left there is smaller altar devoted to the grandparents [bàn thờ ông bà] of your father and your uncle. There is also a photo of your father's father that has been added quite recently. Three years after he died his altar was connected with the one honoring his parents in the "mourning ritual" [lễ mang tang]. On the right there is still another altar, lower than the other altars, that is devoted to your father's two youngest unmarried brothers and an uncle, all who died in motorbike accidents. The photo of the third one who also died in a similar way is hung in the house of his wife.

Above the main altar, your uncle installed a small altar dedicated to three Chinese warrior-deities [thần thánh]: Trương Phi, Lưu Bi and Quan Công. The choice of deities has to harmonize with the age of the head of the family. Some families prefer to have an altar with the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy called Quan Âm [Guan Yin]. The selection of a tutelary deity of each family is done through consultation with a geomancer or any other knowledgeable older man who determines the most suitable choice. However, none of these choices is rigid and in most cases they depend on individual preferences. For example, your mother's brother [cậu] prefers to hang a large picture with an image of the chairman Hồ Chí Minh above the main ancestor altar in his house. This is because of the "revolutionary tradition" among members of your mother's family. For instance, your maternal grandparent [ông ngoại] actively supported the Communists Revolution [theo cộng sản; theo Cách mạng Cộng sản]. The picture, decorated with flowers, imitates the boards with Chinese characters one can see in many Vietnamese temples.

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Besides a domestic cult of ancestors, many families worship a spirit who rules the ground around their house [thần quản lý đất]. *Nearly every household in your coastal village has a small altar installed in its yard called* nha trang *where the owner of the house makes sacrifices of fruits and incense for the Earth Spirit. At the beginning of the New Lunar Year your co-villagers organize a ritual of "praying for rain"* [cầu mua] *during which they ask the divinity to lend them the land for the next year and ensure their well-being. Worship of earth spirits exists together with strong deistic beliefs in supernatural power of mountains, trees, lakes, rivers, stones, tigers and the like. It is common to see offerings made in a small shrine located at the foot of a mountain or in a "sacred"* [linh thiêng] *tree.*

Villagers do not regularly attend temples to worship gods. There is no need for that. Nearly all of the village temples, except those run by monks and priests like Buddhist or Cao Đài temples, remain closed throughout most of the year. They are open during special occasions like village festivals, the god's anniversary, at full and new moon days or at a special individual request. This occasion could be a particular problem like sickness, travel abroad or business about which you wish to consult the divinity. In such cases the petitioner checks with the gatekeeper who is in charge of the temple about the most auspicious day to approach the god. Your parents, like most of the villagers, might not be present during village ceremonies performed by elders, but it does not mean that they are not concerned. To show their solidarity with the village they contribute money for ceremonies. As you grew older, you also realized that this was an essential part of maintaining your family's social position in the village and avoiding criticism from neighbors.

1.1   Introduction

Bronisław Malinowski began his famous monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961: 4) with the words: "Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village (…)." I adapted his method of presenting a field setting to open my Introduction and create an impression enabling the reader to "step in" and see villagers and their religious practices from their "native perspective" (ibid: 516). I started with a description of a few specific fragments of the religious landscape which exist in homes, neighborhoods, and the village of Sa Huỳnh. While the aim of the vignette was to give the reader a sense of religious differences that might be present within the same space, in the second part of this chapter I rather focus on connections that exist in the landscape and contestations that come to the fore in the intersections between community and state. The field of religion in Vietnam is intertwined with specific politics and history, but I leave this issue for a separate chapter (5) and begin by referring to the key debates about village, community and state in the Vietnamese context and then position myself in these debates. These theoretical discussions lead me to form my hypothesis and my main research question, which I address at the end of the second part of this chapter. In the subsequent part, I introduce in detail analytical concepts which I developed in order to answer the research question I pose. The chapter concludes with a short outline of individual chapters to come.

1.2   Theoretical debates about village, community and state

This thesis is a study of coastal communities in Central Vietnam and the multi-faceted 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 restriction that nearly erased them 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 economic liberalization, privatization and commercialization of everyday life, but also to a more favorable attitude toward "folk religion" [*tín ngưỡng dân gian*], which in the last two decades has gained the status of national culture and tradition. As a result, religious practices, invigorated by growing economic prosperity due to the country's modernization and a noteworthy shift in the state's 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 maintained before the reforms, still tries to regulate the place of religion in society by standardizing and instrumentalizing religious practice to provide moral and cultural reinforcement for its Marxist-Leninist principles and policies. Therefore, in my thesis, I seek to highlight the process by 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 groups (such as religious specialists, lineages and local officials) within local communities (see also Kipnis 2001; DuBois 2005; Hann et al. 2006; Chau 2006, 2008; Pelkmans 2009; for Vietnam see e.g., Do 1997; Endres 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008; Malarney 2002, 2003, 2007; Taylor 2004; Kwon 2006, 2009; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Salemink 2010). By *religious landscape* I understand a process in which local community transforms and controls its environment through daily ritual tasks. (I will elaborate upon this concept in the third part of this chapter). 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 landscape emerge through particular engagements and negotiations.

The current ritual intensification in Vietnam inscribes itself in a wider phenomenon of religious revival taking place all over Asia, proving that secular theories which predicted that religion would disappear in an era of modernization and rationalization were incorrect (Durkheim 1995; Weber 2001; Marx 1986; see also 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 attempts 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; Iannaconne 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 to a general trend across all of Asia (see e.g., Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999), Vietnam provides a compelling case study. This is because religious activities here have been revived under circumstances of both 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 Communist-led Vietnamese state integrated the country into the global economy and abandoned socialist practices, 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 a predominant 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. Since religion in Vietnam is linked with a particular political, historical and social context, I will reserve this discussion for Chapter 5.

The contemporary meaning of religion for individuals and their strategies to articulate and position themselves against the backdrop of state policies can be explored in-depth by considering local communities. The vast majority of rural studies by foreign scholars in Vietnam (e.g., Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh) were carried out in a few provinces in the Red River Delta, but not in Central Vietnam. Contrary to this tendency to focus on Northern Vietnam, the main ethnographic material for this dissertation was collected on the South Central Coast, which was formerly a part of the U.S-allied South. I focus on two fishing communities—Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn—of the coastal province Quảng Ngãi (Central Vietnam) that I refer to as a "littoral society" due to its location on a 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 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 to 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 the people in this littoral society. At the same time, due to a decrease in other marine and agrarian resources needed to secure a more stable socio-economic position on the seashore, villagers look for new sources of income and, as a result, have become integrated into a wider economic context (see e.g., Kleinen 1999, 1999a). They have also been caught up in new programs of development and modernization through which the government justifies its intervention into rural areas. Anthropological debates in the last few decades have initiated thinking about local communities as partly constituted by the demands of the modern state actively reworking their local structures. I will refer to these debates later in this chapter, and here I want to emphasize 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 such places in particular—often considered the weakest points of the state—are the targets of the political and cultural programs of the state (see e.g., Tsing 1993; Scott 1998; 2009; Li 1999; Duncan 2004; Horstmann and Wadley 2006; Cummings 2006; Chou 2006, 2006a, 2010). 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 littoral societies' contemporary religious practices are inscribed in the rich texture of everyday concerns, national debates and international negotiations. The value of my approach lies in its 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 situated within and across international, national and local interests. Their engagement in these dialogues, that occasionally take the shape of contestations and negotiations over the issue of what could be considered proper religious practice, suggests that people in Vietnam are far from indifferent towards official politics and in fact have strong opinions about it.

More generally, this thesis is consistent with current anthropological studies exploring the religious resurgence in Vietnam. It is no surprise that the relationship between state and religion constitutes one subject that demands attention in most ethnographic accounts, especially those referring to 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 fact 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).

Above all, however, the study of religious revival and the growing role of religion requires taking into consideration the issue of local communities' engagement with religion and the state's cultural agenda in diverse ways. At this point it is necessary to say a few words about the "village community," a notion 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 1936, 1940; McAlister and 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.[1] Samuel Popkin (1979), in *The Rational Peasant*, roundly criticized Scott's romantic image of harmony and mutual assistance among villagers and emphasized that in rural Vietnamese society, contradictory interests, internal conflicts and differentiation existed. He argued that peasant behavior 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 a space for rethinking the concept of the village seen as 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 now appears as more diverse, autonomous and active in everyday practices of resistance, collaboration or complicity (Comaroff 1985;

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[1] Salemink (2003) shows that the so-called moral and political economy debate had its roots in the Vietnam War.

Scott 1985, 1990; Mitchell 1990; Mbembe 1992, 1992a; Tsing 1993; Li 1999, 2010). Jan Breman (1988:19-21) aptly points out that in the case of Southeast Asian 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 (1999a) 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 its 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. With fewer incentives available 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 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 rethink the village concept and look at the village not only as a "locality" within closed territorial borders, but also as an entity increasingly involved in "expanding market forces" (Kleinen 1999a: 26-27; see also Luong 2009).

1.3 *Espace social*: Religion, environment and society

Exploring vernacular expressions of religion requires consideration not only of the historical, political, and economic aspects that shape the contemporary religious landscape, but also the

people's relationship with their local environment. Although there have been many attempts in ethnographic accounts to take the cultural map of the environment into account—the process of investing the environment with meaning and rendering it manuable through religion and ritual (Johnson 1977; Acheson 1981; Akyeampong 2001; Hoeppe 2007)—it hardly ever happens that religion itself is a central issue guiding the analysis of such works. On the other hand, a vast group of studies on religion tends to underline interconnections between history, politics and economy, but often ignores the environment as a vital element playing an active role in contemporary religious life. In this thesis I shall show that the relationship of local people with their environment provides an important key to understanding local beliefs and people's actions and sheds more light on local negotiations over the religious landscape.

One of the most influential approaches drawing our attention to various dynamics that determine a living space in Southeast Asian societies is framed in the concept of *espace social* [social space] proposed by Georges Condominas (1980). He recaptures a complex set of relationships and intersections that exist in social space, such as those between space and ecological time, with the natural environment, economy, technology, societal and family systems, and religion (Eisenbruch 1992; see also Hanks 1982; Heusch 2000). More importantly, Condominas shows that such an *espace social* is not fixed but can be expanded, contradicted or nested. For Condominas and others who follow his approach, the ethnographic analysis of a given society must include regional and cultural sceneries, their interrelated systems instead of isolated units apart from their social environment (Heusch 2000: 108). Hanks (1982: 879) points out that Condominas's *espace social* grasps more than "the villages, fields, and forest that can be represented on a map" but, above all, contains "a temporal dimension, the span from a people's conceived genesis to the present or possibly the time span in which the people are living," and includes their networks with other groups and a distant central power.

I could not help but form the impression that Condominas's *espace social* very much corresponds to the notion of *Kula*—a complex institution of the Papuo-Melanesian groups studied by Malinowski (1961) and presented in his monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* that brought him international recognition in the field of social science. Briefly, Malinowski described the *Kula* as a form of intricate inter-tribal contacts, relationships between several communities and activities such as exchange of gifts, magic, ritual ceremonies, feasting, constructing canoes and sailing. Through presenting the complex local

conditions that constituted the *Kula*, he showed that domains that are usually seen as separate in the modern world—such as economy, politics, religion and natural environment—in New Guinea societies intersected with each other and created an interconnected whole.

Marcel Mauss' (1990) classical essay *The Gift* was much inspired by Malinowski's study of the *Kula*. In his reply to Malinowski, Mauss argued that gifts were never pure and always entailed reciprocity. However, the vital point here, which I found particularly fruitful for my own research, is that Mauss demonstrated how certain aspects of a "primitive society," treated in social science as separated units, came together in the gift cycle. Kinship, wealth, prestige, economy, environmental factors and religion are intricate parts of cycles of exchanges and constitute a "total social phenomenon."

Therefore, inspired by Condominas' work, but also by insights into the classical works of anthropology, I do not follow tendencies that favor the logic of debates on the "isolated units" of religion, politics and economy, and I intend to show that they operate in tandem with the issues related to the natural environment. Through emphasizing their complex connections and intersections, I hope to reveal the heterogeneity of both state and people and their intricate relations in which they form each other within and across local and national concerns and show that none of them exists in a static and homogenous form.

Instead of a classical village study in which environment is usually relegated to the general introduction that sketches the physical and cultural geography of a setting in order to "set the stage for human drama" (D'Arcy 2006:12), I draw my analysis of religion and local community from the perspective of human-environment relations, since people in littoral societies construct their religious landscape and cosmology through the everyday use of land and sea. Michael Pearson (2003: 39) notes that "folk religion on the littoral (…) is to be distinguished from inland manifestations. The concerns of coastal people differ from those of peasants or pastoralists inland. On the coast religion expressed itself in maritime ceremonies to ensure safe voyages, favorable monsoon, and good catches." The approach that takes into account contemporary people living by the sea, called in Malay-Indonesian phraseology "*Orang Laut*" might be more common in the ethnography of Oceania (e.g., Hviding 1996; D'Arcy 2006) and island Southeast Asia (e.g., Reid 1999; Chou 2003, 2010; Tagliacozzo 2005) but is still rather new for Vietnam. Drawing on innovative works whose conceptual frameworks bridge the gaps between anthropology, history, human geography, and ecology (Bender 1993; Hirsh 1995; Li 1999; Tsing 1999; Ingold 2000; Pearson 2003; Halemba 2006),

I aim to weave together physical and cultural worlds that make up the territory of the research people I studied.

Particularly, there is still a lack of anthropological studies on Vietnam that bring into focus fishing communities and coastal zones; not to mention that most of these works choose terrestrial areas of the relatively prosperous North and South as the most representative in the studies of religious revival. Charles Wheeler (2006) notes that the classic tripartite division of Vietnam into North, Center, and South metaphorically characterized by "'two rice baskets on a pole' – to describe the agrarian rich North and South held together by the poor but hard-working Centre" is still alive in many historical accounts (2006: 129-130). In view of those accounts, the Center—poor in arable land—exists only as a bridge between North and South. In contrast, North and South "remain history's agents and the arbiters of Vietnamese cultural identity" (ibid: 130), development and modernization. As a consequence of this terrestrial bias, the poor and undeveloped region of the South Central Coast is presently neglected by most foreign anthropologists (with the exception of Kwon 2009).

Marginal zones call for more attention since the Vietnamese state is strongly determined to establish "political and social stabilization, national security and welfare for people living especially in the mountainous, remote areas, border areas and islands, [and] in the regions where natural calamities are common (…)."[2] Complementary to James Scott's *The Art of not Being Governed* (2009) on the highland areas connecting Central, South, East and Southeast Asia, we can conceive of the sea as one of the last refuges of "non-governance." The South China Sea is now being enclosed by surrounding states; therefore, the study of marginal zones could contribute theoretically to the current work on border zones and frontier regions that is growing rapidly. Nevertheless, it is still underrepresented in studies on the South China Sea.

I have an ambition to help fill this gap. I believe that the narratives about the harsh environment, unbearable climate, conservatism of inhabitants and lack of modern technology—the absolute and relative remoteness—of Central Vietnam could be a subject of anthropological analysis and shed new light on the contestations of religious domain. Given that the area I have chosen for my study of religion against the backdrop of socio-economic transformation is not representative and "ordinary" but rather denotes an extreme, unusual and unsettled situation, the process of the intersections of religion, economy, politics and

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[2] See, for example, Document of the 8th Congress of the Communist Party 1996 and Resolution of the 6th Central Communist Party 1998 in Phan Si Man, *Development of Rural Infrastructure and its Impact on the Livelihood of People Living in Poverty*; retrieved 22.07.2010 from http://202.244.105.132/English/Publish/Download/Asedp/pdf/071_5.pdf

ecology could, I argue, find better visibility in just such a situation. Such a constellation of cultural factors present in other regions of Vietnam might be particularly visible in locations where the state struggles to tighten its grip and increase its presence.

I took my inspiration to conceptualize the relationship between state and community from the literature mainly referring to the frontier societies of Southeast Asia (Leach 1954; Kirsch 1973; Tsing 1993, 1999; Horstman and Wadley et al. 2006; Li 2000; Scott 2009). I found it useful to apply some of its fascinating insights to the coastal communities living on the *borders* because they, similar to frontier societies, are located far from the political centers of power. Anthony Giddens (1985: 50) distinguishes between *frontiers* and *borders,* aptly pointing out that frontiers describe peripheral and sparsely inhabited areas chiefly because of the "general inhospitality of the terrain." They were characteristic of traditional and premodern states where the "political authority of the centre [was] diffuse or thinly spread" but could be also found in the modern nation-states. Their presence indicates the state's "relatively weak level of system integration" (ibid: 52).[3] In most cases, borders, in turn, only appeared with the emergence of modern nation-states. Borders are limits of a state's sovereignty, clearly delineated even though their nature could be fluid as they are located on the edges of the modern state, often the sea (cf. Winichakul 1994). Borders, in contrast to frontiers, transmit a state presence through military posts, border guards, custom checkpoints, and/or military maneuvers**.** Analogically, the communities living in border areas, which by their nature might be politically and socially heterogonous, are the subject of the administrative domination of the state (Giddens 1985). The spatial marginality of these communities is a growing concern of the state, which tries to incorporate them through various development programs. Moreover, in the context of an imagined or real threat of foreign aggression, not only development plans lie behind the state's attempts, but also a geopolitical strategy with its aims to tightly control territories located on the margins of state influence (De Koninck in Duncan 2004: 13).

At this point it is necessary to consider that the sea coast could be both a natural frontier and a border, a space highly protected and secured (Bartlett and Smith 1999). As Darius Bartlett and Jennifer Smith note, the shore typically denotes the division between national (land) and international (water) space. Giddens (1985) made an interesting observation that some of the modern borders that lie in the marginal zones such as deserts, seas, mountain chains, swamp or marshland, rivers, forests and islands frequently form

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[3] For the classical study of frontier society see Frederick Turner (1994 [1893]) and for a comparative frontier history see Lamar and Thompson (1981).

primary settlements' frontiers. However, gradually their "wild" environment had been inhabited by dominant groups that, on occasion, took over a land from its previous inhabitants.

People in such peripheral zones rarely recognize themselves as marginal. There is nothing new in the idea that people in every society perceive themselves as being at the center of the universe, the one that they see and experience. At the same time, they recognize other universes as existing, and sometimes as more powerful than themselves (Anderson 1991: 13). Anna Tsing (1993), in the case of the Meratus Dayak communities living in the mountain and forest area of South Kalimantan, Indonesia, convincingly shows that *marginality* is not just a construct of center/periphery dichotomy, but rather could be defined as a *process*.[4] She demonstrates that marginality might be the starting point for innovations: people might seek to overcome their marginal status, enter into complex national debates and constitute, if only temporarily, a kind of political and social force pronounced in discourses that search for their own context.[5] Therefore, *marginality* is not constructed by the powerful state but rather shaped exactly in the process of the intersection of state rule, the formation of regional and ethnic identities and gender differentiation (Tsing 1993). In other words, it is not a stable condition or only a function of location, or of a label given by those in the centers of power, but rather it exists as the construct of particular discourses and particular processes in which a certain location might appear distant, undeveloped or remote (ibid.).

Russell Ferguson (1991) reminds us that the discussion about marginality should be followed by the question: *marginal to what*? Taking his point, I assume that the spatial and social isolation of *communities* is always relative: like the marginality of Central Vietnam *vis-à-vis* the North and South; and of an island (Lý Sơn) *vis-à-vis* mainland communities; or traditional *vis-à-vis* modern; of fishermen in relation to farmers; or women versus men; and even of local *spirits*—such as female goddesses (often thought to belong to deistic beliefs)—versus national heroes; or ghosts *versus* patrilineage ancestors (venerated according to

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[4] The Dayak is one of the most marginalized groups, which in the 1970s became the subject of the state authoritarian policy and various development programs. The state intervention in the nomadic communities of the Meratus Mountains aimed to domesticate the tribal peoples who, in the state officials' view, "have not been yet ordered" and bring them to civilization by moving them into resettlement villages, often established on the coast, and making forested land available for national use. It is noteworthy that in Indonesia, coastal zones are associated with the civilized and developed culture of the Muslim population that for centuries has established its power and monopolized trade (Li 1999). In Vietnam, however, the Mekong and Red River Deltas are considered to be the cradle of the Vietnamese wet rice civilization and culture, while the coast and maritime activities remain culturally marginal. I will develop this point in Chapter 4.

[5] For example, as modernization produces marginality and, in consequence, in the modern era some regions and places emerge as "marginal" and "backward," the state homogenizing agenda might provoke among communities a sort of marginality expressing itself in the form of local identity and invented tradition (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Such marginality might be used by various members of communities as a source of creativity and/or to make themselves visible (Tsing 1993: 18).

Confucian practices). Marginality could be turned into a creative force that challenges central hegemonies (Ferguson 1991). These linked "asymmetries" of state order, social status, gender, or spiritual hierarchy are not clear-cut or firm categories (Tsing 1993).[6] As Tsing notes, in everyday practice, destabilized by those who remain on the margins, these categories not only intersect with each other in intricate ways but also change over time.

Marginality appears as a relative and contested matter. Neither are centers of power homogeneous entities, nor are people passive victims of more powerful agendas. Rather, they have "strong alternative views (...) about their own importance and agency in the world" (Keane 1997: 37). People might talk about their marginality in terms of distinctiveness. However, it is unlikely that they do so in terms of opposition. They also might seek to exercise their agency by accomplishing their own "culturally constituted intentions, desires, and projects" (Ortner 2006: 142) in order to overcome a perceived marginal status. Therefore, *marginality* could be understood also as *locality* (Keane 1997: 38). In other words, people may construe their marginal(ized) locality in terms of a "unique spiritual tradition" but they also realize that its recognition largely depends on integration within the national narrative (Ferguson 1991; Tsing 1993, Cummings 2006). Keane (1997: 38) argues that if local communities generate their own context, and negotiate, articulate and represent their identity, it implies the acceptance of some of the authority emanating from the capital city, the nation, or the global economy. The activities of those authorities, producing a "frame of reference," are only meaningful for communities when they are combined with people's views. The future and prospects for growth are often subjects of anxiety for both local officials and local people. For that reason, the places usually considered peripheral and weak by the state, represent more clearly the patterns of heterogeneity of state and community and the local politics and agendas in the context of contestations over the religious landscape. Such contestations are grounded in negotiations that do not rest on a singular view but on multiple views originating within the state and local communities themselves.

In his examination of general states' attempts and eventual failures to improve human conditions, including some of the 20th century utopian projects like collectivization in Soviet Russia or the lesser-known project of the forced sedentarization of millions of Tanzanian people in *Ujama* villages, James Scott (1998) argues that the state is inclined to arrange and

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[6] Tsing talks about asymmetries between individuals and groups. Following Godelier (1984), Van der Grijp (1993: 8-9), who connects asymmetry with social inequality, explains that it "can exist at any of a number of levels within a society: between the sexes, between age and kinship categories, between classes or between ethnic groups."

make society legible in order to stretch its capacity. Inspired by Scott's argument, my main hypothesis is that the modern Vietnamese state is inclined to simplify society in order to standardize complex and diverse vernacular classifications and hence make landscapes and people legible and controllable. I will return to this point in Chapter 5 when I show how Scott's argument works for my own analysis of the state policy in Vietnam.[7]

In this study my aim is to analyze how, in the context of the "state simplification" process, the local community appropriates official narratives and how friction and tensions between various local categories within the community itself challenge and contribute to the process of generating their own context: the *locality* (Ortner 1995; Keane 1997; Li 2000). I assume that the "local community" is composed of people who are neither uniform nor necessarily harmonious, since they are divided not only by age, gender and class but also by different aims and aspirations (Ortner 2006). These groups and individuals often have conflicting understandings and strategies to achieve their goals. Moreover, the people in the locality are not just confronted with the state *per se* but with its multiple representatives in the shape of central, provincial, or local officials, scholars and journalists with diverse visions and positions in their social networks (Kerkvliet et al. 2003; Salemink forthcoming). Therefore, the process of constructing its own religious landscape must be more than just a mechanical reaction by the community or, simply, its adaptation to the state policy. This led me to formulate my main **research question**:

> *How do people in Vietnam's littoral society create and (re)invent their landscape as a recognizable social and religious space against the backdrop of "state simplification" projects and restrictive state cultural policies?*

In order to answer my research question, I must first formulate my analysis around three closely inter-connected analytical concepts: *littoral society, religious landscape, and the changing and changeable cosmological landscape*. Second, I structure my thesis around three axes that help me to pursue my line of argumentation. The first axis—**cross-denominational**—examines how various beliefs and religious practices are interconnected and mutually influencing, overlapping, and conflicting. The second—**spatial**—charts how ritual, spiritual, religious and cosmological ecologies link and give meanings to various places.

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[7] In Chapter 5 I address in greater detail Scott's argument and its relevance to my own material. Through an analysis of the state policy in Vietnam I trace the process of simplification and standardization of popular forms of religiosity.

Finally, the third axis—**temporal**—traces how changes in the political, economic, and social domains engender changes in the religious and cosmological landscape. By linking and weaving these axes together with my three analytical concepts, I attempt to explore how categories like nation, state, politics, economy, history, religion, and environment intersect in everyday life.

1.3.1 *Littoral society*

Long ago, Marcel Mauss (1904-5[1979]) in his classical monograph titled *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology*, argued that land does not produce cultural effect in itself, but must be considered in relation to a social context in all its complex totality. It cannot be treated as isolated from society. This statement must also work the other way around. Mauss' pioneering attempt to knit together the land and the people has its proponents in the anthropological field who seek to break with the view that separates people and land as "qualitatively different ontological entities" (Halemba 2006: 3; see also Condominas 1980; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Hirsch 1995; Humphrey 1995; Ingold 2000). In an attempt to interweave physical and cultural domains, these authors accordingly bring into focus different aspects that form the complex relationship between people and the land.

"Landscape" as a conventional Western notion is usually used in human science to refer to physical environment, a particular "way of seeing," or the idealized world of the painter's representation (Hirsch 1995). Yet, these definitions present landscape as something rather static and do not grasp that it "exists as a part of everyday social life" (Hirsch 1995: 5). My intention in this thesis is to illustrate that the landscape is a "historical process of interaction between people and the environment in which both are shaped" (Allerton 2009: 236). Such a conceptualization brings a different perspective to the "landscape," which neither refers to a natural surface of the earth with its physical features like mountains, valleys and sea, nor to a cultural representation, or a "cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolizing surroundings" (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988: 1). Tim Ingold (2000) in his *Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skills* notes the qualitative and diverse character of landscapes and argues that landscapes exist and take on meaning in relation to people. In a nutshell, "landscape" is a social construction and a cultural process (see also Hirsch 1995).

Taking into account my argument that peripheral places can provide significant knowledge about the state's agenda and people's responses, I consider in my analysis both landscape and people. I understand "landscape" as a "familiar domain of human dwelling"

which, through living therein, it becomes a part of people as people are a part of the "landscape" (Ingold 2000: 191). By referring to coastal communities as "littoral society," I attempt to interlink the physical and the cultural, illuminating different aspects of the complexities that exist between people and the land.

I have already noted that the coast could serve both as a natural frontier and a border. Due to the presence of the sea, which facilitates circulation of people and trade, the coast is a form of border that cannot be separated and closed off (Hviding 1996; Pearson 2003; D'Arcy 2006). In recent times, historians have emphasized that for the people living along coasts, the sea is not a barrier but a zone of connections. One of the most powerful images of Southeast Asia, albeit not without serious analytical limitations, draws on Braudel's model of the Mediterranean region's focus on the sea as a unifying and integrating factor.[8] According to this view, different regions in Asia, including Southern and Southeastern China and Southeast Asia, are connected across the South China Sea (Sutherland 2003: 14). The seductive power of the Mediterranean analogy lies in its liberation from the "political borders" concept and how it opens a new space to explore connections and borrowings, and continuity and change beyond the imposed boundaries of the Southeast Asian territory (2003: 17).

In his study of the Indian Ocean, Michael Pearson (2003: 27) notes that the ocean "both facilitated and constrained the circulation of people, who carried with them goods and ideas." He points out that it is not just the water that provides unity but, above all, people themselves. In most cases, "means of travel, movement of people, economic exchange, climate, and historical forces" are considered by many scholars to be those elements that created unity while "religion, social system and cultural traditions provided the contrasts" (Chaudhuri 1985 in Pearson 2003: 6). Pearson (2003) challenges this view by stressing that many areas owe their character to interactions and connections within these "contrasts." Cross-cultural integration is not only made up of migration, commerce or conquest but also of ideological and cultural flows. He pleads for thinking more in terms of connections than divisions since for him the ocean acts as "transmitter for disease, religion, tourists, goods, information, not just pepper and cotton clothes" (2003: 8).

Because the coast is not a solid line but a fluid zone that can be penetrated and contested, the society in such a contact zone has to be fluid and flexible as well (Pearson 1985, 2003; Hviding 1996; Li 2006; Whitmore 2006; Wheeler 2006; D'Arcy 2006; Hardy 2009;

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[8] For the analysis of advantages and limitations of Braudel's works for Southeast Asian historians, see Sutherland 2003.

Chou 2010; Salemink 2011). Therefore, by stressing the role of the sea without separating it from the land and people, I argue that the seashore is an open and flexible space where beliefs, ideas, and goods constantly circulate and where a particular style of life is exercised (Pearson 1985). Following Pearson (1985), Li (2006) and Wheeler (2006) I have glossed Quảng Ngãi seashore as a *littoral society*.

1.3.2 *Religious landscape*

Bender (1993: 2) argues that landscapes operate on very different spatial scales: horizontally across the earth's surface and vertically, "up to the heaven [and] down to the depths." However, a landscape is not only a space but also has a time dimension through its multilateral engagement with the past and the future and through its re-creation in ritual and local narratives (Bender 1993; Hirsch 1995; Ingold 2000). Ingold (2000: 194) highlights the "fundamentally temporal" quality of the landscape. Landscape "enfolds the lives and times of predecessors, who, over generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its *formation*" (2000: 189; emphasis added). Evoking both the flows and hard work of creating closure and stability, much like Arjun Appadurai's famous "scapes" (1996), Ingold (2000: 194-201) introduced the concept of "taskscape" that denotes "patterns of dwelling activities" and their temporality.

Ingold's idea that the "taskscape" constitutes an integral component of landscape led me to look at the activities related to religion such as building, renovation, maintaining sacred spaces, conducting ceremonies, evoking and consulting spirits, making offerings and the like, as kinds of "taskcapes." They include all practical operations carried out by people in the littoral society in order to be in command of their life by exercising a certain control over their local world. Such activities enacted in the landscape constitute a *religious landscape*. I am aware that Ingold's concept of "taskscape" as it includes human technical and social practices, is much wider than my focus on the religious side of human activities. However, by focusing mainly on religious activities as particular aspects of the "taskscape," I aim to show more explicitly that they might be contested by the state authorities who want to organize a *religious landscape* and make it fixed and strictly defined. More specifically, the state/government selects spirits, assigns sacred spaces and grants certificates in order to "pin down" gods and make them both nationalized and institutionalized (cf. Halemba 2006). In such a situation, the *religious landscape* takes on a whole new dimension in which *political* implications are played out and provoke contestations that may occur over the landscape.

1.3.3 The *changing and changeable cosmological landscape*

Catherine Allerton (2009: 237) offered a new perspective on the entanglement of landscapes and human lives when she introduced the concept of "spiritual landscape," drawing attention to "how people imagine spirit forces and energies to emerge from or to be connected to places, and to the attitudes that people may have to 'hidden' or mysterious realms lying beyond, behind or immanent within the visible earth." She explains that the notions of "spiritual landscape" grasp an important feature, namely that the landscape continues to be granted a spiritual role even if the role of spirits diminishes.

A "spiritual landscape" is not necessarily what one would recognize as "religious" (Allerton 2009: 238), not a façade of temples and shrines that can be measured, described, and depicted, but a culturally constructed world of imaginative, temporal and flexible relationships with gods and spirits that exist above and below the earthly surface and beyond physical boundaries. People's cosmological beliefs that constitute their "lifeworld" (Ingold 2000) convey messages about the landscape itself and provide them with moral and cultural instructions. The "lifeworld" shapes and is shaped by everyday practice and thus remains a flexible system that embodies continuously reconfigured knowledge of the world of humans and gods. Discursively, this knowledge might be modified in accordance with the changing state's agendas or with the economic and historical context, but it might also significantly influence and inscribe local terrains and geographical space. This is pertinent to Southeast Asia where spirits-beings and energies of the landscapes are engaged in everyday life and evolved their own spatial logic well before the rigid grids of the state's territoriality (Yang 2004; Allerton 2009).

By introducing the concept of "spiritual landscapes," Allerton stresses that for many Southeast Asian people the landscape has agency, but I emphasize cosmological continuity and interdependence that may exist within a larger territory. Underlying the phenomenon that a cosmological terrain goes beyond the boundaries delineated by modern cartography and might change depending on historical, political, or economic factors, I propose to call it a *changing and changeable cosmological landscape.*

To sum up, by formulating and applying these three concepts I am taking landscape to a broader sense as (1) not just a surface of the physical earth and sea, but the surface upon which humans live and because of that, the landscape cannot be separated from them: this is *littoral society*; (2) the surface which people seek to transform and control through their daily

ritual tasks: *religious landscape*; (3) and the surface which they repeatedly seek to transcend: *changing and changeable cosmological landscape*. These three concepts are useful analytical tools which enable me to carry out my analysis of how people situated in different ecological, economic and political niches draw meaning from their coastal environment and thus create, re-invent and contest the space around them, proving in all these cases their agency and creativity.

1.4   Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 2 deals with fieldwork and methodology. Drawing on Malinowski's ethnographic field methods, I explain reasons for my choice of two littoral communities in Central Vietnam. Like Malinowski, who presented the individual islands scattered in the ocean as one territory within the sphere of the trading system of the *Kula*, I argue that Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn located in Quảng Ngãi Province of Vietnam's southern-central coast stem from part of a single cosmological landscape and formed the interconnected "littoral society" in which the sea acted as transmitter of beliefs. By looking at the two sites I am able to form a more complex picture of the multi-faceted contestation over religious landscape taking place against the backdrop of changes in the ecology, the economy, and in politics. Furthermore**,** by emphasizing the field site's marginality, not only in a geographical but also a cultural sense, I also point out my own difficulties in obtaining access to my chosen settings. Finally, this chapter introduces my own advantages and limitations in doing fieldwork in Central Vietnam and discusses methods I have used in order to answer the research questions I posed.

In **Chapter 3** I describe the rural settings of coastal Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn Island. I start by drawing a general picture of Quảng Ngãi Province and each of the settings, providing historical and social background for my study of the local religious domain. I point out the continuity of Kinh (Việt) people in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn with the Cham culture and its seafaring legacy. I also emphasize that in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn borders and place names have changed repeatedly, and the religious and cosmological landscape cannot be deduced from the administrative frame. Understanding diverse local dynamics is therefore indispensable for grasping the complexity of the religious revival in the communities in question. Furthermore, by introducing historical, economic and environmental factors shaping the local landscape, I show how life on the coast is bound with the sea and has submitted to its rhythm, defining the concerns of the villagers. Description of present-day economic activities

gives the reader a sense of everyday concerns, potential conflicts and problems in the contemporary rural environment. In turn, the introduction of religious sites into the two settings provides the basis for more nuanced analysis of the socio-religious organizations of the littoral society in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 looks at what it means for people in Central Vietnam's littoral society to have two main livelihoods—farming and fishing—within their communities. More precisely, this chapter examines how this distinction became the basis for constructing and maintaining, but also deconstructing, a social and ritual dichotomy between *land* and *sea* activities in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn. I detail the social differences between farmers and fishermen that were established through religious ceremonies and the erection of separate temples which marked spiritual and hierarchical boundaries between the land-based village and the fishing community. Such distinctions between sea and land activities that were preserved in the social and religious organizations of the littoral society did not exclude the possibility that these two types were in a constant state of flux. By looking at Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn together I conclude that they are not permanent and stable identities: they change in one direction or another depending on the social context. Prospects of profit or migration, to give just a few examples, might provoke a tendency toward "segmentation" and in such a new situation different social units might see each other as one. I also argue that the recent enhancement of the fishermen's economic position v*is-à-vis* the farmers and their ritual investment in agricultural temples suggest that fishermen are not just a disadvantaged group, but that they exploit the situation in a way that helps them demonstrate their growing social status. By resisting exclusive ritual control by the "village seniors" of the land-based village, fishermen partly reversed the tables and overturned the old hierarchy.

By providing a detailed description of socio-religious organizations in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn from a human-environment perspective, **Chapter 5** analyzes how to conceptualize religion in the Vietnamese context. It opens with a discussion of religion in Vietnam in the post-Socialist context and shows important differences between Vietnamese religious traditions and monotheistic modes of religiosity in Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Russia. While I point out the limited relevance of the analyses glossed as "postsocialist studies" to my own material, I also show how my case study, which does not simply fit into those debates, could contribute to the general discussion on "postsocialism." Furthermore, following Talal Asad's (1993, 2001) argument that religion was historically constituted and its concept and terminology derived mainly from the Christian background, I pay more attention to local

religious practices that I believe are pivotal in conceptualizing religion in Vietnam. I argue that religion in Vietnam was formed as a local, *emic* category in the context of colonial hegemony and Western intellectual influence. Such a process required the reformulation of practices and social meanings of religious traditions in congruence with the Western idea of religion and the design of new measures aimed at controlling such practices. Drawing inspiration from Scott's (1998) argument that modern states are inclined to simplify society in order to standardize the complex and diverse vernacular classifications and hence make landscapes and people legible, I analyze how in the case of Vietnam the state incorporates, regulates, and standardizes the religious landscape through administrative procedures and cultural policies. Last but not least, I introduce strategies Vietnamese people use to respond to the state project of "legibility" and "simplification."

Chapter 6 is about the contestation within and around the religious landscape that occurred in the past but still have consequences that continue to influence the present. The discussion on social and religious organization of the littoral society in Chapter 4 provides the reader with a background for understanding changes in the religious and cosmological landscape in the local community caused by the antireligious campaigns of the late 1970s. In Chapter 5, I emphasize the state's active role in the process of "simplification" and "legibility" of the religious landscape and I introduce the ways in which villagers respond to the state's cultural and political project. In this chapter I take the analysis a step further by showing more explicitly that the relationship between the state and villagers' religious practices is by necessity a two-way process. It involves players who are situated in different political and religious niches and represent diverse visions of religious spaces and practices. Since Lý Sơn authorities were much more relaxed about the task of implementing anti-superstition campaigns than were the Sa Huỳnh authorities, mainly because of their physical distance from the mainland, my focus in this chapter is on Sa Huỳnh. As I shall demonstrate, Sa Huỳnh villagers were confronted not only with various proscriptions towards their religious traditions coming from the state agents but also with more rigid views of the religious authorities, such as Buddhist clergy, about what constituted "proper" and "pure" religion. In consequence, my characterization of a two-way process goes beyond dualistic interpretations and stresses complexity and interactions within and across relationships between state, villagers and Buddhism. Finally, I show that by integrating official rhetoric, religious beliefs and local perceptions of the world in day-to-day experience, villagers successfully re-assembled the remaining pieces of their religious landscape and, by adding additional ones, constructed new

symbolic spaces. In effect, a newly "enchanted" landscape became equally powerful and potent in the eyes of the local community because it made sense in the villagers' worldview, even though such a landscape did not conform to the perspective of the state or more institutionalized versions of religion, such as Buddhism.

In **Chapter 7** I analyze one of the state's commemorative projects devoted to glorifying the Paracel and Spratly soldiers and preserving all temples and relicts related to their activities on Lý Sơn Island. I show that the state's appropriation of Ly Son's legacy encouraged islanders to rework local narratives in such a way that they simultaneously support state claims, communal interests, and their individual and lineage aspirations. Therefore, I focus on the dual process of appropriation and re-working of national narratives by the island community, which opened up a new space of possibilities for the marginalized community of Lý Sơn fishermen who began to manifest themselves through the "Paracel-Spratly project." By showing the complexity of national-level, province-level and local contestations over memory and meaning, I seek to shed more light on the process in which state notions do not simply clash with the views of local people, but rather provoke a re-construction of their memory in "desired" directions. Moreover, I show that the religious landscape is gender-constructed since provincial authorities are more willing to accept male ancestors of Lý Sơn lineages as potential heroes of the Paracel and Spratly flotilla than their female kin. This is because male ancestors covered not only the interest of their lineage but also the broader interest of those who sought to reconstruct Lý Sơn's community in its historic forms and re-centered its marginal place in Vietnam's geo-body. Lastly, following anthropological and historical debates, this chapter argues that local communities and states are not monolithic, but rather heterogonous entities entangled in complex relations in which they forge themselves within and across international, national and local interests.

Chapter 8 is intended as an in-depth analysis of women's religious practices that are played out against a backdrop of men's exclusive claims to the religious landscape in this littoral society. It tells a few ethnographic stories from female perspectives and presents religious activities seen through women's eyes. By presenting women as important actors in the local arena of village affairs, I want to give them the last word in my analysis of multi-faceted contestations over the religious landscape. As we learned from the previous chapters, men in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn monopolized the most prestigious religious roles—including ecclesiastical positions—in village temples, carried out ancestral and communal house rites and reserved for themselves the role of defining religious orthodoxy. Women neither claimed

the rights to these posts nor felt excluded or disrespected. However, it would be wrong to think that they sat by quietly and remained silent and obedient. Relegated to domestic domains, women turn their zone of exclusion and marginality into the space of creativity and agency. In this space, they seek alternative meanings for themselves other than the domesticity prescribed in the Confucian tradition and demonstrate their agency by challenging prevailing ideas and inserting their own interpretations into the framework of dominant local discourses. Instead of openly resisting men's dominance, through various kinds of transgressive performance, they stretch the boundaries of what constitutes religious authenticity and authority and create a religious context that involves them as women. Thus, this chapter argues that authenticity is a gendered process in which women authenticate and constitute themselves as gifted spirit mediums and religious specialists who challenge the men's control of "sacred" values, power, authority and authenticity in the village.

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At the beginning of this chapter I have placed the photo of one of my field sites, the coastal township of Sa Huỳnh taken during my trip to the hills. However, instead of looking down at the landscape I have decided to start my introduction by inviting the reader to "step in" and imagine herself as a part of that landscape, as someone *growing up in* and *moving through* the landscape.

This is the approach that I decided to adopt in my study of littoral society and its contemporary religious life. Ingold (2000) emphasizes that if we apprehend the landscape in a dwelling perspective, it may fundamentally change our orientation. Consequently, by imagining ourselves as being *in* we will not think about the landscape as a picture in a book that we look *at* because "in the landscape of our dwelling" we are familiar enough to "*look around*" (2000: 202, emphasis in origin). Taking a dwelling perspective as a point of departure for this study may allow us to see the landscape not as a static physical texture of earth, but as a "living process" emerging from engagements of people with the environment in their day-to-day activities (Inglis 1977: 489, quoted in Ingold 2000: 198).

CHAPTER TW0

Fieldwork and Methodology

Figure 2. Waiting for a meeting with authorities of the People's Committee Office of Ba Tơ District, Quảng Ngãi Province

2.1   Doing Fieldwork in Vietnam

My PhD research project on the revival of popular religion and contestations of religious landscape in Central Vietnam in the context of the *Đổi Mới* reforms was preceded by three years of research in the Red-River Delta of Northern Vietnam. I first went to Vietnam as part of a postgraduate program arranged by the Polish Ministry of Education and Sport. From autumn 2002 until the late summer of 2005 I was affiliated with the Institute of Religious Studies of Vietnam Academy of Social Science in Hanoi (VASS). Meeting intellectuals and state officials provided my first opportunity to learn about the sensitivity of religious issues in Vietnam and to gain practical knowledge about how to operate in a country where access to the field required not only official approval of both national research institutions and government officials, but also some kind of cooperation with local authorities. Moreover, while in Vietnam, for the first time I had an opportunity to interact with Western scholars and learn from their experience. Initially, communicating with the academics, officials and "common" people, mainly in Russian, I did not realize that without knowledge of Vietnamese I could have only very limited access to Vietnamese society and to government documents, newspapers and academic literature. Dr. Andrew Hardy, the head of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), brought the importance of speaking Vietnamese to my attention. Gradually, I realized that in Vietnam face-to-face contact is important not only because available information is often unsatisfactory and rapidly changing, but also because it is a form of contact that is effective in both official and unofficial interactions. Therefore, expertise in the local language seemed to be essential in overcoming many formal constraints.

In 2003, I arranged to take individual classes in the Vietnamese language with professional teachers from Hanoi National University, which I continued for two consecutive years. In the meantime, I explored in more depth Vietnam's religious domain by participating in domestic rites, communal rituals and festivals in urban Hanoi and in rural areas outside of the capital. I also took part in pilgrimages to famous religious sites organized by Hanoi people. Additionally, I collected newspapers, government documents and various local academic works on religion in the scope of my primary fieldwork.

In the third year of my postgraduate program I selected my field site in a rural area 40 km away from Hanoi where the Buddhist Association had launched a project to build the Institute of Vietnamese Buddhism. My growing network of personal contacts, good relations with authorities and sufficient knowledge of the local language turned out to be essential to meeting the challenge of administrative constraints. My research was structured around three

main objectives: to explore the process that led to the religious revival of traditions, to investigate the meaning of religion for individuals and various expressions of religious experience, and finally to study contestations over the religious domain against the backdrop of historical, political, and economic contexts. In the region where I carried out my initial fieldwork, the Buddhist pagodas, temples, and shrines as well as the authority of monks attracted not only villagers living nearby but also high-ranking officials, diplomats and businessmen. This fact held crucial meaning for my research because I was given the opportunity to observe various intersections between politics, religion and economy. Moreover, such experience prepared solid ground for my doctoral research on religious life in Central Vietnam because the project itself was an invaluable source of knowledge about Vietnamese religion in general, and it gave me insight into the non-exclusionary character of religious practices in Vietnam. In contrast with monotheistic religions, religious practices in Vietnam are often less institutionalized and not based on the notion of a "jealous God" who commands exclusive devotion. As a result of their loose character, these religious beliefs overlap much easier with other religious practices and everyday concerns (see Chapter 5).

Drawing on their field research in the major urban settings of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City or in rural areas, a number of anthropologists have pointed out the role of economic development in religious change and revitalization. Indeed, in Hanoi and its vicinity it was not difficult to see middle-class Vietnamese men and women offering large amounts of money to pagodas and temples, or to observe rich business(wo)men approaching monks and nuns in order to "secure" their new-found wealth. They commonly attended different kinds of Buddhist ceremonies and ordered rituals or rushed from one pagoda to another. When I returned to Vietnam in September 2006 as a PhD student with a new project that was part of the "Religion and Morality" program at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, I was particularly interested in whether it was possible to talk about religious revitalization in an area which is marginal and far away from urban settings. I also wondered whether I could observe any religious practices invigorated by new forms of wealth in this region that was experiencing a much slower rate of socio-economic change. I wanted to know what kind of new practices I would encounter in such an area, if there were any at all.

My other aim was to uncover the interaction between a local community and the state in the process of reconstructing religious space by focusing on the social actors representing these categories. I also wondered in what form the state makes its presence felt, especially in an area located on the margins of its influence: how it influences ritual activities and

contributes to the process of constructing religious space. This raised questions of whether these categories are clear-cut and on which grounds the interaction between them operates in a place that might be considered marginal, "backward," and in need of "development."

In order to answer these questions, I decided to choose one of the poorer provinces of the southern region of Central Vietnam. I speculated that if there was any revival of religious practices, intersections between state and people, central and local, it must be more evident and visible there than in other places. However, Central Vietnam, especially its southern part, poses a challenge for anthropologists (including myself) whose language skills were mainly honed in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City and who are not used to the different dialects of that region. The other challenge was the difficulty accessing the field, since foreigners are usually mistrusted by local authorities there, in contrast to the northern and southern parts of Vietnam where officials are more accustomed to the presence of overseas researchers.

Initially, I considered the possibility of doing research in Quảng Bình and Thừa Thiên-Huế Provinces, but after consulting with Andrew Hardy on this matter, I realized that there were already a few projects concerning religion in Thừa Thiên-Huế being carried out by both foreign and local scholars. In turn, in Quảng Bình Province I needed better connections with local authorities. In May 2007, three months before my travel to Vietnam, I received an e-mail letter from Andrew Hardy informing me that he had just started a multi-disciplinary project on the "Long Wall of Quảng Ngãi"[9] in cooperation with the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology (VASS). He asked me to consider his and Dr. Nguyễn Tiến Đông's proposition to do research in a the less-known province of Quảng Ngãi where their team had already established good relations with the provincial authorities, and he also assured me that I would be accepted. Since the project leaders generously decided to include me in their plans, I was more than willing to accept their help.

2.1.1   *Arranging research permission for Quảng Ngãi Province*

My selection of Quảng Ngãi Province, located in the south central coast region of Vietnam, posed several difficulties. First, the Institute of Culture Studies (VASS), which was in charge

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[9] Drawing on his reading of 19th century historical sources, which mentioned the existence of "Long Wall" in the province of Quảng Ngãi, historian Andrew Hardy initiated an archeological survey in 2005 undertaken by a team of EFEO and the Institute of Archaeology (VASS). The research confirmed that the wall extends for 130 km from the district of Tra Bồng, Quảng Ngãi to the north, across the whole province of Quảng Ngãi as far as the district of An Lão (Bình Định Province) to the south. According to historical documents, the Wall was erected in 1819 during the reign of the emperor Gia Long and separated the lowland from the highland. However, Hardy's recent research indicates that the Wall was not only built as a barrier, but also facilitated communication such as trade between east and west and north and south (the wall was build along an ancient Mandarin road linking the capital to the southern provinces).

of my visa and research permission, was afraid that there was nothing to study in a place that seemed in the middle of nowhere. Some of them asked me what was so special about Quảng Ngãi that I decided to do my fieldwork there and then advised me to stay in Hanoi or in its surroundings where they considered religious life to be much more dynamic. The researchers from the Institute were also afraid that they did not have strong enough relations with provincial authorities there to arrange my research permission. Second, my Hanoian friends expressed their surprise when I told them that I was going to live for a year in Central Vietnam. One articulated his opinion in a straightforward way: "There is no real Vietnamese culture in Quảng Ngãi. The people there are in fact Cham…." They also made jokes about the province's local dialect, which even Vietnamese from other parts of country could hardly understand. For them the "real Vietnamese culture" was the one represented in the North. Such statements by my northern friends illustrate a general bias against the province as well as its marginality as viewed from the "center" perspective—not only in geographic, but also in cultural and political senses. For them, Central Vietnam was not the "center"; the "real center" was the North.

The perception of Quảng Ngãi as "backward," "stubborn" and "conservative," as expressed by some of my Vietnamese friends and colleagues, only aroused my curiosity about this overlooked part of Vietnam. I was aware that the province was famous for its revolutionary movement supporting the Hồ Chí Minh regime, even after 1954 when it was assigned to the U.S.-allied South (see Chapter 3). Unable to find students from Quảng Ngãi in Hanoi, I started to familiarize myself with central pronunciation with the help of one of the students from Quảng Nam (a neighboring province of Quảng Ngãi) who was temporarily staying in the capital. However, two months passed during which I waited for permission to start my field research, and I worried that I would not be allowed access to the province. Despite the difficulties connected with my choice, I moved forward and discussed my research plans with local and foreign researchers. Soon, help arrived from the EFEO, which took on the role of mediator between the VASS and the provincial authorities in Quảng Ngãi. The Institute of Culture Studies took charge of the preparation and sending of all necessary documents to the officials in Quảng Ngãi.

In early November 2006, accompanied by the archaeologist Nguyễn Tiến Đông from the Institute of Archeology in Hanoi, I was introduced to the authorities in Quảng Ngãi. Upon my arrival in Central Vietnam, I took part in an introductory trip arranged by the EFEO that covering the whole province of Quảng Ngãi. Although the aim of this trip was to trace the

remnants of the "Long Wall," it helped me directly with my own research project. Firstly, it allowed me to form a more profound picture of the province, grasp its historical context, geographical topography and the relationship between the lowland and highland regions, as well as its local politics. Secondly, it was an essential step in the EFEO team's strategy to introduce me to the provincial authorities.

Initially, I wanted to do research on Lý Sơn Island, which was the ideal place to take a closer look at the process of revitalization of religious practices due to the commemorative endeavors the Vietnamese state devoted to the historic Hoàng Sa (Paracel) and Trường Sa (Spratly) Navy and the preservation of all temples and records related to their activities on the island. I was curious about the islanders' response to the central State's claims with regards to their legacy. However, because of its discursive association with the Paracels and Spratlys, which are a bone of contention between China and Vietnam, Lý Sơn Island is considered a restricted border zone and an important defense position. I was aware that if I asked for permission to go there at the beginning of my research I would be rejected. Having no other choice, I was looking for another suitable site.

After consultation with Andrew Hardy and Nguyễn Tiến Đông I considered another place: the district town of Trà Xuân, which is located in the southern part of Central Vietnam, close to Kontum Hinterlands. However, due to the fact that the area was populated by ethnic minorities, Việt, I again faced the problem that this was a "sensitive zone." [10]

2.1.2 *Selecting Sa Hùynh*

Ultimately, the EFEO's trip influenced my choice to select lowland Sa Hùynh Township (Đức Phổ District) (see *Map 1,* p. 61; see also *Map 2,* p. 90) located in the vicinity of the ancient upper Mandarin road. The place turned out to be less problematic than Lý Sơn and Trà Xuân for the provincial authorities who accepted my choice.

Sa Hùynh town is in reality a municipality [*xã*], which is an administrative unit subdivided into six villages [*thôn*] and located parallel to the seashore. The villages represent an interesting combination of fishing and farming communities (see Chapter 3). Additionally, the area was associated with the colonial period's discoveries of the Bronze Culture Civilization; Sa Hùynh also constituted one of the former Cham seaports. Champa was an

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[10] Generally speaking, studying ethnic minorities in Vietnam is a sensitive issue to the Vietnamese state. Many of these groups are living in border areas of geo-strategic importance, and moreover they are culturally different from those living in the lowlands (Roche and Michaud 2000).

Indianized Kingdom that between the 7th and 15th centuries established its rule over coastal plains and mountain zones in what is today central and southern Vietnam. Around the 17th century Champa became part of the Việt polity through the southward expansion and colonization called *Nam Tiến*. Importantly, the presence of the Cham civilization left traces in the form of religious relics scattered all over Sa Hùynh and of ancient Champa inscriptions mysteriously covering stones and grotto walls. Hidden in the thick bush, they still wait to be decoded. The historical presence of the Cham greatly influenced the religious beliefs of the Sa Hùynh people who included Cham gods in their Vietnamese pantheon (cf. Chapter 3).

Already facing many difficulties finding a location acceptable to both provincial authorities and me, I was puzzled by the ambiguous status of Sa Hùynh. On the one hand, Sa Hùynh was described by local authorities as poor and undeveloped, albeit with the potential to become a popular tourist spot. On the other hand, I was told again that Sa Hùynh was a sensitive border area, although less "sensitive" than Trà Xuân or Lý Sơn. It was never clear to me what local authorities really meant by labeling Sa Hùynh a "sensitive border zone." I was aware that not all places along the seashore were included in "border zones," tourist spots such as Nha Trang, Hội An or Dà Nẵng for example. On the other hand, I knew that Sa Hùynh hill was used by the Border Guard Command [*Công an Biên phòng*] as an observation post for "Vietnam's territorial waters." During the Second Indochina War the same hill was appropriated by the American Navy because of its strategic position. However, I suspect that with the development of the tourist industry, Sa Hùynh would become a more easily accessible tourist destination just like other places along the Vietnamese coast.

At the beginning of my research there were real difficulties gaining free access to the field site, which initially required short stays. During the first three months I visited Sa Hùynh at regular intervals, which gradually nurtured the province's confidence in me. I was aware that revealing at the beginning my intention to stay for a year was a sure way to be denied permission to do research. I was convinced that the best strategy was to allow the province authorities to get to know me slowly, which meant that I gradually gained "deep" access to the field. During the first three months of my stay in Sa Hùynh, I was required by the Border Guard Command to prepare a weekly report with detailed information about my plans for the upcoming seven days. I was also obliged to inform the border officers whenever I left or arrived in Sa Hùynh. After three months of regular visits, I received support from the head of the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism [*Sở Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du Lịch*], who was not only a member of the Communist cadre, but also a researcher holding a PhD from

Hanoi in folklore studies, and I was ultimately granted permission to do a year-long research project in the whole province.[11] At the same time, the Border Guard Command eventually exempted me from the burden of filing weekly reports. Nevertheless, from time to time I had to send a full report of my activities to the Institute of Cultural Studies that was passed on to the police in Hanoi.

In the EFEO project and in my own project the head of the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism saw a chance to make the province better known not only in the country, but also outside its borders. He and other provincial authorities especially pinned their hopes on the "Long Wall" to receive World Heritage (UNESCO) status.[12] Such recognition would not only promote the province but, above all, would bring economic profit through development of the tourist industry. Therefore, despite enormous paperwork given to the officials, my presence was cordially greeted and seen as a small step towards realization of these ambitious plans. Nevertheless, the authorities had their own understanding of my role in the province and also of the research I was carrying out. They took it as an honor to introduce me to the rich local culture that had not yet been "discovered." Consequently, I was encouraged to see the more impressive cultural festivals and "unique preserved customs" of the province and invited to join trips organized by the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism in February 2007.

During my stay in Sa Huỳnh I was accommodated at the house of the venturesome young widow Bình, who owned a motel at the edge of the seashore. In the beginning, the police officers did not want to allow me to stay in the widow's place and tried to convince me that "the farther away from people I could stay, the safer it was for me." The "safer place" they considered was a desolate communist-style seaside resort located at the periphery of the village.[13] Fortunately, in the end, they turned out to be sensitive to my lamentation that I would feel very lonely there with only trees, sand and sea for company. In November 2006 after my first permission had been arranged, I settled in Sa Huỳnh and started my field research. As I began to explore religious life in Sa Huỳnh, I realized that I had missed part of

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[11] During my stay in Quảng Ngãi Province the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism [Sở Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du Lịch] became the Provincial Office of Culture and Information [Sở Văn hóa Thông tin]. I am not aware of exactly when the provincial authorities changed the name.

[12] To my present knowledge the province, with the assistance of the EFEO and the Vietnam Institute of Archeology, is in the process of applying for Vietnamese National Heritage Recognition.

[13] When I briefly visited Sa Huỳnh in April 2011 (three and a half years after I left my field site) the communist-style seaside resort had been completely rebuilt and turned into a modern resort advertized on their internet website.

the story. In Sa Huỳnh I saw ritual and religious links with Lý Sơn Island located only about 30 km from the Quảng Ngãi coast, as illustrated in the ethnographic vignette below:

According to local narratives, at the beginning of the 20th century Sa Huỳnh fishermen found a dead woman thrown by the sea onto rim rocks below the temple of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na at the foot of the Forbidden Hill. They took her body away and buried it in the vicinity of the temple. Many fishermen believe that she was a woman trader from Lý Sơn Island. In Sa Huỳnh she is known as Bà Lao although some people argue that her name was Ngô Thị Khinh, while others say that her real surname was Tô, which indicates a Chinese origin.

Over a period of time, the Goddess Thiên Y A Na lost her power and sacredness. Fishermen recorded that after the Vietnam War the goddess ceased to control the sea and finally left her temple, having reached "nirvana." In the meantime, the spirit of Bà Lao came to possess efficacy and power. In the 1980s, villagers included Bà Lao into their pantheon of three goddesses—Thiên Y A Na, Thủy Long and Quan Âm—worshiped on the Forbidden Hill. In consequence, this place became known among villagers as an "area of four ladies." Nowadays, people perceive Bà Lao as a particularly sacred spirit because she was young, unmarried and died prematurely. Fishermen in Sa Huỳnh believe in Bà Lao's power and efficacy to control the local waters. For example, Tự, a middle-age fisherman whom I met making offerings at her grave, said that a few years ago his ship got bogged down in shallow waters close to the place where Bà Lao's grave lies. He was convinced that she raised the water level so his ship could safely enter the port.

Phận, the old caretaker of Thiên Y A Na's temple, stated in an interview that a few years ago relatives of the dead woman from Lý Sơn Island came to him and enquired about her grave. They said that they learned about the location of her grave through a spirit medium. The family, wanting to fulfill their ritual and ceremonial obligations towards their newly revealed ancestor, asked Phận to take care of the grave and gave him some money to renovate it.

Nowadays, at the end of each year and at the beginning of the New Year, the head of the fishing community responsible for the fulfillment of certain ritual obligations towards the village and divinities burns incense for Bà Lao and places fresh offerings on her grave. Every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month women also make offerings of flowers and fruits there. Fishermen going to sea visit Bà Lao's burial place and ask for her blessing.

I was not able to find Bà Lao's family during my visit to Lý Sơn, however islanders told me another story which led me again back to Sa Huỳnh. I learned from fishermen that in one of the temples devoted to the worship of the Whale Spirit in Lý Sơn they keep the head of the most powerful whale. When I asked islanders what happened to the rest of the whale's body they replied that the corps had drifted out to Sa Huỳnh and is now kept in a similar temple by Thạch By village (Sa Huỳnh).

Although neither side could confirm the other's story, their narratives continue to reveal symbolic connections between the two places. In February 2007 the fishermen of Sa Huỳnh, showed me a one-metre-high wooden statue that they found in their nets while fishing in the vicinity of Lý Sơn Island. The wooden carving showed a Chinese dignitary seated on a throne with armrests in the shape of a dragon's mouth. The statue survived quite well, although the places where the paint had come off were covered with diverse shellfish. The fishing crew that made this unexpected discovery placed the statute in the yard of the boat owner's house, just next to an open-air altar dedicated to the Earth Spirit [Thổ Địa]. The statue was prudently surrounded by a wire fence and covered with an umbrella in case of rain. The fishermen considered the finding a sign of luck, security and good health for their families. Shortly afterward, rumors circulated that the statue was an image of the kings of the Vietnamese Lê dynasty. The narrative was soon enriched with a story of its supernatural power [linh thiêng] such as the miraculous protection it provided fishermen against various misfortunes.

I took these stories as metaphors of the interconnected littoral society in which the sea acts as transmitter of beliefs. Like a head and other remains are integral parts that form a complete whale's body, Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn are joined by the sea and constitute one cosmological landscape in which beliefs create elements of cohesion. By cosmological landscape I mean cosmological continuity and interdependence that may exist within a larger territory (see Chapter 1). Therefore, in February of 2007, when I got a chance to expand my research, I started to work at a second site, Lý Sơn Island, parallel to my mainland fieldwork in Sa Hùynh. Each setting shed light on the other and significantly enriched my knowledge about important changes that happened in the littoral society. By looking at the two I was able to form a more complex picture of their life and religious institutions.

2.1.3 *Traveling to Lý Sơn*

My first trip to Lý Sơn was arranged by provincial authorities from the Quảng Ngãi Office of Culture who decided to invite me to see the New Year festival organized on the island. I was incredibly lucky to gain access to this place, which is mostly closed to foreigners. As I have already mentioned, because of its discursive association with the Paracel and Spratlys, Lý Sơn Island is considered a restricted border zone and an important defensive position. From 1974 onward, when Chinese forces overran a South-Vietnamese military station on the Paracels, China and Vietnam have confronted each other over control of the Paracels and Spratlys, resulting in the sinking of three Vietnamese naval ships by Chinese forces in 1988 (Amer 2002). With the discovery of submarine deposits of natural oil and gas, both states do not simply claim the islands, but seek to extend their sovereignty over the entire continental shelf, hoping to incorporate the South China Sea and its mineral and marine resources under their respective controls. The already difficult economic situation of Lý Sơn Island, lagging behind the mainland in terms of health, education, and infrastructure, worsened since Lý Sơn fishermen were denied rights to use fishing grounds near the Paracels, which for generations they considered their own. Moreover, Lý Sơn fishermen are not only barred from historical fishing waters now claimed by China, but as a consequence of its sensitive border location, also from other forms of development, like international tourism.

After the provincial authorities got to know me better, my presence as a foreign researcher on the island was particularly welcomed, but I was still suspect by the Border Guard Command. During my first visit to the island in February 2007 I was accompanied by an official who spent his childhood and youth in Lý Sơn, but at that moment was working in the Quảng Ngãi Office of Culture. To get to Lý Sơn I had to go through the passport control at the border post in Sa Kỳ port, near Quảng Ngãi town. Only after that was I allowed to board the new hydrofoil, popularly called "fast boat." It took about 45 minutes to arrive at the island. Upon our arrival, once again I had to report my presence on the island at the post of the Border Guard Command located on the seashore and then at the district People's Committee. This procedure became my routine: whenever I departed from Sa Kỳ port, I had to show my passport and updated permission from the Quảng Ngãi Border Guard Command to the guards at the ports of Sa Kỳ and Lý Sơn.

Map1. Field sites of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn.

In the beginning, I could not stay overnight with a Vietnamese family, but after negotiations with the police I was allowed to stay in one of two guesthouses on the island that offered overnight accommodation instead of being accommodated in the guesthouse of the district People's Committee. The guesthouse was run by a couple in their early forties, located close to the harbor and popular among fishermen. It served as a coffee shop in the mornings and in the evenings was turned into a karaoke bar. Here male guests could "enjoy" the company of young girls employed as hostesses. This place became not only my "home" but also a first-hand source of information about the island and the life of its inhabitants. I had the opportunity to spend mornings over coffee with local fishermen discussing their daily business and keeping myself on track about all events on the island.

From February until August 2007 I took regular trips back and forth between Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn. I usually followed the rich calendar of communal religious events on the island. In May and June I stayed for an entire two months on Lý Sơn. Since my first arrival in February I had been "adopted" by relatives of the official from Quảng Ngãi who took me to the island the first time. They were also a couple in their forties with four children, and they hosted me whenever I arrived and provided assistance in my research. They introduced me to other villagers, although they had their own preferences and often tried to influence my choices. After some time, I received permission from the Border Guard Command to stay overnight at the couple's house, but I decided to stay at the guesthouse, since it was a good place to meet other villagers and cross-check information.

I observed that the island's border and peripheral location did not weaken local identities but, on the contrary, created a common ground for its inhabitants to re-configure and strengthen their local culture vis-à-vis the mainland. Gradually, I became aware that an impressive communal ritual life existed on this offshore island and that the Quảng Ngãi Office of Culture was deeply involved in restoring and appropriating some of its traditions in order to promote the "cultural heritage" of the province. Furthermore, Lý Sơn's location vis-à-vis Paracel Island and the local history of the Hoàng Sa Navy provided a focus for provincial authorities and local scholars for more profound research. In the early 1990s the Vietnamese state turned its attention towards Lý Sơn as a valuable source of information about the historic Hoàng Sa [Paracel] and Trường Sa [Spratly] Navy and in 2001 issued a directive concerning preservation of all temples and records related to their activities on Lý Sơn Island. The Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa Navy consisted of fishermen recruited from Lý Sơn Island. Many of them died at sea while collecting goods from wrecked ships for Vietnam's

rulers (Lê Quý Đôn 1972 [1776]: 210) and their bodies were never returned to relatives, giving rise to special ritual and memorial practices in Lý Sơn. Facing the competition from China for control over the archipelagos, the Vietnamese Party-State chose to frame its claims to sovereignty not in economic terms but with reference to historical and emotional stories of Vietnamese sailors who shed their blood on the islands, as I shall explain in more detail in Chapter 7.

Despite the island's sensitive, provincial authorities hoped that in the near future Lý Sơn could be turned into a tourist attraction that would complement the "Long Wall Monument." These various observations and considerations influenced my decision about the inclusion of Lý Sơn in my research project. In the end, it turned out to be the right decision because the island substantially supplemented and solidified my research and understanding of the process of contestation of religious space in Central Vietnam's littoral society. However, doing research in two sites could be problematic.

The short vignette introduced above shows that Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn are not really two places, but are part of one religious and cosmological territory joined by the sea in which mutual dependency and connections are made by worship of common gods and through sacred places. In the course of my research I recognized that sacred spaces of the coastal villages constitute only a fragment of a much wider cosmological landscape that extends up to the mountains and links distant places (cf. Allerton 2009). During such trips economy, religion, politics and ecology merged in a complex manner and established association and connection among sites. Gradually, I gained the knowledge that through salt Sa Huỳnh people were connected to the Highlands which offered them cassia (a sort of cinnamon) for incense production as well as rice in exchange for it. In turn, Lý Sơn people were taking red rice plants from the highlanders to experiment with their cultivation in the Island's infertile soil. I also learned that the Thiên Y A Na goddess who is believed to secure the livelihood of the fishermen on the seashore was present in the mountain and forest region of Trà Xuân, which I finally was allowed to visit.[14] As I already mentioned, in her temple the Hrê Highlanders, Việt people and ethnic Chinese were engaged in trade in forest goods like cassia and in the past precious eaglewood [*trầm*] used for incense and connected with the littoral society

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[14] The role of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na in the trade of forest goods and economic and cosmological continuity between mountains and coastal areas has been analysed in my paper "The Goddess of Cinnamon – Relationship between Lowland and Highland" presented at the International Conference: *Asian Borderlands, Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation*, International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden) in Chiang Mai (Thailand), 5-7 November 2010.

through commercial relationships. [15] The goddess was considered the guardian of this perfumed wood, and her worship is one of many examples of economic and cosmological continuity I discovered during my fieldwork (see e.g. Li 1998: 124-125; Salemink 2008). Due to space and time limitations, I am unable to pursue this view further. However, it is worth keeping in mind that the world of people in the littoral society is broader than the administrative borders on the map suggest.

Before I draw a general picture of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn in Chapter 3, it is worth discussing the methods I used in order to be able to answer the research questions I posed and the ways in which the data were collected.

2.2   Methodology

The godfather of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, Bronisław Malinowski (1961), took several overseas expeditions between Sinaketa and Dobu islands when he trailed the Triobrianders along the *Kula* ring and traced the fundamentals of the exchange, the magic, the mythology, and other associated institutions and underlying beliefs of the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea. He would not call his style of doing fieldwork "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1995, 1998), but, quite the opposite, he presented the individual islands scattered in the ocean as one territory within the sphere of the trading system of the *Kula*. By following trade routes between those islands, Malinowski offered a complex picture of the Melanesian sailors and their economic and religious life. He argued that only through charting the chain of ceremonial exchanges and relationships between various places was he able to draw a full picture of the *Kula* institution (Malinowski 1961: 464).

My focus on religion determined the character of my ethnographic research that I carried out between September 2006 and September 2007. People and their religious practices and worldviews were eventually much more dynamic and unpredictable than my carefully designed plan to stay in a small community predicted. Ironically, the idea of a small community itself turned out to be a fiction, even in the marginal zone that I selected for my research, as I shall explain in more detail in Chapter 3. This obliged me to change my initial plan and design a new project while already in the field, one which took into account the fact that the two sites were part of a single cosmological landscape. However, following Malinowski, I did not conceive it as a comparative research project, as fieldwork in different geographical places is often envisioned. Just the opposite, following the paths and movements

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[15] For trade of eaglewood in the Champa and post-Champa period see Hardy (2009).

of people, objects, and narratives I collected data that gave me a more complex and complete picture of the littoral society in Central Vietnam and forced me to rethink differences found in the two settings through connections ((Malinowski 1961;Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Marcus 1995).

Before beginning my fieldwork in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, I spent a good deal of my time in libraries in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City collecting popular and official sources which included newspapers, academic literature, and governmental documents. Some of them, like *Công Báo* [*The Official Gazette*], I had collected already during my previous research in Northern Vietnam in 2005. Additionally, I gathered primary and secondary historical sources such as files and surveys carried out by the colonial government. My initial reading of these documents allowed me to situate Quảng Ngãi Province within a larger historical and political context. Moreover, it helped me to see my micro-level fieldwork evidence concerning the construction of religious space in a broader perspective. I was also able to link particular historical practices to contemporary practices. Without at least some knowledge of the history of the province and of the official discourse on culture and tradition in Vietnam, I would never have been able to understand the context of religious revival and identification of strategies employed by people during their interaction with the state's officials.

Following the reading of popular, official and secondary literature, I was also able to delineate and formulate specific problems that I considered worth exploring during my ethnographical fieldwork. I started my study by looking at historical influences on religious practices in Quảng Ngãi Province and I made a quick survey of the archaeological and historical literature. I found it important to consider the historical existence of the Cham in the province, since their presence left an enduring mark on the fishing organization and religious practices and formed the background for cultural diversity in this region (see Chapter 3).

Trying to answer my research question of *how people in Vietnam's littoral society create and (re)invent their landscape as a recognizable social and religious space against the backdrop of "state simplification projects" and restrictive state cultural policies,* I began my fieldwork by concentrating on the activities of various religious professionals, believers and the situations and contexts they took part in. My aim was to classify gods and deities worshiped in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, levels of experience and participation as well as personal motivations for involvement in religious practices and, finally, to delineate how practices were appropriated, transformed, and reproduced at sacred sites, and what their meaning, role and significance was for individuals and the community. Against conventional

tendencies which assume that it is more convenient for a female anthropologist in Vietnam to do research on the same gender as her own, I focus on the male social and religious domain not only because it was crucial for understanding the local community but also because access to women was given to me—as a woman—somewhat naturally. Men and male-oriented organizations such as patrilineages and the male-exclusive same-age associations played a prominent role in ritual life in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn from which women were excluded. Men monopolized the most prestigious religious roles in village temples, carried out ancestral and communal house rites and defined religious orthodoxy. Although male religious activities obviously dominated my fieldwork, I was careful not to obscure the female role in the religious life of the littoral society. I claim that as a woman I was more advantaged than a male anthropologist would have been, because I could do systematic research on both genders. A man probably would not have the same access to the female world and intimate conversations that women might share at some point with a female anthropologist.

In the first weeks of my fieldwork in Sa Huỳnh, I identified elders and the temples' guardians with whom I conducted a series of interviews and who provided me with the calendar of communal rituals and annual festivals. In conducting interviews I mostly made use of open-ended semi-structured or unstructured methods and I never presented myself as an authority when interviewing the villagers about their religious practice or life. I was aware that setting myself up as someone who knew nothing (*maintaining naiveté*) but was willing to learn from residents, creates a much better platform for collecting valuable data. I also realized that villagers were reluctant to answer my questions alone but gladly sought the company of other villagers who, according to them, gave more accurate answers. In this way they tried to protect themselves against any possible harm I could do if I was not careful enough in my contacts with the police. On the other hand, they sympathized with my struggle to understand their culture and way of life and were willing to help me.

People in the village were curious about me and often approached and asked questions. My ability to use the Vietnamese language without the mediation of an interpreter enabled me to interact directly with my informants and gain credibility with them. We often talked about whatever interested my informants and then I followed particular issues that emerged during our conversations and made deeper inquiries. On other occasions, I deliberately looked for "conversation" and waited for a suitable moment to bring up a particular problem that I kept in mind instead of asking directly. Unstructured conversational

interviewing proved its value and revealed the various dynamics of village life, since I could observe the interaction and even disagreement between my interlocutors.

Participant observation was one of my main methods because it not only allowed me to engage and explore different aspects of people's activities, but served as a check against their subjective statements on what they believe and do. It also gave me more nuanced understanding of physical and socio-cultural contexts of my settings and of data I collected through interviews. Furthermore, observation was also a crucial method for formulating further research questions that arose during witnessing and participating in interaction between people. Instructed by villagers, I often made notes in my calendar about communal ceremonies and festivals and I was careful not to miss these occasions. The communal events gathering villagers, guests from neighboring communities, local authorities or even local historians, folklorist or archaeologists formed a springboard for enlarging the network of my contacts in the field site.

Because religion in Vietnam is quite different from the institutional monotheistic religions in the Western context, as I shall argue in Chapter 5, I had to work out how to collect data regarding less formalized and institutionalized Vietnamese religious traditions. At this point it is necessary to say that I did not find it helpful to design a survey inquiring into religious life or to measure religious attendance and participation in rituals.[16] First, I understood that, in contrast to Catholics in Poland, for example, who regularly go to church on Sunday, pray to God and read catechism during mass, people in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn do not form religious organizations in which members meet and pray regularly to a particular spirit. Village temples in my settings were only open during communal ceremonies. Although people felt obliged to contribute money, they were free to decide whether they wanted to attend these events or not. Their presence was not obligatory since there were elders in charge of the rituals. Marking the absence of half of the village inhabitants during a given ceremony in my survey would only give me a false impression that these people were not religious or

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[16] However, in 2005 with help from the Institute of Religious Studies in Hanoi, I decided to design a survey on religious affiliation and motivation regarding participation in religious practices. The questionnaire included several closed and multiple-answer questions with a few additional opened-ended questions. The respondents were also asked to give information about their age, gender and profession. The survey included 500 persons in the capital city of Hanoi. The survey of the first 250 respondents was carried out in one of the Buddhist temples. The second group of respondents was chosen randomly in one of the districts of the city. The result came rather as a surprise: more than 90% of respondents in the two groups answered that they did not follow any religion (Catholicism, Buddhism, or Protestantism). Even those who were questioned in a Buddhist pagoda denied their religious affiliation to Buddhism. Instead they marked answers in the rubric titled "beliefs." Although I am not using the results of this survey in my thesis, it helped me reconsider my understanding of religion in Vietnam and to develop and formulate my questions in a more detailed way (see Chapter 5).

did not share a communal spirit. As I talked with the "missing" participants, I began to comprehend the "native" point of view about what "religion" is and what it means "to be religious" in Vietnam. Often, their religiosity was based on practical dependence on spirits and was intensified when they encountered a particular crisis (cf. Chau 2006: 62-63). Second, since Vietnamese people must fill out dozens of survey forms for local authorities, they mistrust this kind of method and might respond by hiding their more private thoughts and by giving socially and politically "acceptable" answers.

I also gave up my initial plan to create typologies of all sites and spaces used for religious activities in the research locations and to create typologies of gods and deities worshipped at practice sites. When I asked about a particular god and tried to determine his/her role and function, people indicated that god as a seafaring or agriculture divinity worshipped in a such and such a temple. However, I frequently found these gods in the temples where they "should not be" according to the information villagers gave me. For example, I discovered that in Lý Sơn the Whale Spirit—a guardian of fishermen worshiped in a seafaring temple—was also venerated in an agriculture shrine as the deity who has the power to produce rain. On another occasion, I spotted the Goddess Thiên Y A Na in the local communal house, which was usually reserved for the cult of village founders. Soon afterwards I realized that although I was able to classify a particular spirit and determine general patterns, in everyday practice all gods and places mixed with each other in a very flexible way.

In order to puzzle out answers in light of such flexibility, I continued to use open-ended semi-structured interviews. The villagers were already used to my presence in the village and could notice that I had broadened my knowledge about their village and way of life. As a result, I was more emboldened to ask specific questions that grew out of our relationship and my participatory observation. In turn, villagers were more willing to answer. It was worth waiting a bit with my questions, because I discovered that behind the circulation of gods between temples, there were hidden stories about internal conflicts among villagers and struggles for power, or accounts about anti-superstition campaigns and state intervention (see Chapters 6 and 7).

My travel back and forth between Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn in fact did not weaken my ties with these communities but, on the contrary, helped me to improve my relationship with villagers, police and local authorities. Especially the latter welcomed my temporary disappearance from their life with a sigh of relief. The reality was that at least for a moment

they could avoid the additional paperwork that I gave them through my presence in the village. Despite the practical effects of my periodic absences in each of my settings, people were more eager to convince me as to the "unique" character of Sa Huỳnh or Lý Sơn. My research in the two settings helped me to understand attempts by islanders to be visible on Vietnamese maps, and to be a part of the mainland's flourishing economy. All these efforts were combined with their struggle to keep the island's cultural identity and show its historical uniqueness. In turn, Sa Huỳnh, famous for the archeological discovery there at the beginning of the 20th century, turned out to be quite an open community, whose weakening communal ties, solidarity, and mutual obligations called for more individual religious practices. My feeling was that religious practices in the two settings constituted contemporary responses to contemporary conditions.

2.3   Conclusion

Finally, let me emphasize my main points in this chapter. Against the terrestrial bias and tendency to research Northern Vietnam, I chose coastal communities of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, Central Vietnam for my study of religion. In the eyes of the relatively prosperous North and South, Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, like most of Central Vietnam, were seen as marginal, "backward," and in need of "development." Therefore, I wondered whether it was possible to find religious revitalization in an area which was marginal and far away from urban settings. I also pondered the question of what religious practices would look like in settings located on the margins of the state's influence. Given that the state attempted to tie its control over such territory through military posts, border guards and the like, the real challenge was to get access to the field, since the two sites—Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn—were considered by provincial authorities a "sensitive border zone."

My focus on religion determined the character of my ethnographic research and led me to expand my field research. As I stressed, I do not conceive of my research in the two sites as a comparative project, because Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn were part of a single cosmological territory and formed an interconnected "littoral society" in which the sea acts as transmitter of beliefs. By looking at the two sites, I was able to form a more nuanced and in-depth picture of the multi-faceted contestation over the religious landscape against a backdrop of changes in the ecology, the economy and in politics. My methods of collecting data mainly consisted of participant observation, open-ended semi-structured and unstructured interviews

and library research. People's flexibility in dealing with their surroundings, the cultural hybridity and ambiguity of their gods, and their cosmology's state of change have become the focal "routes" of my entire fieldwork experience and the factors which led me to formulate my theoretical framework and perception of religion in Central Vietnam's littoral society.

CHAPTER THREE

Field Settings

Figure 3. Fish Market in Sa Huỳnh, Quảng Ngãi Province, Central Vietnam, 2006

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the rural settings of Sa Huỳnh on the mainland and Lý Sơn Island, which are located in Quảng Ngãi Province on the southern-central coast. I begin by drawing a general picture of the province and each of the settings, providing historical and social background pertaining to my study of the local religious domain. By introducing historical, economic and environmental factors shaping the local landscape, I show how life on the coast is bound up with the sea and submits to its rhythm and how it defines the concerns of the villagers. I also point out the continuity of Kinh [Việt] people in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn with the Cham culture and its seafaring legacy.

3.2 Field settings

3.2.1 *Quảng Ngãi Province*

Quảng Ngãi geographically belongs to the so-called South Central Coast [*Nam Trung Bộ*] that stretches from Quảng Nam to Bình Thuận Provinces. It borders Bình Định Province to the south, Quảng Nam to the north, the Central Highlands to the west and the South China Sea to the east. Quảng Ngãi today is associated with a distinct Bronze Age culture of Austronesian seafarers referred to as Sa Huỳnh culture that flourished in central and southern Vietnam between 1000 BC and 200 AD.[17] The Sa Huỳnh archaeological sites, named after the village where the discovery took place and where I conducted my fieldwork, provided evidence for intercultural links to maritime Malay cultures and extensive trade networks across the South China Sea before the Cham period, around 600 BC (Wheeler 2006; Vickery 2009).[18]

Archaeologists do not agree on the question of whether the prehistoric Sa Huỳnh culture is the first material evidence of the Champa Kingdom[19] (see Southworth 2004; Vickery 2009). Champa is a name of Indian origin describing several coastal states which occupied the south-central coast of Vietnam from the end the first millennium BC. These territories were never permanently unified into a single state. From the early 13th century

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[17] In 1909, the French scholar M. Vinet identified jar burials, pottery and other objects with characteristic ornaments in the coastal village of Sa Huỳnh. The first discovery of artefacts in Sa Huỳnh was followed by excavations by Vietnamese archaeologists in other settings including the most recent one on Lý Sơn Island.

[18] Nowadays, archaeologists concur that Sa Huỳnh sites bear evidence that the seacoast was for centuries a point of cross-cultural contacts rather than a borderline and that the sea was a space that integrated and facilitated the circulation of wealth and power (Wheeler 2006).

[19] There exists a vast bulk of literature on the Champa Kingdom starting from the colonial period, see i.e., Claeys 1934; Maspero (2002 [1928]); Mus (1975 [1933]); for recent studies see e.g., Southworth (2004); Trần Kỳ Phương (2004); and Hardy (2009).

Champa was involved in conflicts with Đại Việt—the name of the Việt polity at the time—as it tried to expand its control over Cham territory, but only in the 15th century did the Vietnamese successfully invade Champa. Champa became a part of Đại Việt through the process of *Nam Tiến* which refers to the southern expansion of the territory of Vietnam from the 11th century to the mid-18th century (Vickery 2009; cf. Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2002a).[20]

Nguyễn Đình Đầu (2009) reports that from the 11th to the 15th centuries Vietnam opened its frontier in the South. In the 16th and 17th centuries Nguyễn lords established their power in the south. Consequently, the civil war of the Nguyễn with the Trịnh lords [1627-72 and 1774-75], causing the division of Vietnam into two parts of "Outer Region" [*Đàng Ngòai* located North] and "Inner Region" [*Đàng Trong* located South], created conditions for Vietnamese migrants living in the new land to form their own distinct cultural identity. Central Vietnam was part of the "Inner Region" and provided an option for northern Vietnamese migrants who, driven by lack of land, famine, internal conflicts and struggle for power, were looking for a better life elsewhere. Li (1998) points out that the Vietnamese who arrived in the 17th century had to settle in a different environment and engage with the Cham society in order to allow their own society to continue. The gradual extension of new areas of the South led migrants to escape domination by Thăng Long, the political center in the Red River Delta, and to adapt local elements like Cham deities or spirit cults, to name only a few, which were free from Confucian restrictions (Li 1998: 101-116; Nguyen The Anh 1995). Vietnamese migrants colonizing the old Champa's territory worshiped tutelary spirits that they had never worshiped in their places of origin. The new experience of the sea and the encounter with the unfamiliar Cham civilization produced quite different patterns from those of Northern Vietnam (Li 1998; Do 2003). As a result, the migrants incorporated new maritime guardian spirits into their own "agricultural" pantheon.

Such a practice of newcomers appropriating foreign deities derives from a widespread belief in mainland Southeast Asia that all territory is inhabited and ruled by spirits. Many Southeast Asian peoples still believe that it is necessary for humans to establish a good relationship with the local spirits to make the land safe and prosperous, because only in this way it is possible to retain power over a new property. Especially in the old days, the new owners of the territory ritually accommodated the fact that other inhabitants once ruled over the land and its fertility. Through ritual procedures the spirits were pacified and incorporated

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[20] For a recent study of contemporary settlements of Cham Muslim in Vietnam's Mekong Delta see Taylor (2007a).

into the pantheon of the new dominant community that gained local power while indigenous inhabitants were defeated and sent away (Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003). In South Asia those who wanted to establish "meaningful bonds with the earth and its inhabitants ruled or sought to be ruled over by them" often attempted either to appropriate the power of local goddesses by establishing themselves as patrons of their cults or to destroy their power by destroying the sculptures and temples of those deities (Schnepel 2003: 171; see also Schnepel 1995:43-44).

Quảng Ngãi Province is an excellent example of peaceful pacification of foreign gods and an interesting mélange of Việt and Cham culture, especially visible in local beliefs. Tạ Chí Đài Trường (2005: 259-264) reports that at the beginning of the 20th century, Vietnamese in Sa Huỳnh still performed a large ceremony for the Cham spirits of the land such as the Uma Goddess and Chúa Ngu Ma Nương.[21] The ritual relationships with these spirits, predicated on the existence of a more powerful spiritual domain, was maintained through the ritual "buying or renting land" [*lễ tả thổ*] (Li 1998: 131; Tạ Chí Đài Trường 2005: 264). Similar forms of this ritual were also carried out on Lý Sơn Island until recently (Phan Đình Độ n.d.). Like the first generations of migrants, the contemporary inhabitants of Lý Sơn, used to perform a "ritualized bargain" through a local "sorcerer" with the Cham couple Chúa Ngu Ma Nương and make lavish sacrifices in order to keep the land fertile (cf. Li 1998:131). One of the inhabitants of Lý Sơn Island described the ceremony concerning land ownership earlier reported by Tạ Chí Đài Trường (2005) and Li (1998) in the following words to me:

> In the past, the North of Lý Sơn belonged to the Chiêm Thành [Cham Kingdom]. Our Kinh forefathers fought with the Chiêm Thành who were defeated and had to leave their land. The land remained and it was sacred [*linh thiêng*]; if our ancestors who wanted to inhabit it refused to worship them [the Cham deities] they would bring serious illnesses upon the village. That is why the forefathers installed an altar [on the old Cham territory] for a wife and a husband Chúa Ngu Man Nương. The couple managed the land and every five years the village organized the ritual of "request for land" during which many oxen and buffaloes had to be offered to keep peace. The ceremony was great and lasted several days and nights. The *phù thuỷ* [sorcerer] was invited too. He called the couple and asked them if they were satisfied with the offerings. If they said "yes" they could stop but if they said "no" they had to continue to make sacrifices of animals. The land belonged to them, without the offerings the village would be punished. If the husband required five pigs they would give him

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[21] Uma Goddess is the name for Hindu Great Goddess Paravati, usually associated with Mountains. Chúa Ngu Ma Nương is a Cham spirit of a husband and wife.

exactly five pigs. Asked they answered; the husband was easygoing but to satisfy his wife was very difficult!

Li (1998: 112) reports that Vietnamese in the South more closely resembled the customs of their Southeast Asian neighbors than their compatriots in the North. They not only appropriated foreign spirits and beliefs into their own religious practices but also more willingly experimented with the material culture of other peoples in the region. As I have already indicated, the most immediate source of inspiration were the Cham and their culture. Particularly, the Cham seafaring capacity must have impressed Vietnamese migrants who sought to survive and prosper in the quite different environment of the South (ibid: 100). Charles Wheeler (2001: 6) notes that most of the seaports were established during the Nguyễn period on the foundations of former Cham seaports that had an extensive trade exchange with predominantly Chinese seafaring merchants.[22] They served as a "nexus for sea, coastal, riverine, and land traffic that integrated Vietnamese regions and linked Vietnam with maritime Asia" (ibid.). Vietnamese migrants not only learned seafaring techniques from the Cham but also the structure of their ships followed the Cham principles (Li 1998: 112). In the present day, Quảng Ngãi, including Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn—the previous Cham ports—is an example of seafaring continuity based on a historical legacy of the Cham (cf. Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2002b). Quảng Ngãi fishermen operate for months at sea. Some of them, like Lý Sơn fishermen, have the capacity to go to the deep sea, since their fishing grounds are located far from the coast.

For most of its history Quảng Ngãi was far from a peaceful place. The more recent history of the province was marked by a few important events. In the 18th century it was an arena of conflict between highland and lowland populations. The civil war known as the Tây Sơn uprising started in neighboring Bình Định Province, included Quảng Ngãi and eventually extended over the whole of Vietnam. In the early 20th century Quảng Ngãi was the scene of serious peasant revolt against the French colonial regime (Marr 1971). In the years 1945 – 1954 when the resistance war against the French took place, the province was a stronghold of the Việt Minh. In 1954, after the First Indochina War, the United States supported the establishment of an anti-communist government south of the demilitarized zone between Quảng Trị and Quảng Bình Province. Consequently, Quảng Ngãi was assigned to the South and disconnected from the liberation movement that it strongly supported. Due to a solid

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[22] Only in Quảng Ngãi Province were located six ports—Sa Huỳnh, Thới Cần, Sa Kỳ, Lý Sơn, Đại Cổ Lũy, Mỹ Ý—which bear the Cham origin, see *Đông Khánh Địa Dư Chí* [*Descriptive Geography of the Emperor Đồng Khánh*]. (Hanoi: EFEO, 2003[1885]), Vol. 3; see also Ngô Đức Thọ and Nguyễn Văn Nguyên (2006).

communist tradition, much of the population continued to support the Hồ Chí Minh regime even when the first regular American troops entered Quảng Ngãi.[23] Shortly after 1965, Quảng Ngãi became the scene of thousands of strategic bombing missions described eloquently by Jonathan Schell (1968) and the most notorious massacre of the war, when hundreds of civilians were killed at Mỹ Lai in Tịnh Khê Commune of Sơn Tịnh District by the American military (see Kwon 2006).

In 1975, after the First Indochina War was over and the country was unified again, Quảng Ngãi, like other neighboring provinces that suffered extraordinary destruction, tried to raise itself from the ruins. In the late 1970s, the revolutionary state demanded to remake the South according to the socialist vision of society and employed the process of collective economy. However, in contrast to the North all these initiatives failed because, as Philip Taylor explains (2001: 72), "It held back the development of commodity relations and encouraged the persistence or reversion to small-scale production." As stated in the interview by official authorities in Quảng Ngãi, in Central Vietnam the relation between more prosperous and less prosperous peasants was shaped in quite a different way than in the North, and such relations were never as harsh as they were in northern villages. Many of the tenants in Central Vietnam were knowledgeable persons who treated their laborers well and provided help if necessary. It is probable that this picture is highly idealized, nevertheless the interlocutors supposedly wanted to point out that the state's policy ended in a complete fiasco. They said that when the poor farmers joined co-operatives, their situation often became worse than it had been when they worked for hire. There was also a fundamental disparity between fisheries in the northern and southern regions. By the 1980s, only 10-15 percent of the boat owners in Central Vietnam had joined co-operatives and the greatest number of them were in the provinces known today as Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên, Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận[24] (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002). In Quảng Ngãi, fishing cooperatives established from

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[23] Quảng Ngãi Province and especially Đức Phổ District are proud of the female civilian doctor Đặng Thùy Trâm who worked as a battlefront surgeon for the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam during the Vietnam War [1955-1975]. She was killed in 1970 at the age of 26 by the American military forces, probably when she travelled along the trail in the Ba Tơ jungle in the province. She became famous thanks to her diary, a wartime account covering the last two years of her life, which was found and kept by American soldiers for 35 years and only revealed and published in the original Vietnamese in 2005. The book attracted international attention and recognition. In her honor one of the hospitals in Đức Phổ District was named after Đặng Thùy Trâm. See *Nhật ký Đặng Thùy Trâm* (*Diary of Đặng Thùy Trâm*). (Nhà xuất Bản khoa học xã hội: Hà Nội, 2005); for the English version see *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram* (Harmony Books: New York, 2007). See also http://wn.com/Dang_Thuy_Tram.

[24] Borders and names in Vietnam changed repeatedly and typically with a new regime. Nguyễn Duy Thiệu (2002) refers to the provinces created by the Communist government after 1975, known as Bình Trị Province which is contemporary Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên Provinces; and as Thuận Hải Province which is contemporary Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận Provinces.

1979 to 1980 only survived a few years, as they met with resentment from the people. In the 1980s the fishing cooperatives stopped operating, although they have never been officially dissolved.

In 1986, Vietnam revised its economic policy and inaugurated a new period of socio-economic reforms. While these reforms have contributed to rapid economic growth of the two large deltas in the north and the south of Vietnam—the Red River and Mekong River Delta—Central Vietnam was left behind. At present, Quảng Ngãi Province is one of the most economically disadvantaged regions of Vietnam today. As a result, the province is a focus of various local and international development programs and projects such as the construction of a massive industrial complex, including the oil refinery Dung Quất. In 2003, pushed by international authorities like the World Bank and Asia Development Bank to balance the economic growth throughout the country, the Vietnamese government established an Economic Zone around Dung Quất Bay comprised of a light and heavy industrial zone, a new town and port, and a marine and ecological tourism resort.[25]

Dung Quất has been introduced in the mass media as an example of Vietnam's dream of modernization and progress, and Quảng Ngãi is promoted as a province "abundant in economic development potentials" including tourism development and a "future leading large-scale industrial centre, and a dynamic economic space, serving as a driving force for the nation's industrialization and modernization." Quảng Ngãi officials aspire to making this ambitious dream come true.

3.2.2   *The coast: Sa Hùynh*

Sa Hùynh is one of the five relatively small bays located in the most southward district [*huyện*] of Đức Phổ. In contrast to the portrayal in the mass media about its progress in development and modernization, Sa Hùynh is still a non-industrial area of fish and shrimp farms, salt marshes and rice fields.

"Sa Hùynh" is both a historical and common name used by local people to describe a small town, which in fact is a cluster of connected villages, stretching parallel to the beach and situated in the vicinity of the contemporary border between Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định Provinces. Initially, Sa Huỳnh did not refer to the cluster of villages but was in fact the name of one of the six seaports located in Quảng Ngãi Province.[26] Today, Sa Hùynh is officially

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[25] See http://www.business-in-asia.com/dung_quat_guang_ngai_vietnam.html, accessed on 25 June 2010.
[26] The name "Sa Hùynh' dates back to the reign of the Nguyễn lords in Đàng Trong [1558-1777] and its etymology originated from the Sino-Vietnamese term Sa Hoàng, meaning "golden sand'." In a geography book

known as Phổ Thạnh Commune or *xã*. The term *xã*, often translated as "commune," refers to an administrative unit denoting a municipality consisting of various villages or *làng*, residential units or "villages" or "communities." Depending on the region in Vietnam, sometimes the term *thôn* is used instead of *làng* to refer to "community" or both terms are used interchangeably. Occasionally the *làng* might be a unit of the *thôn*. The *làng* or *thôn* might be broken into smaller units such as "hamlets" [*xóm* or *ấp*] and "sub-hamlets" [*lân*]. In Sa Hùynh the term *thôn* is used by local authorities to denote the smallest residential unit, however people referring to their "community" might also talk about *làng* or *vạn chày* [fishing community]. Since the terms are used in a flexible way and the rules vary from region to region it would be incorrect to consider the case of one particular setting as representative for all of Vietnam (Kleinen 1999, 1999a).

The effort to determine what constitutes a village [*làng*] or commune [*xã*] might also create some confusion since in Vietnamese history borders changed often together with the names of the place.[27] Whatever "village" is a unit in present times might not have existed fifty years ago, and often it is a product of historical contingency. The history of Phổ Thạnh Commune serves as an example. Like Quảng Ngãi Province, Phổ Thạnh changed its name and borders several times. By 1945 the commune was composed of ten villages—Châu Me, Vĩnh Tuy, Tấn Lộc, Hưng Long, Thạch Bi, La Vân, Long Thạnh, Thạnh Đức, Đông Vân and Tân Diêm—and known under the name Phần Bằng Nam [Part Lying to the South]. In 1946 the commune's name was changed into "Phổ Thạnh." In 1957, the government split the commune into two parts creating two new communes: Phổ Thạch and Phổ Châu. Such splitting and merging of administrative units is a very common practice in Vietnam; typically

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of the Nguyễn dynasty *Đại Nam Thống Nhất Chí –Lục Tỉnh Nam Việt* [*Gazetteer of Great Vietnam – The Six Southern Province*].Tu Trai Nguyễn Tạo trans. Republished Saigon: Nha Văn Hóa. (1973 [1882]), we can read "That is a part of Hoàng Sa [the Paracel Island], a place of a drainage basin which lies east of the Trường Sơn Mountains with sea-water continuously washing over the shore," quoted also in *Đảng Bộ Phổ Thạnh* [*Phổ Thạnh Party Committee*](1985: 3).

[27] Sa Hùynh people reported that in the colonial time the border between the two provinces of Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định was located much more eastward than it is today. As evidence they pointed out the two identical temples called *miếu Đôi* which, located next to each other, formed the former border between the two villages of Đồng Vân and Tân An and, at the same time, between the two provinces of Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định. According to the legend, in this place local people found the head of a white horse which belonged to a Chinese general. They decided to erect a temple in order to worship the spirit of the White Horse [Bạch Mã]. However, the discussion about which side of the border would be the right place for worship turned into a heated argument between the two villages in which both claimed the right to the spirit and to the temple. In consequence, the authorities of *Phủ* [a province in colonial time] gave both villages the right to build separate temples and worship the spirit, but on the condition that the temples must be identical and cannot differ in height or embellishment. Today, the "Twin shrines" which stand on both sides of the border at a distance of only 20-30 cm from each other, remain visible evidence of the old argument between locals. For the location of the Đôi Temple see *Map 2 [11]*; p. 90.

it happened when a new regime seized power. After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the two communes Phổ Thạch and Phổ Châu were turned again into one "Phổ Thạnh" commune, only to be divided once more in 1999 due to overpopulation and difficulties in administration. Today, Phổ Thạnh Commune, with an area of over 24 square kilometers including 51,4 hectares of residential area, covers six villages [*thôn*] of Thạch By, Thạnh Đức, La Vân, Đông Vân, Tân Diêm and Long Thạnh, while four other villages—Châu Me, Vĩnh Tuy, Tấn Lộc, Hưng Long—belong to Phổ Châu Commune. However, the division went even further for some of the villages of Phổ Thạnh Commune. As a result, Thạch By, Thạnh Đức and Long Thạnh villages have also been split into two parts (see *Map 2*; p. 90).

My fieldwork focused mainly on Phổ Thạnh commune and the interrelated fishing villages of Thạch By (divided into Thạch By 1 and Thạch By 2), in the agricultural village of La Vân and in the salt-producing village of Tân Diêm. In the past Tân Diêm was a sub-hamlet [*ấp*] of La Vân, but today it constitutes an autonomous village [*thôn*]. It is necessary to note that although I tried to confine the area of my research, it was impossible to focus exclusively on those boundaries since the communities continuously expanded their ritual landscape. They organized and participated in religious ceremonies and festivals not only in their own communities but also in neighboring villages, including Phổ Châu Commune which was a part of their ritual landscape. Therefore, regardless of the administrative division, the whole township, including Phổ Thạnh and Phổ Châu Communes, was known among local folks by the name of Sa Huỳnh. Following the local perception of space, I will use the name of Sa Huỳnh when I am referring in general to this coastal settlement, and the names of individual villages when I wish to single out a particular process or phenomenon.

In Vietnam government officials are appointed at the level of the province [*tỉnh*], district [*huyện*] and municipality [or commune = *xã*] government. Local state power in Sa Huỳnh is exercised by officials recruited from the region and represented in the state institution of the People's Committee [*UBND - Ủy Ban Nhân Dân*] which is tied to the district and provincial offices of the town of Đức Phổ and Quảng Ngãi City. The People's Committee Office represented by the chairman [*chủ tịch*] at the apex oversees several administrative departments responsible for economic and administrative management of the area, guiding and organizing cultural events including religious festivals, police work, updating fishermen about new regulations, issuing the sailing licenses and investigating complaints and grievances, just to recount a few of their multiple duties.

The territory's location on the margins of state control combined with its border status make the state's presence in Sa Huỳnh rather complex. Apart from the People's Committee, the other important institution is a "Border Guard Command" [*Công an Biên phòng*] responsible for patrolling, securing and exercising sovereignty over Vietnamese territory and what are considered to be "Vietnam's territorial waters." In Sa Huỳnh the most eastward point of the headland—the hill Cấm [Forbidden]—forms the entrance to the port. Due to its strategic position, the hill serves as a military observation post. In Sa Huỳnh the Border Guard Command also alerts fishermen to storms and difficult weather conditions, provides assistance when needed and controls activities on the sea.

The population in Sa Huỳnh, occupying an area about 24 square kilometers is one of the densest in Đức Phổ District and in 2006 reached 20,000. In 2006, Thạch By comprised 1,852 households with a total population of 10,000 people. Over half of them were still of working age, which in Vietnam is from 15 to 60 years for men and from 15 to 55 years for women. La Vân, relatively small in comparison to Thạch By, consisted of 466 households with a population of 2,307. Tân Diêm had 310 households and 1,514 inhabitants.[28] However, it is difficult to say how representative these numbers are since Sa Huỳnh experiences fluctuations of incoming and outgoing migration. According to Hy Van Luong (2009a: 40), Quảng Ngãi is one of the provinces producing the largest number of migrants to Ho Chi Minh City. Many Quảng Ngãi people work in Biên Hòa (Đồng Nai Province) and the Central Highlands as well. Sa Huỳnh fishermen, for instance, go in great numbers far north and south in search of good catches, but stay close to the coast. They are concentrated in ports like Vũng Tàu, close to Ho Chi Minh City, where they form a temporary community. Their wives visit them regularly and help in the fish trade. In the last two decades, Vũng Tàu has become part of the fishermen's ritual landscape since they invite the head of the fishing community from their home village to carry out a ritual celebration, and through the local Goddess Thiên Y A Na they secure their catches at the beginning of each new fishing season. Because of space limitation I am not able to pursue this issue further.

In Sa Huỳnh, medical facilities and access to education are poor. Although there is a small medical clinic, usually people search for medical advice in nearby Bình Định Province and in more complicated cases in Ho Chi Minh City. There are three schools in the village, two primary and one secondary school. However, in case one wishes to continue schooling at

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[28] All these statistics comes from *Bảng Thống Kê Lao Động xã Phổ Thạnh năm 2006* [*Employment Statistic 2006*], obtained in Phổ Thạnh UBND.

a high school, the nearest one is located in Đức Phổ, a town thirty kilometers away from Sa Huỳnh. Only a few young people have the resources, abilities and opportunities to continue their education in the universities in distant Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City or in Quy Nhơn town (Bình Định Province).

3.2.3   *Economic activities*

Stretching from the foot of the green mountains and the sea Sa Huỳnh is still a rural rather than industrial setting. A broad sandy beach and coastal plains create more favorable conditions for the fishing industry than for wet rice cultivation. That is why the majority of its 20,000 people make a living from fishing, fish selling, production of salt and fish sauce, fish breeding ponds, boat construction, animal husbandry and small restaurants and shops. According to the data obtained in a local government office of the People's Committee, 80 percent of Thạch By—the most densely populated community—lives off fishing. Since in Sa Huỳnh there is no industry, the official authorities emphasized its increase in unemployment in the last few years. Due to the unrealistic character of annual government statistics, which pointed out that 68 percent of the total population was unemployed in 2006 and noted that Thạch By, a town that depended exclusively on fishing, had the lowest employment, it is not clear what the main criterion for such an assessment was. I assume that the statistics that showed the lowest rate in Thạch By did not consider its informal sector, but instead concentrated on the fact that most of the fishermen were landless and during the off-season could not switch to farming. The other important factor is that the fishermen's wives who usually stayed at home and took full responsibility for the household during their husbands' absence might have been regarded as unemployed. It is noteworthy that although fishery and agriculture were seasonal occupations, there existed an informal sector, as most of the villagers were still involved in small-scale artisanal production (cf. Sở Văn hóa thông tin Quảng Ngãi 2005).[29] However, they often did not consider these activities as real jobs. For them a "real job" was wage labor.

The economic and social diversification in Sa Huỳnh can be observed in the composition of the households. The poorest people live in sheds built almost on the beach. The better off live in solidly built houses above the beach and inland. Highway A-1 runs parallel to the beach, and is overcrowded with buses going at great speed from north to south and back again, along with mopeds and motorcycles with small trailers that carry most of Sa

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[29] This might include such activities as, for example, the cultivation of ornamental plants, production of bamboo baskets and fishing nets, preparing dry sea products for the sale, and tailoring.

Huỳnh's fish and other aquatic resources to the nearest markets in Đức Phổ town or even to more distant inland centers.

Shops have mushroomed along the highway in the last ten years, offering dried fish, cuttlefish, sea horses in bottles of vodka and other products of the fishing trade to passing travelers. Next to these stalls, which to Western eyes might appear more like a freak show than shops, are simple restaurants which offer a cheap bowl of noodles. For the more demanding, there are motels scattered along the main road where one can refresh oneself after a long journey by renting a room for the night and dining on fish, rice, vegetables and alcohol.

For some of its length, running between tightly packed houses then continuing parallel to the coast, the railway tracks in Sa Huỳnh mark a border between the sandy terrain and the rice paddies. Passing with a terrible roar day and night, the trains trouble Sa Huỳnh's inhabitants and fuel stories about poor wretches who somehow did not hear the approaching train and were run over. Nevertheless, people have tried to take advantage of every single occasion to sell their products and support their budgets. Thus, whenever the express train stops in Sa Huỳnh on its way from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, a group of women rush to sell dry cuttlefish, sweets and dry pancake to the passengers peering through the windows.

Beyond the tracks are rice fields dotted with small clusters of houses and groves of coconut palms stretching to the foot of the mountains. Irrigating paddy fields, a stream from the mountains flows under the railway and highway bridges and then turns unexpectedly and flows for one kilometer parallel to the beach and towards the sea. Nothing is wasted. Except in the driest months of the summer, the section of the canal stream right above the beach is very green, covered by water-fern and grass, creating favorable grazing for cows. However, there is not enough for everybody, and most people have to graze the cattle high in the hills. Early mornings some of the Sa Huỳnh people paddle upstream and check their nets in search of small fish trapped in the canal at high tide.

The long beach continually changes during the year. In autumn and winter the sea is very rough and every wave crashing against the shore brings a huge mass of sand to form dunes. The beach is full of unexpected traps, steep drops, seething whirlpools and rapid currents that can pull one under. Only the most experienced fisher folk who know the sea go fishing then. With the arrival of spring, the sea softens a bit. The sun rises earlier and the days get longer. When summer comes the beach looks like a long golden caterpillar basking in the sun on a turquoise leaf. This is a happy time for village children who splash in the sea and play football on the beach in the afternoons.

While heavy rains and raging typhoons strike Quảng Ngãi Province from August to December, it is at this time that the fisher folk use every sunny day to dry fish. Women arrange fish in rows on sheets stretched on the sand and collect them after sunset. The same procedure is applied for rice, which women dry on either side of the highway. The process of drying fish takes a few days and then the finished product is each wrapped separately in foil and sold when the first opportunity for a transaction arises.

The local market center is Thạch By, right in front of the main Buddhist pagoda Từ Phước. A big yellow sign with red letters visible from the highway announces the market. Women spend all day long in their shops or trading strolls selling rice, vegetables, fruits, spices, a bit of meat, fresh fish, clothes and other commodities. But the main fish market is the port in Thạch By. About noon the area becomes packed with dealer women waiting with baskets, prepared for the boats [*ghe*] that return with the catch from the nightly fishing. The women immediately recognize "their" boat from among those that draw up on the shore. Meanwhile, fishermen sweep the fish off the deck, throw them into baskets and pass them to the women. Then the fish are sorted according to species, size and quality, taken to nearby sheds and stored in containers with ice until the next morning. Some species, for example cuttlefish, demand additional work and dealer women spend their afternoons processing them. A few hours before sunrise the fish are transported to Đức Phổ town and sold in the market.

As I have already noted, Sa Huỳnh remains a non-industrial area consisting of different strata of people. Some of them belong to the group of the fishers who own boats and fishing gear. The "boat's owners" [*chủ thuyền*] might not be directly involved in fishing but they absolutely need skilled labor. Those who cannot afford to buy a boat or equipment are hired for such labor. The owners of the boats usually seek workers among their neighbors; others look to their families. There is also a group of traders and dealer women who organize the purchase and sale of the fish. By lending money to the boat owners, the "dealer women" [*đầu nậu*] reserve the right to purchase the catch. Another group consisting of "traders" [*chủ vựa*) and operating at the local or regional markets, also make a deal with dealer women, boat owners and fishermen to claim priority over others to buy the fish. In most cases dealers, traders and owners of the boats monopolize the fish trade through investments and together operate as a small joint venture (cf. Nguyen Duy Thiệu 2002).

In Sa Huỳnh, fishing has been an intensive activity in the coastal waters for a long time. Fishermen employ mainly traditional fishing techniques such as "trawling, hooks and lines," "lift nets," and "seine nets" [*lưới giả cào, lưới rút vay* and *nghề câu*] to catch fish far

from the shore; all these methods require hard manual labor. Fishing close to the shore and in the lagoon demands a profound practical knowledge. The fisher folk skillfully employ different kinds of nets, which are essential elements in the art of fishing. The most popular methods of using nets are *lưới bén* and *chài lưới* for catching fish and shrimps during the day and the night. The fishermen relying on their ability to locate various species gather and "drive them together into the net" [*đuổi cá*].

In the last decade, due to increasing demands for marine crops in domestic and international markets, Sa Huỳnh, like other fishing communities in Vietnam, has been incorporated into a greater market economy. As a result, Sa Huỳnh has entered into a modernization phase in which fishermen have increased their harvesting capacities. Motorization of boats enabled the search for new fishing grounds, the expansion of the lagoon under shrimp cultivation and its intensification increased harvests, the development of ice-making techniques enabled preservation of fish from a few hours to a few days, and better transport and roads intensified the fish trade to include distant markets. However, every coin has two sides, as the new technology increased individualism in what had been considered a community-based activity, and thereby reduced work opportunities.

Moreover, many fishers could not fully benefit from the modernization process and struggled with poverty and a lack of suitable technology. Before privatization in 1986, the equipment, gear and cost for building the boats was provided by the co-operatives; today the fishermen have to cover by themselves the high cost of building trawlers, which could be up to six hundred million Vietnamese dong (in 2007, 30 000 Euro), according to the boat owners. Nevertheless, Sa Huỳnh's fishers continued to hope for good catches, as did others making a living along the coast. Although they fished close to the shore, they stayed at sea for long months. The fishing crew usually consists of 15 people and operates as a private firm. Small boats and vessels are also privately owned. Ownership of the bigger trawlers varied; in Sa Huỳnh it is common to find rich fishermen who own two or even four big trawls.

Hiển was one of them. He was a vigorous man in his mid-sixties and the owner of four big trawlers. Three of his four sons worked at the sea [*làm biển*]. Fishing families were generally numerous. Male members were involved in fishing operations while women in processing and transporting their fish to the markets for sale and taking up the complicated economic transactions. A son and son-in-law played the role of the captain on behalf of his father or father-in-law, who, although he might be retired, was still the legal owner of trawlers. The rule was that the owner of the ship received half of the profit of the catch; the second half

was shared evenly between members of the crew. While Hiển did not take part in fishing excursions anymore, he enrolled in a sailing course instead of his sons, who could not directly benefit from this course. The lectures organized in a building of the People's Committee not only concerned the sailing license but also updates of the law. Thus, he took careful notes to transmit all he learned to his working sons.

Three of Hiển's daughters were married and their husbands were also involved in his business. One of the daughters, a twenty-eight-year-old woman, who lived at the house of Hiển, had an eleven-month-old son, and she had not seen her husband for ten months. Her case was one of many examples I found in Thạch By of reversed patrilineal patterns according to which a woman joined the household of her husband. Hiển also had a new daughter-in-law who had just married one of his sons and was expecting a baby. Soon after the wedding he too began working at sea together with the husband of Hiển's daughter, who was the captain of the trawler. The salary of these men fluctuated between 15-20 million Vietnamese *đồng* (700-1000 Euro, 2007) per year. Similar to other young women in Sa Huỳnh whose husbands went fishing in distant fishing grounds, Hiển's daughter opened a shop at home with various commodities for home use. She was busy taking care of her small son and the business and could not visit her husband, unlike her sister-in-law who once went to Thanh Hoá, where the young couple spent a week together.

The situation of these two women was not exceptional. In Sa Huỳnh and other coastal villages we could easily find young and middle-aged women who had to manage their household and struggle with daily problems in the absence of their husbands who were operating their trawlers far from home. Since a large number of the Sa Huỳnh fishermen worked in waters of Bà Rịa, Vũng Tàu, Hải Phòng, Đà Nẵng and Bình Ty, their children and wives saw them only a few times a year. The two directors of the primary school and secondary school pointed out during an interview that the absence of fathers at home harmed families. Single mothers were not able to deal with all the problems of adolescent children.

Most of their husbands and sons were involved in intensive fishing in Vũng Tàu Port, about 800 kilometers distance from Sa Huỳnh. According to the head of Thạch By, more than 400 Sa Huỳnh vessels and trawlers operated in Vũng Tàu waters alone, not to mention other locations. Women tried to do their best to take care of their families and usually chose those from among themselves who did not have small children and could afford it, to go once a month to Vũng Tàu. One of them, a 35-year-old woman named Hương, was appointed by the women as "a note keeper" [*chủ ghi*], and she mediated the transfer of money from Sa Huỳnh

fishermen working in Vũng Tàu to their wives staying at home. Her father joked about young Sa Huỳnh women, that at the beginning they took trips to visit their husbands because they missed them but soon it transformed into the control of their pocketbooks. Three days a month the fishing fleet of Hương's husband went ashore to repair nets and fishing gear. Thus, every month she undertook the trip by bus to Vũng Tàu Port, rented a small room in a cheap motel and spent a few days working in the fish trade side by side with her husband. Soon after the fleet came to shore she sorted and sold their catch to dealers. She collected her husband's wages and those of the other men and took them back to Sa Huỳnh.

Tài, nineteen years old, was one of the men working in Vũng Tàu. He was like most of the young fishers from Sa Huỳnh. I met him when he was still in Sa Huỳnh looking for a job. He had little education but he was already an experienced fisherman. Unlike his friend, Hiển's youngest son, he had to drop out of secondary school because his family could not afford to pay for his education. However, without having graduated from high school he was unable to get a better job or a job in the industrial zone. The only choice he had was a job in Vũng Tàu. The families of the two boys lived in the same neighborhood. Tài was brought up by his grandparents. His father left his mother when he was still a child, and a few years later, his mother married another man and moved to Nha Trang City, leaving Tài and his two younger sisters in the care of his grandmother. Since he turned fifteen he had been going to sea and learning how to fish. Last winter Hiển accepted him as a crew member for one of his trawlers in Vũng Tàu, where he encountered deep-sea fishing for the first time.

Women in Sa Huỳnh work even after age sixty and their husbands have already retired. This shows that what is officially considered the retirement age has little relevance in the village. Hương's mother was sixty-five years old and still worked. Every morning at four o'clock she got on her moped and went to the Đức Phổ market where she sold fish. Her husband made a joke that for years he fed the family, working hard at sea, but now he is too old and cannot work anymore; thus it is his wife's turn to feed him. Hương's mother operated her business together with another woman. She was responsible for carrying and selling fish in Đức Phổ while her partner in trade held places in the queues for fish and seafood at the Sa Huỳnh market. Most of the female traders make a considerable contribution in cash (called *giữ mối*) to buy preferential treatment over other dealers. They decide to make such contributions, which oscillate between 20 and 60 million Vietnamese *đồng* (1000-3000 Euro, 2007) especially when they want to buy seafood. The owner of a vessel [*chủ tàu*] usually sets a price which in fact has the form of a long-term loan. He needs loans from such dealers,

particularly if he is going to buy a vessel. The two sides draw up a contract in which they state the value of the loan and determine the time and the value of repayment. A lender gains the right to buy fish for a special price over others who do not make any such contribution. If a dealer woman puts bars of gold in pledge, the owner of the ship will be obliged to repay the equivalent at market price. In case the latter fails to keep his promise, the woman could seek justice in the People's Committee. In practice everything is based on confidence [*tín tưởng*] in an owner of the boat, who is generally trustworthy. But in fact there is no guarantee that he will keep his word. Dealer women cannot also exclude the possibility of accidents at the sea that happen from time to time. Hương's mother and her business partner said that they did not want to take a risk and they were buying seafood from a woman who made a deal with the owner of a vessel. However, it is also very probable that they simply might lack the capital. In consequence, they must accept the fact that the dealer woman charges them a higher price.

Due to the international demand for seafood, more and more farmers and fishermen seek to get rich through shrimp farming and export. Đức, a seventy-year-old man was an example of a farmer who had such hopes and set up a small shrimp business. Dry shrimps were quite expensive; the price per kilogram could even reach 250 thousand Vietnamese *đồng* (10 Euros in 2007). However, to get the best quality dry shrimps [*tôm khô*] one needed quite a big plot of land. A son of Đức took out a bank loan and bought land in La Vân village, where he built a larder for drying shrimps. Every morning Đức was buying fresh shrimps from a dealer woman in Sa Huỳnh. He cooked them for a while to reduce the unpleasant smell and then put the boiled shrimps on bamboo trays and dried them in the sun. After a few hours the dried shrimps were shelled and stored in the larder. The very next day the product was sold to a dealer woman who re-sold it to the seafood companies in Nha Trang and Ho Chi Minh City. From Ho Chi Minh City shrimps were exported to the United States and Singapore.

Traditionally, in Vietnamese coastal villages fish production was inextricably linked with other activities such as salt and fish sauce production. In Sa Huỳnh there are two villages where more than half of the population derives its livelihood from salt production: Long Thạnh and Tân Diêm. In the old days, those who did not have any land worked as day laborers for the owners of the salt-fields. As villagers stated in an interview, in the colonial period the French controlled salt production and purchased the ready product. The salt from Sa Huỳnh was sold to Tonkin (the northern part of Vietnam) and Cochinchina (the southern part). Although the French salt monopoly aimed to control the highlands and ethnic groups for whom the salt was essential for their livelihood, the illicit trade of salt and fish sauce with

Hrê and Cơ ethnic groups living in the mountain and forest regions flourished in secret. People from Sa Huỳnh travelled into the mountains to Ba Tơ, a trip which lasted about five days, to exchange the salt mostly for rice. In present times, the technique of salt production has remained the same as it was in the old days, with the difference that the postcolonial state took responsibility for the distribution of salt to the minorities. A state-run company was located in Sa Huỳnh that bought up the salt. However, people complained that the price offered by the company was so low that they preferred to sell the salt on their own initiative.

Under the influence of market forces, growing migration and mobility, traditional management systems and community-based structures are changing. Not everyone wants to eke out a living working as a fisherman. In recent times, Sa Huỳnh has encountered a situation where young people moved to Đà Nẵng, Quy Nhơn, and Ho Chi Minh City in search of better paying jobs. The temporary stay of young persons in the city became permanent when they found work, made a living and started a family. Hy Van Luong (2009b: 92-93) reports that an overwhelming number of migrants from Quảng Ngãi were young people between the age of 15 and 35. In Sa Huỳnh those who could afford it went to Ho Chi Minh or Quảng Ngãi City and paid for a basic Japanese or Korean language course that allowed them to apply for a work permit abroad. They hired themselves out as laborers in Japan or South Korea, where they stayed for several years. Young women, who did not see chances for marriage in their native village, went to Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi, in the hopes of finding a job and a husband (see Luong 2009b: 91). Those who were already married but wanted to escape poverty or were just looking for adventure also moved to the big city. Some of these young women inevitably slid into prostitution, which is rampant in karaoke bars. In turn, girls under the legal working age from neighboring Bình Định Province served tables in roadside restaurants and bars for "a bowl of rice" or small salary in Sa Huỳnh. Some of them voluntarily gave up school, but the vast majority was forced to do it because parents were unable to pay for their education. These girls grew up in poverty, and by moving to Sa Huỳnh they hoped for changes that would enable them to help their parents and start a better life.

3.2.4 *Religious sites*

In Sa Huỳnh there are numerous temples and shrines located where humanized deities and terrestrial and maritime spirits are venerated by the local community (*Map 2*; p. 90). There are also one Buddhist pagoda and two Cao Đài temples. All these religious sites, situated in individual villages, form the common religious landscape which people seek to control

through their daily ritual tasks. People attend communal ceremonies, move between sacred places and villages and make donations. However, religious and ritual life in Sa Huỳnh differs from the patterns I got to know during my stay in urban Hanoi or even in rural regions of the North. Most of the Sa Huỳnh temples are only open to the public during the anniversary of spirits, seasonal ceremonies and occasionally for a personal request. Young and middle-aged people, busy with schooling or with their jobs, rarely attend village ceremonies and leave this duty to their parents or grandparents. Those who can attend ceremonies usually donate a small sum of money in advance to village elders who are in charge of ritual preparations. Such small contributions are regarded as a token of their solidarity with the village. While communal rites are attended only by some of the residents, the village festivals organized by local authorities, usually attract crowds of young people who seek entertainment in their rather monotonous rural life.

Besides communal events organized either by village elders or local authorities, there are religious specialists in Sa Huỳnh who represent an informal and less institutionalized religious domain. Local masters specializing in exorcism, geomancy or fortune-telling are often dynamic and active persons with charismatic personalities. People turn to them and seek their help whenever they feel anxiety regarding failures in business, problems in the family, infertility, or insecurity connected with work at sea, just to give a few examples.

It is important to note that while communal village ceremonies usually enabled me to explore the male ritual space, the informal religious domain gave me more knowledge about the dynamics of female religious life. In Sa Huỳnh, as in other parts of Vietnam, women were in the past excluded from worship in communal temples and suffered ritual discrimination as a consequence of beliefs in female pollution associated with sex, childbirth, menstrual blood and trade. In Central Vietnam, some of them acted as spirit mediums for the Goddesses Thiên Y A Na and associated spirits in a ritual known in the North as *lên đồng* or *hầu bóng* (Nguyễn Hữu Thông 2001; Salemink 2008a). Nguyễn Hữu Thông notes that the rituals of spirit possession revolving around the cult the Goddess Thiên Y A Na were particularly popular in the imperial period among upper-class women in Huế, the old capital of Vietnam (in Salemink 2008a: 270). Due to their subordinate social position these women looked for consolation by becoming a spirit medium (ibid.). However, in contrast to Huế, in Sa Huỳnh the cult of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na was exclusively associated with the male domain. In Sa Huỳnh, only recently women appropriated the local cult of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na, which for a long time was confined to men. They also have established themselves as respectful
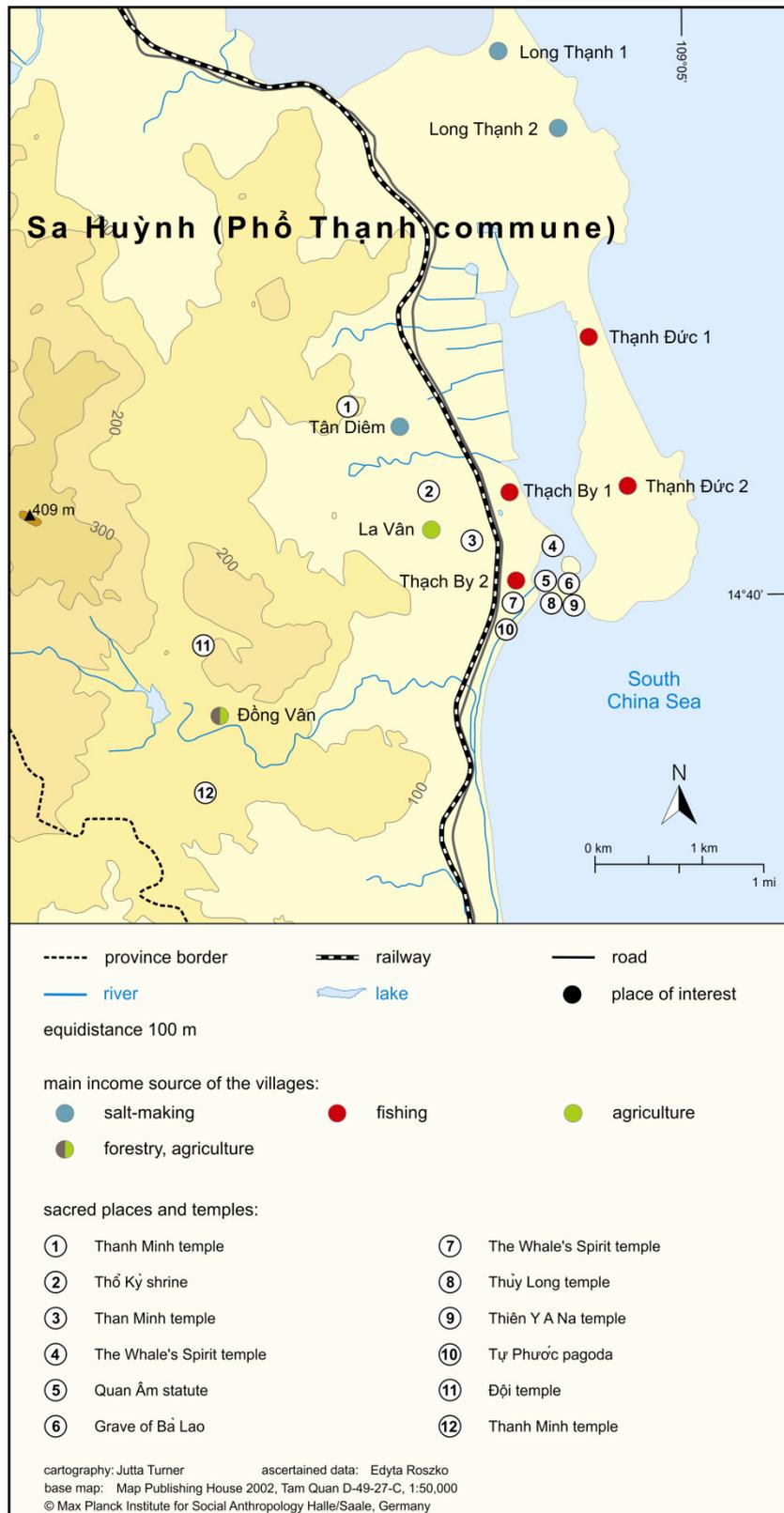
Map 2. Map of religious sites in Sa Huỳnh, Quảng Ngãi Province, Central Vietnam.

spirit mediums. Most generally, the situation of women changed to some extent, due to the socialist restructuring of the village political and religious spheres and, as a result, women were liberated from traditional prohibitions and were allowed to attend village ceremonies.

During my stay in Sa Huỳnh from November 2006 until August 2007, every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month I regularly visited the temple of Thiên Y A Na. Taking part in the trips and observing ritual practices I could learn more about women's religious space. For many of these women the excursions to the Thiên Y A Na temple were a way to deal with their daily anxieties and to ensure the well-being of their families and their trading ventures. Gradually I established closer relations with these women and met them regularly in their spare time. These contacts deepened my knowledge about how they negotiated their marginality and managed their religious space outside of communal ceremonies and how through religious practice and self-discipline they sought to mitigate risk and misfortunes in their everyday life. I will analyze this issue in more detail in Chapter 8.

In Sa Huỳnh, the Thiên Y A Na temple constituted the oldest building situated at the foot of the Forbidden Mountain and was one of the few religious structures which survived the First Indochina and Second Indochina War as well as the anti-superstitious campaigns launched in the late 1970s. Sa Huỳnh people believe that the place where her temple was located and where the South China Sea pushed the water into the channel of a small bay known as the "sea gate" of Sa Huỳnh [*cửa biển Sa Huỳnh*], was symbolically protected by the goddess. However, the Thiên Y A Na temple is one of a few religious structures located at the foot of the Forbidden Mountains. This transitional point between the sea and the land is also a place where anonymous souls of the dead are devoutly worshiped by local residents. The most interesting example, already described in Chapter 2, was the grave of the woman of Lý Sơn origin who suffered violent death in the sea, called by local folks Bà Lao.

It is impossible to list all the temples and spirits worshiped in Sa Huỳnh that form its religious landscape (*see Map 2*; p. 90). Therefore, I prefer to refer to some of them, which are particularly important for the community, in individual chapters.

3.2.5 *The island: Lý Sơn*

As I indicated in Chapter 2, Lý Sơn Island is located 30 kilometers offshore from Quảng Ngãi Province and about 300 kilometers from the Paracel Archipelago. It is a small atoll, formerly named Cù Lao Ré, which is a Vietnamese pronunciation of the Malay word *Pulao*, meaning

island.[30] In turn, the Sino-Vietnamese record of the name "Lý Sơn"—"Lý Shan" [理山] translated as the "Governed Mountains"—draws our attention to the important detail that three long-extinct volcanoes on the island played an important economic and defense role during the Nguyễn dynasty. Still today, the Lý Sơn mountains, as those in Sa Huỳnh, are used as military observation posts and play an important role in exercising sovereignty and in monitoring Vietnam's territorial waters, especially at the present time, when the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos remain a contentious territory issue between China and Vietnam, as the two countries both claim them as their own.

As in the case of Sa Huỳnh, what today constitutes the district [huyện] of Lý Sơn is a product of historical contingency. Lý Sơn Island changed its name and administrative status several times. In 1808 the king Gia Long changed the name "Cù Lao Ré" into "Lý Sơn" and made the island a *canton* [or sub-district – tổng] of Bình Sơn District (Quảng Ngãi Province). After the August Revolution of 1945, the island, consisting of two communes, maintained the status of *canton* but changed its name to "Trần Thành." In 1946 the *canton* was renamed and became the commune of Lý Sơn. In 1951, the French colonial authorities placed Lý Sơn Commune under administrative supervision of Dà Nẵng Township [thị xã] in Quảng Nam Province. In 1954, the South Vietnamese authorities again made Lý Sơn a commune of Bình Sơn District. In 1993 Lý Sơn became an independent district when separated from Bình Sơn. Today, Lý Sơn is one of the fourteen districts of Quảng Ngãi Province (Nguyễn Thanh Tùng 1999-2000; Phan Đình Độ 2006).

At present, Lý Sơn has an area of 10 square kilometers with 20,000 citizens living in three communes: An Hải, An Vĩnh, and the third commune An Bình located on the neighboring Bé Island (formerly called Cù Lao Bờ Bãi), which has been populated quite recently and was included in the Lý Sơn District. Lý Sơn Island, which remained unscathed during the First and Second Indochina Wars, is considered among provincial authorities as a storehouse of data on the settlement and development of the Việt people in central Vietnam and a potential destination for future tourism.

After colonizing the mainland in the 17th century the Vietnamese people on Lý Sơn Island are the latest residents in its long history of settlement. Archeological evidence indicates that pre-Sa Huỳnh, Sa Huỳnh and Cham civilizations were present prior to the Việt arrival on Lý Sơn. According to local family records [gia phả] the first fifteen Vietnamese families came from the mainland in 1609, divided land between them and established two

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[30] I am grateful to Andrew Hardy for this information.

villages, An Hải and An Vĩnh, which nowadays form two communes.[31] Those who came later and did not have access to free land usually formed fishing settlements. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, due to the excellent seafaring capacity of the islanders, many of them were recruited by the feudal state of the Nguyễn dynasty to collect precious sea products and goods from wrecked ships in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes.[32] Even today, the Paracels constitute the historical fishing grounds of Lý Sơn fishermen, in contrast to mainland fishermen who preferred to stay close to the coastline.

The two settlements (in vernacular Vietnamese: *làng*) of Lý Sơn today constitute the administrative communes [*xã*] of An Vĩnh and An Hải. An Vĩnh consists of two administrative villages [*thôn*]: West [Tây] and East [Đông]. An Hải forms three villages: West [Tây], East [Đông] and Central [Trung Hòa]. According to the only available data as of 2005, obtained in the district's People's Committee, An Vĩnh had 2500 households with a population of 11,422 people while An Hải had 1814 households with 8,214 people. An Bình Commune, located on the neighboring Bé Island, consisted of 106 households and its population reached 476 people. The statistics provided by the district authorities showed that by 2005 the total population of more than 20,000 people on Lý Sơn lived in 4420 households; 700 people belonged to military forces.

Local state power in Lý Sơn was represented by the district People's Committee office and two commune-level People's Committees. The three offices on the island were governed by an individual chairman who supervised the administrative works, managed local affairs and organized protection against typhoons, just to give a few examples.

3.2.6   *Economic activities*

Next to agriculture, fishing is the main occupation on the island. However, according to local statistics, 70 percent of the islanders practiced farming, not fishing, even though the soil on Lý Sơn is of poor quality and there are no big rivers or streams on the island. Nevertheless, the switch between the two livelihoods is quite common. Especially in the winter season when the sea poses a threat for humans and fishermen have to retreat into the safe shelter of their houses, many of them take up farming as an alternative occupation and a source of an

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[31] See for example *Gia Phả - Hộ Võ Văn*. [Family annals - *Hộ Võ Văn*] kept by the Võ Văn lineage, An Vĩnh Commune, Lý Sơn District, Quảng Ngãi Province or *Gia Phả - Hộ Phạm Văn*. [Family annals - *Hộ Phạm Văn*] kept by the Phạm Văn lineage, An Vĩnh Commune, Lý Sơn District, Quảng Ngãi Province.
[32] The seafaring capacity of Lý Sơn fishermen and their expeditions to the Paracel Archipelago were also noted in the latter official court records of the Nguyễn dynasty known as *Đại Nam Thống Nhất Chí – Lục Tỉnh Nam Việt* [*Gazetteer of Great Vietnam – The Six Southern Province*] (1973 [1882]).

additional income. For the remaining seasons many Lý Sơn men set sail for the fishing grounds. Mackerel, tuna, cuttlefish, shellfish, sea cucumber, seaweed, and sea coral, just to mention a few, are exploited in great amounts. From July to November shoals of herrings gathering around elevated areas on the southern side of the island give fishermen an excellent opportunity to increase their catches. According to the data provided by district authorities, as an island surrounded by sea, it has favorable conditions for raising aquatic products. It is estimated that islanders can produce more than 6000 tons of seafood per year.

However, lack of electricity is one of the many serious challenges islanders have to struggle with. According to official reports, in the whole district of Lý Sơn only 50 percent of the households have access to electricity. Available only every second day for a few hours in the later afternoon, there is just enough electricity for domestic demand and it only covers the needs of half of Lý Sơn's population. This has caused many difficulties not only for households but, above all, for the development of the sea-based economic sector on the island. For economic development's sake, the island's local authorities seek ways to solve the problem of the energy supply. The project for using wind power for generating electricity is an example.

Lý Sơn fishermen not only struggle with lack of electricity but also have to fiercely compete with better-off mainland villagers, especially at the present time when their fishing grounds around the Paracels are shrinking, although at the same time, market demands for fresh and high-quality aquatic products are higher than ever before. Consequently, Lý Sơn people are looking for ways to strengthen their ties with the mainland and enhance economic opportunities. Similar to the new Highway A-1 through Sa Huỳnh, which facilitated transport of fish to even distant inland markets, a new hydrofoil service in Lý Sơn enables the islanders to be quickly connected with the mainland, while also constituting an economic advantage. Seizing economic opportunities offered by the hydrofoil, the islanders got involved in array of trade transactions and small businesses.

One of the couples in their forties provides a good example. They had four children, and when I was there the oldest were studying in Quy Nhơn and Ho Chi Minh City. The two youngest remained at home helping their parents with household chores. Since the husband gave up his fishing career, he earned his living by farming garlic, onion and corn. His wife, who came from a farmer's family, explained that she was happy with her husband's decision about abandoning the risky and dangerous profession at sea, even though fishing brings in more money.

Two of the wife's brothers were living in the provincial city of Quảng Ngãi and neither of them was interested in continuing to work as a farmer. The younger brother worked as an official in the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism. Since the two brothers moved to the city, the husband took over their duties and helped his father-in-law in garlic and onion cultivation. He also supported his wife's small trade of deep-fried fish patties and fresh beef. Twice a week her older brother bought at the Quảng Ngãi market a fresh portion of high quality beef, packed it into polystyrene boxes filled with ice, and arranged for its transportation to Lý Sơn on board the new "fast boat." Informed by cell phone about the meat supply's arrival, the husband waited at the harbor to fetch the load. He also had an arrangement with local fishermen from whom he regularly bought a large portion of fresh tuna fish. In the evening he usually minced the fish. The minced tuna was further processed by the wife who added carefully weighed-out portions of spices. Her two youngest sons formed the flat cakes and fried them in deep oil. The very next day the product was sold by the woman on the local market. The trade of deep-fried fish patties and beef brought a sufficient profit, significantly contributed to the household budget and supplemented income derived from farming. As a result, the couple was sufficiently well off to lend money at low interest to those who needed cash.

Lý Sơn people have always strategized for their economic survival and experimented on an individual basis. Due to a shortage of fresh water for agricultural and domestic use they tried alternative crops in order to make a living off the sandy soil. In the 1950s they tested red rice plants taken from the highlanders, but the cultivation turned out to be too demanding and farmers were forced to look for more suitable crops like sweat potatoes. However, a major success story in Lý Sơn's agrarian history has been islanders' ability to improve a method of garlic and shallot cultivation in the sand that was invented by a man in the l940s. By sanding the clay beds near the seashore to make percolation possible, one of the farmers successfully initiated garlic and shallot cultivation. In the early 1960s, the method was adapted by others who started to use sand from the seashore and even seawater for garlic crops.[33] The success of this experiment allowed them to sell garlic and shallots to Ho Chi Minh City. However, between 1988 and 1989, heavy exploitation of sea-sand beaches on the island caused the beaches to almost entirely disappear. Although islanders invented a method to recycle the sand, it did not prevent a crisis in the garlic industry due to shortage of sand. In 2008 the

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[33] For a similar case of successful experimentation with cultivation of shallots in Southeastern Ghana, see Akyeampong (2001).

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situation became so serious that farmers were forced to buy sand from people who dug it from the seabed.

Agriculture and fishing are main sources of possible income in Lý Sơn. Recently, however, islanders have seen the island as a potential destination for tourism. Although the tourist industry as such does not exist yet on the island, a few Lý Sơn families opened a kind of small guesthouse for visitors from the mainland. Others seriously considered turning their houses into small hotels for future domestic and foreign tourists.

"Quê hương" [native village] is one of the very few guesthouses on the island which offers overnight accommodation. It is suitably located next to the harbor where ships from the mainland usually moor. The guesthouse was run by another couple in their early forties who had two children. Their older daughter was already married and lived in Ho Chi Minh City. A son was in elementary school. The yard of their house in the mornings turned into a coffee shop where local fishermen met and talked about daily business. The couple employed girls usually from distant villages of the Mekong Delta who in the morning helped the owners to serve coffee and in the evening were employed as hostesses to offer their services to (male) guests.

According to the official statistics of 2005, over 11,000 people in the whole district were of working age, however I could not obtain information about the rate of unemployment.[34] Agriculture or fishing did not seem to be attractive to young people on the island and some anticipated the development of the tourist sector in Lý Sơn. For example, one young man, inspired by a relative working in the Quảng Ngãi Culture Office, decided to study museology in distant Ho Chi Minh City, training which he believed holds prospects toward getting a job when the island becomes a tourist attraction. Since 2007 the Quảng Ngãi central authorities built the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa memorials, which include a museum, a restored communal house, a temple and the monument to the Hoàng Sa Navy. He was convinced that his knowledge and experience would be helpful in recovering the island's history.

3.2.7 *Religious sites*

According to historians and archeologists, Lý Sơn could be a veritable storehouse of historical documentation in the form of centuries-old architecture, Sino-Vietnamese inscriptions decorating the walls of religious buildings, family records, popular tales, local names of

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[34] See *Niên gián thống kê, huyện Lý Sơn, tỉnh Quảng Ngãi* [*Yearbook statistic, Lý Sơn district, Quảng Ngãi Province*], obtained in Lý Sơn UBND.

places and divinities of Cham origin, to mention just a few examples. Below, the two maps of An Hải and An Vĩnh's religious landscapes (*Map 3 and Map 4*; pp. 98-99) well illustrate the impressive concentration and wealth of religious structures which survived unscathed the First and the Second Indochina Wars, which barely touched the island. Like elsewhere in Central Vietnam, many of these temples bear traces of assimilation of Cham elements into Việt culture, while others show strong Chinese influence. They cast an interesting light on the history of island, but also constitute an arena of contestations and dynamic changes since islanders struggle for the provincial and national "Certificate of Designation of a Historical and Cultural Relic" [*di tích lịch sử văn hóa quốc gia*] as well as official authorization for their communal ceremonies.

Similar to Sa Huỳnh, village communal ceremonies on Lý Sơn Island constituted an exclusively male domain from which women were excluded. Despite the socialist restructuring of the village political and religious spheres, Lý Sơn elders who were in charge of ritual life on the island perpetuated the exclusion of women from worship in communal temples. Occasionally, during certain ceremonies, such as the death anniversary of Thiên Y A Na, women were prohibited from entering the kitchen adjacent to the temple and men were in charge of all preparations, including cooking and distribution of food during communal feasts. Moreover, in Lý Sơn men but not women acted as spirit medium for the Goddess Thiên Y A Na.

Apart from the communal worship, there existed a more informal and less institutionalized domestic religious domain. However, I found that this also was dominated by men. I chanced upon particular types of healers and exorcists called "magician" [*thầy pháp sư*, "master of sorcery," "master of the Dharma" [*thầy pháp*) or "master of magic water" [*thầy phù thủy*] who served as intermediaries between the people and ghosts and divinities; they also played the role of spokesmen during communal offerings or used their special power to expel or pacify evil spirits that caused a wide range of diseases and misfortunes in the village.[35] On Lý Sơn Island the tradition of "sorcery" was handed down from father to the eldest son, who learned the ritual forms, magic charms and incantations, and the craft of making amulets by assisting his father. Women were generally excluded from this circle due to their menstrual cycles or pregnancy, which made them "unclean." The younger "sorcerers"

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[35] For more information about the "master of the Dharma" see Cadière (1955-1957); Hickey (1964); Didier (1996); Do (2003).
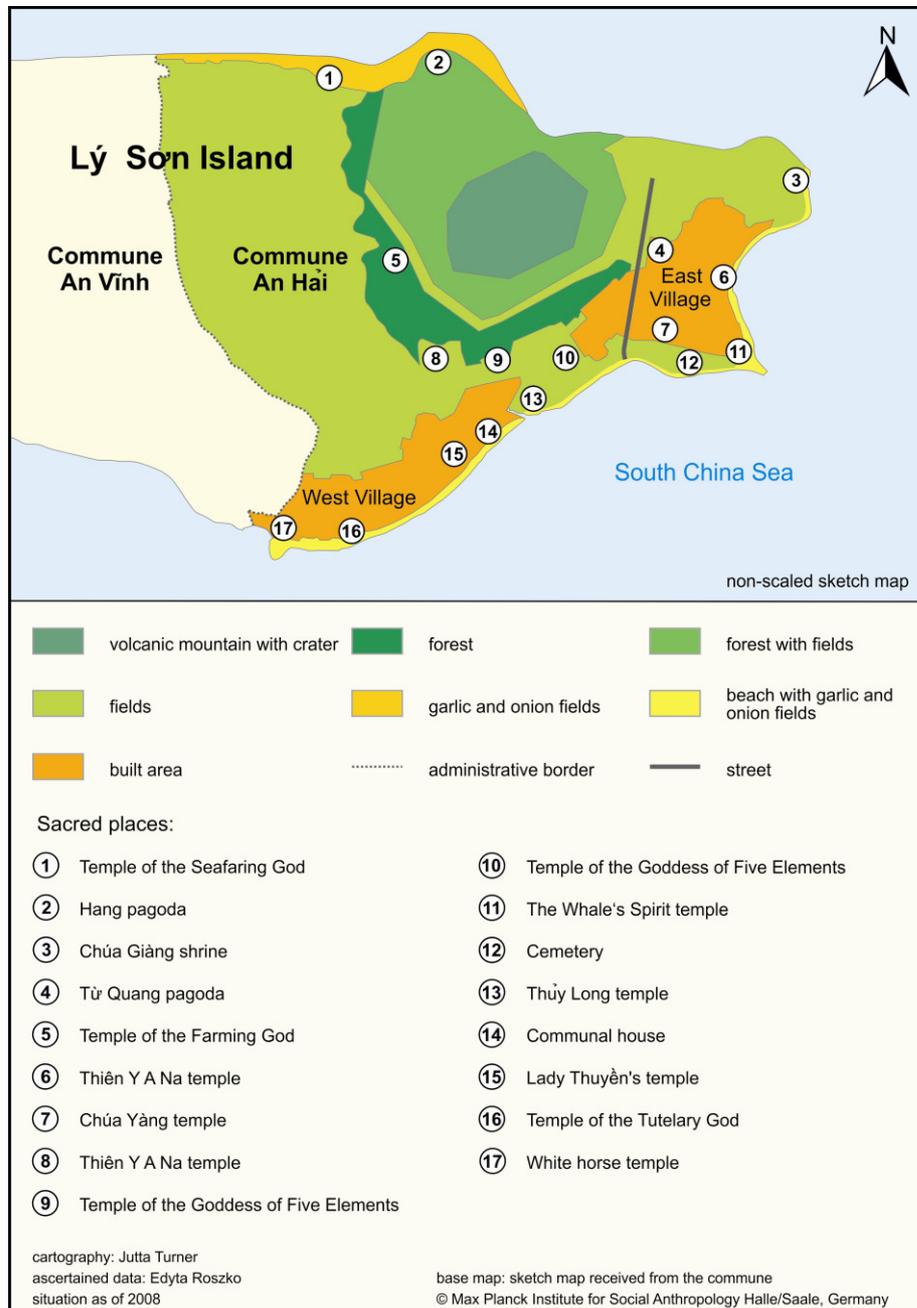
Map 3. Map of religious sites in An Hải Commune, Lý Sơn Island.

N

Lý Sơn Island

Commune
An Vĩnh

Commune
An Hải

① Đụn pagoda

② Tịnh Xá Ngọc Đức pagoda

West Village

③ Võ Văn Khiết's temple

④ Ông Bà temple

⑤ Temple of the Goddess of Five Elements

⑥ Caodai temple

⑦ Inner Dune temple of the Whale's Spirit

⑧ Outer Dune temple of the Whale's Spirit

⑨ Caodai temple

harbour

⑩ Temple of the Goddess of Five Elements

⑪ Âm Linh Tự temple

⑫ The Whale's Spirit temple

⑬ Thiên Y Na temple

East Village

⑭ Temple of the Dead

⑮⑯⑰⑱ ⑲ ⑳ ㉑㉒

㉓

South China Sea

non-scaled sketch map

■ pasture	■ fields	■ garlic and onion fields
■ beach with garlic and onion fields	■ beach	■ built area
.... administrative border	—— street	

Sacred places:

①	Đụn pagoda	⑬	Thiên Y Na temple
②	Tịnh Xá Ngọc Đức pagoda	⑭	Temple of the Dead
③	Võ Văn Khiết's temple	⑮	The Whale's Spirit temple
④	Ông Bà temple	⑯	The Whale's Spirit temple
⑤	Temple of the Goddess of Five Elements	⑰	U Linh Sa Nữ Vượng temple
⑥	Caodai temple	⑱	Shrine of the founders of the village
⑦	Inner Dune temple of the Whale's Spirit	⑲	Temple of the Goddess of Five Elements
⑧	Outer Dune temple of the Whale's Spirit	⑳	Lady Roi's temple
⑨	Caodai temple	㉑	White Horse temple
⑩	Temple of the Goddess of Five Elements	㉒	Vĩnh An pagoda
⑪	Âm Linh Tự temple	㉓	Communal house
⑫	The Whale's Spirit temple		

cartography: Jutta Turner
ascertained data: Edyta Roszko
situation as of 2008

base map: sketch map received from the commune
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Map 4. Map of religious sites in An Vĩnh Commune, Lý Sơn Island.

were less traditional than their older masters and stated during the interviews that they did not see any obstacles for a woman becoming sorceress, although they could not report any who had done so on the island. I did not meet any female religious specialists in Lý Sơn, but I could not exclude the possibility that there might be women like there were in Sa Huỳnh who healed certain diseases, read cards, told futures, made amulets using threads of different colors and wrote mysterious signs on paper; but they did not have the ability to do exorcisms.

Although women did not resist restrictions on their participation in village ritual life imposed on them by men, it does not mean that they did not practice religion. One of the important religious spaces for women was Buddhist pagodas. Here women expressed their religiosity and took the initiative in organizing religious events. More often, on the first and on the fifteenth day of a lunar month women visited pagodas, made offerings for Buddha, listened to sermons given by monks, prepared vegetarian meals, and chanted sutras together with other women. Men were not excluded from Buddhist practices and were welcome to join the women. Men and women together helped the Buddhist clergy to maintain pagodas in good condition and often took responsibility for cleaning and renovation work as a part of "improving their karma" and collecting "merit" [*làm công đức*].

Although it is not my intention to question changes in religious life in the village caused by the anti-superstition campaigns and the shift in the village power structure caused by the socialist reforms, I would like to point out that Lý Sơn represents an interesting case of maintaining an old gender division in ritual life. The existing exclusion of women from the worship in the communal temples distinguishes Lý Sơn from other places in Vietnam described by anthropologists (see e.g., DiGregorio 2001; Malarney 2002) as well as from what I observed in Sa Huỳnh. However, what matters here, is that the observed differences gives us a more complex picture of various dynamics of ritual life in post-Socialist Vietnam.

3.3   Conclusion

My aim in this chapter went beyond providing the reader with basic information about the field setting. To gain a broader perspective on Quảng Ngãi Province and of the two communities—Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn—and to capture the social and interactional character of their relationship with the sea, I brought some relevant historical and economic aspects into focus. My point is that to understand the contemporary way of life of people in the two settings requires us to look at how the previous generations interacted with other groups of people who were culturally distinct. Therefore, I drew attention to the efforts of Vietnamese

migrants to turn their new environment into a space which would be accessible and manipulable through religion and ritual; such operations included the construction of temples on the foundation of the Cham religious sites and appropriation of spirits of the previous owners of the land. The seafaring capability of the Vietnamese in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn is another telling example of a historical continuity found in Quảng Ngãi. Furthermore, by drawing the picture of the province and the two settings in historical perspective I provided a basis for better understanding how contemporary inhabitants deal with the world outside. Accordingly, description of the present-day economic activities gave the reader a sense of everyday concerns, potential conflicts and problems in the littoral society. In the next chapter, I will turn to the socio-religious organizations of the littoral society.

Littoral Society and Its Socio-Religious Organizations

Figure 4. Procession in honor of the village's founders, An Hải Village, Lý Sơn, 2007

There is a legend among fishermen in Central Vietnam that the ship of King Gia Long was rescued from sinking by the Quan Âm Goddess who tore off a scrap of her dress and threw it into the sea, creating the whale that carried the royal ship on his back safely to the shore. According to local Buddhist beliefs, Quan Âm Goddess or the Goddess of Mercy is a Buddhist bodhisattva who resigned his search for "nirvana" and instead took a female form in order to help people. Her cult is particularly popular among fishermen of the South Central Coast of Vietnam who believe that she helps them during storms.

Moved by the whale's deed, King Gia Long in his gratitude included the whale in his family and gave him the royal title of Great General of the Southern Sea [Nam Hải Đại tượng quâ]. Since this time, fishermen in Central Vietnam have considered the whale as their tutelary spirit and "father" [cha] who protects them during their voyages at sea. Therefore, whenever they find a beached whale on the shore they organize a funeral ceremony and erect a temple, which serves as a kind of tomb for the marine mammal. Every year those fishermen celebrate the anniversary of its death and make offerings at the altar in its temple.

According to local narratives, in Lý Sơn at the beginning of the 19th century farmers found a whale beached on the shore just opposite the temple of the Goddess of Five Elements [Bà Chúa Ngũ Hạnh] which belonged to the village An Vĩnh. The five statues of this goddess represent Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood and keep the balance between yin [âm] *and* yang [dương]: *the principles of* order *and* disorder. *The villagers decided to include the seafaring deity in their spirit pantheon. The fishermen's organization Vĩnh Thạnh protested and claimed the property rights to the beached whale. However, the farmers did not want to yield and remained steadfast in their decision. They strongly believed that the Whale Spirit chose their village to send rain in time of drought and to improve crops. Subsequently, the two communities of farmers and fishermen reached a compromise by building two separate temples called the Outer Dune Temple [lăng Cồn Ngoài] and the Inner Dune Palace [dinh Cồn Trong] designated to venerate the Whale Spirit that was revered by fishermen and farmers under his full name Great and Cruel General of the Southern Sea [Nam Hải Dạ Sa Đại tướng quân tôn thần]. It was decided that the fishermen's anniversary celebration would precede the one organized by the farmers but it could not be held without the presence of the village senior—the ritual master of high sacrifice and representative of the founding lineage and hence a farmer—as a sign of Vĩnh Thạnh's respect for the village.*

4.1   Introduction

This chapter looks at what it means for people in Vietnam's littoral society to have two main livelihoods—farming and fishing—within their communities. More precisely, it examines how this distinction became the basis for constructing, maintaining, but also deconstructing a social and ritual dichotomy between *land* and *sea* activities in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn. It details the social relations between farmers and fishermen that were established through religious ceremonies and hierarchical stratification and charts important changes caused by new socio-economic and political situations.

Michael Pearson, a historian of the Indian Ocean, wrote that "[f]olk religion on the littoral (…) reflects the need of its practitioners. The concerns of coastal people were usually quite different from those of peasants and pastoralists inland. On the coast religion had to do with customs to ensure safe voyages or a large catch, or a favorable monsoon so that fishing could recommence. Particular gods were propitiated for these purposes."[36] The vignette told above well illustrates Pearson's point about different concerns of agriculturalists whose main worry in this context was over rain for their crops, and of fishermen who rather wanted to ensure a safe passage at sea. Here, we touch the heart of the problem—different perceptions of what constitutes *valuable* work.

In the past, rice in Vietnam was considered the essential staple that could be kept for long periods and used in time of famine. In this sense farm labor was highly valued. Unlike rice, fish had to be consumed shortly after catching and, hence, just added variety to a farmer's meal, which predominantly consisted of boiled rice, sometimes with a drop of fish sauce and some vegetable morsels (Jamieson 1985). In Vietnamese society farmers look down upon fishermen since fishing has been considered the easier way of life. In contrast to the hard labor of a farmer who had to invest in the soil through cultivation and to look after the fields in order to enjoy his yields, a fisherman, it was believed, just went to sea and extracted its produce, giving nothing in return. The old folk proverb—"In the village, the scholars come first, the farmers come second; but when the rice runs out and one wanders [in search of a bowl of rice], scholars come after farmers"—gives us a sense that farming was a highly valued activity, since the good yields of rice in a year guaranteed that villagers would not starve (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 118).

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[36] Michael Pearson. Coastal Communities and Maritime History. *History in Focus*. The Sea (Autumn 2005), retrieved on15 February 2011 from http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/.

Farmers invest in land and make it productive through labor, ritual and property. In turn, fishermen invest in their fishing gear, take whatever the sea offers them and sell whenever the occasion shows itself. However, something else the vignette above shows is that in coastal areas the quite different modes of life of farmers and fishermen are inextricably interwoven since the land and the sea shape and influence their living environment, social organization and religion. While social and ritual boundaries between farmers and fishermen are constructed and nurtured through sacred places, worship of agricultural and seafaring spirits, religious ceremonies and hierarchical stratification, they are also undermined, negotiated and modified when an occasion demands it. To put the argument of this chapter in a nutshell: even as people in the littoral society of Vietnam cognitively dichotomize the two main environments of *land* and *sea*, these two categories remain extremely fluid in everyday life.

In the first section of this chapter I explore how the different perceptions of what constitutes valuable work shape the image of farmers and fishermen in Central Vietnam's littoral society. To provide the reader with a general idea of the distinction between the *land* and the *sea* that constitutes the littoral society on the South Central Coast of Vietnam, in the subsequent part I will analyze *vạn* as a "guild" and a "territorial unit." Furthermore, I will show that two identities of land-based village and sea-oriented village exist in relation to each other but at the same time, are relative categories. Last, but not least, I will focus on the process of how exactly the ritual boundaries between sea- and land-based units are constructed and transgressed by fishermen in the present time. I argue that fishermen have gained a stronger economic position than farmers and through heavy investment in agricultural temples and rituals, try to turn the tables and overturned the old hierarchy.

4.2   Dichotomy between the *land* and the *sea*

The dichotomy between the *land* and the *sea* that constitutes the littoral society in Central Vietnam is expressed in the two *emic* terms: **làng** and **vạn**. Traditionally, **làng** or "village" constituted the territorial unit of Vietnamese society, with the political and religious system localized in the *đình* [communal house], and represented a land-based lifestyle. In the *đình* villagers spiritually ensured good harvest for the upcoming year through the worship of those who first broke the land under the plough [*tiền hiền*] and the founders of the village [*tiền*

hậu].[37] In Quảng Ngãi, ***vạn*** referred both to the *self-ruling fishing organization* and the *territorial unit* with its own religious system localized in the *lăng*, a temple for the cult of a seafaring guardian spirit—the Whale. The fact that *lăng* means "tomb" speaks volumes about fishermen's concerns, as through offerings in propitiation of the Whale Spirit they sought protection rather than ensuring and controlling the fertility of land and hence, the village.

Trần Quốc Vượng (1992: 29) notes that in pre-colonial and colonial Vietnam fishing was a despised occupation and fishermen constituted one of the most marginalized groups in the society. Landless and without roots in the village and living in the areas close to the sea and rivers, fishermen were discriminated against and deprived of the spiritual and material contributions offered by the *làng*. Such a situation was not unique to Vietnam. Various authors provide accounts of traditional Islamic, Hindu, and also Buddhist societies in which fishermen were perceived as being "out of culture" and having lower social status (see e.g., Serjant 1995); these biased attitudes in reference to fishing activities survived until present times (see e.g., Hoeppe 2007; Chou 2003, 2010). For example, Götz Hoeppe (2007), in the context of South India, provides evidence that fishermen for a long time lived at the fringe of a predominantly agrarian society and were considered polluting and unapproachable by high-status Hindus. Still today Indian fishermen admit to their occupation with reluctance, arguing that it is only temporary, even though fishing has been their livelihood for five generations.[38]

In the case of Vietnam, Nguyễn Duy Thiệu (2002) recounts that the fishing hamlet attracted the poorest landless peasants who on the basis of kinship, neighborhood, or a common fishing technique formed the *vạn* as distinct from the land-based *làng*. In Northern Vietnam and the north coast of Central Vietnam the *vạn* was known but in a different form, as floating communities living on boats along the banks of rivers or in the lagoons. These "water inhabitants" [*cư dân thủy*] formed small hamlets or *chòm* scattered among shallows in the vicinity of rocky caves, which provided good shelter in case of storms. This kind of *vạn* was unstable and fishermen often moved in search of new fishing areas (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 91-92).[39]

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[37] In Central and Southern Vietnam communal houses were characteristically erected in honor of the *tiền hiền* and the *tiền hậu*: those who first broke the land under the plough and the founders of the village. If the communal house was a northern *đình* it would be a shrine for the village guardian spirit. The guardian spirit of the village or *thành hoàng* worshipped in the northern *đình* could be either a historical or a mythical person.

[38] Personal communication from a director of the Integrated Coastal Management Venkatesh Salagrama, Halle 8 March 2007.

[39] Such communities are now the target of (unsuccessful) state resettlement programs, just like the upland minorities are, see for example Chou (2010).

The members of fishing hamlets did not have access to the communal house in the *làng*. Not having land and, hence, not being able to invest in land through labor, the fishermen were not allowed to vote or to vie for positions of canton chief, village head, or any other administrative post in the village. The fishing hamlet was not protected by a head-night watchman as the village would have been. Another important distinction from the *làng* was that the northern *vạn* did not have a site of communal worship or ancestral hall. The floating community, in comparison with those on the mainland, held all family ceremonies on the boat of a patrilineage kin group (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 97).

Apart from the *vạn*, in Northern Vietnam there were so-called "fishing villages" or *làng đánh cá* whose inhabitants engaged in both fishing and farming. These villages resembled the fairly common "craft villages" [*làng nghệ*] of the North whose inhabitants were experts in goldsmithery, production of conical hats, manufacture of furniture or silk and the like, alongside agriculture (see e.g., Toàn Ánh 2005 [1968]; DiGregorio 2007). The social structure of these fishing villages also resembled the exclusively crop-growing villages, since their members also engaged in agriculture and worshiped guardian spirits in the local communal house. These communities stretched to the seaside, but their mainstay was agriculture. "Fishermen" in those settings did not dare to go out into the open sea, but preferred to stay close to the shore and catch fish during the season when the sea was calm. Thus, they were much more related to land than their declared occupation might suggest. In fact, fishing was regarded as a sideline, and for the rest of the year, members of "fishing villages" were engaged in other activities such as farming or trading (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 113-115).

A social organization that performed important mutual aid functions in the northern fishing villages was the *giáp* or "patrilineal organization" (DiGregorio 2007). It did not have a formal character but was rather created among men on the basis of age, lineage, a common neighborhood or hamlet, worship of particular spirits, or a number of other factors. One village might consist of many patrilineal organizations while others had none at all. Generally, this organization was not necessarily limited to the territorial unit and was open to members of other lineages and neighborhoods. The aim of the patrilineal organization was to help its members in various ways whenever they faced troubles. However, what is essential for my analysis is that the membership was passed down from father to son and enjoyed certain privileges. One of the most important privileges, in addition to the right to receive communal land, was the permission to practice the fishing profession (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 79).

Thus, fishing in those villages was complementary to agriculture and a hereditary occupation, a feature *absent* in the South Central Coast of Vietnam where the admission to the fishing craft was entirely voluntary.

Fishing hamlets on the South Coast of Central Vietnam do not fit strictly in any of the above-mentioned types of the fishing communities, but it would be wrong to consider them as a total transformation of the northern model. Tonan (2008: 248) aptly points out that in the course of the southward progression of the Vietnamese, village arrangement and patterns of power and wealth involving the dominant village families were taken south and reproduced with some modification in a new environment (see also Chapter 3). If we look at the geography of Vietnam, we see that in Central Vietnam a narrow strip of lowlands linking the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong River Delta in the south is trapped between the Trường Sơn Range to the west and the South China Sea—"East Sea" in Vietnamese—to the east. These lowlands consist of alluvial plains and sandy strips of coastal dunes. In Quảng Ngãi Province from the 16th to the 18th centuries, the newcomers deforested vast terrains of the region in order to gain arable land for rice cultivation and to found villages through common efforts of members of the patrilineal organization from their place of origin. These groups established dominant positions on the basis of their prestige as first settlers in the frontier area even though in their place of origin they might have been outcasts. They invested in the land through labor and made this land their property. Soon after a new village received its name[40] it was included in the province register and, like in the North, the villagers could officially erect a *đình*, which was the political and religious center of the village (Nguyễn Văn Mạnh 1999). The memory of their arrival and at the same time the right to the new land was preserved in the local *đình* through the cult of the founders. The exclusive character of the founders' cult had a burdensome influence on newcomers who could not claim this common experience and consequently were rejected from village membership and land ownership. Making the best of the natural conditions in the new environs, they formed *vạn* on sandy strips of coastal dunes and depended on fishing for living.

In Sa Huỳnh, according to the local narratives, the most fertile plains were occupied by the first migrants coming from the North. The village convention of Sa Huỳnh indicates that the agricultural village of La Vân had been already established in 1740 (the 1st year of

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[40] In many cases the names of villages founded by northern migrants in Central Vietnam were named after their place of origin; An Vĩnh and An Hải villages on Lý Sơn Island are examples.

King Cảnh Hưng).[41] According to historical data, the fishing settlement Thạch By was established much later than La Vân, namely in 1816 (the 15th year of King Gia Long). Situated on the most favorable land, La Vân was regarded as the head village, while adjacent Đông Vân and Tân Diêm formed small dependent hamlets. Inhabitants of Tân Diêm, which is located closer to the sea, are to this day engaged in producing salt, while Đông Vân, situated on the hills, combines forestry and agriculture. In turn, Thạch By and Thạnh Đức, sitting directly on the beach, developed into fishing communities, *vạn* (see *Map 2*; p. 90), which had inferior status *vis-à-vis* the land-based *làng*.

Toàn Ánh (2005 [1968]) observed that a new "hamlet" was not only created by those who arrived later than the established group, but some were also developed when there was not enough land, or the land was barren, or some families resettled in the vicinity of river, sea, or forest to earn their living fishing, producing salt or working at clearing forest. They asked the village for permission to establish a new hamlet that was run by a separate chief, although it was administratively subordinate to the village. In the course of time the newly created hamlet could become an autonomous village (Toàn Ánh 2005 [1968]: 23, 31 and 121). This was the case for Đông Vân and Tân Diêm, but Thạch By and Thạnh Đức constituted settlements outside of the *làng* system and hence of the state land ownership-based administration.

While Sa Huỳnh's composition of fishing and farming villages illustrates the division between the *land* and the *sea* activities well, Lý Sơn provides an interesting case of an attempt to emulate the mainland pattern even though on the island there was *no* arable land for rice cultivation. Lack of arable land and inability to grow rice is an important detail that sheds new light on the formation process of categories such as *làng* and *vạn*. In the face of serious physical constraints to growing rice, islanders still reproduced the hierarchical division between farmers and fishermen that they knew from the mainland.

Coming from the northern coast of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh (North Central Coast) some of the "founders" and "great lineages" might have had the lower status of fishermen, but in the new setting, by taking advantage of being first, they established themselves as a superior *làng*. The recognized descendents of the "founders" formed dominant lineages and an unofficial channel of grassroots administration—chiefs of hamlet [*xóm*] and sub-hamlets [*lân*]—that operated within the context of "patrilineages" of the village. Other lineages that were ranked alongside the "founders" but did not win the same

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[41] See *Hương ước, Đức Phổ* [*Village convention of Đức Phổ District*]. (1937). Hanoi: École Francaise D'Extrême – Orient. Unpublished manuscript, Library of Social Science, Hanoi.

power were those whose precursors came shortly after the founders; these lineages were called *tộc lớn* or "great lineages." This hierarchical stratification survived until today on the island and it was displayed in religious and ritual practices. All these groups recorded their genealogy [*gia phả*] in individual lineages' ancestral halls. Others, who might have been fishermen or peasants, were not admitted to the *đình* order and did not share equal rights as village members because they arrived much later than the "founders" and "great lineages." They had to obtain permission from the "founders" or "great lineages" to buy a plot of land and build a house on the territory of the village, but even in such cases they were not considered its legitimate members. Having been denied village membership, they joined forces and formed a *vạn* with its own civil code, although it was still dependent on the village.

However, in contrast to Sa Huỳnh where fishing communities occupied sandy dunes and, thus, could be easily distinguished from agricultural villages with their surrounding rice fields, on Lý Sơn Island fishing and farming settlements merged with each other, exactly because of the lack of arable land for rice cultivation. More precisely, the two "municipalities" (see Chapter 3) of An Vĩnh and An Hải were established in the 17th century as two *làng*, but shared their territory with two *vạn*: Vĩnh Thạnh and An Phú. Vĩnh Thạnh *vạn* was positioned within the territory of An Vĩnh village, while An Phú *vạn* overlapped with An Hải village. This arrangement survives today.

Conversely, those who formed *làng* could not claim superior status on the basis of investment in rice cultivation; nor could they produce the crop that would rescue the village from starvation in times of famine. Unable to keep strict physical boundaries between the *làng* and the *vạn*, *làng* members of the two villages nurtured these separate categories through rituals and ceremonies and through claiming that their ancestors were the first settlers on the island who tamed the new "wild" land and founded the villages. They experimented with different crops like beans, sweat potatoes, and corn but none of these crops provided a substitute for rice or were valued highly. Similar to fishermen, the *làng* was forced to buy rice from mainlanders. Consequently, the position of members of the *làng* vis-à-vis fishermen was much weaker in comparison to that of their counterparts in Sa Huỳnh where the *làng* had landed property, paid land tax and produced rice. In its effort to strengthen its role, the *làng* on the island continued to seek a way to produce rice, the staple and ritual food. In Chapters 2 and 3 I noted that in the island's history there were several attempts to grow rice. Desperate to find a kind of rice that would take root in their infertile soil, members of the *làng* even turned

to the highlanders and tried planting red rice. But all these attempts were fiascoes. At present, the most successful crops are garlic and onion.

To give the reader a general idea of the dichotomy between the *land* and the *sea* that constitutes the littoral society on the South Central Coast of Vietnam, in the two subsequent sections I will analyze *vạn* as a "guild" and a "territorial unit."

4.3   *Vạn* as "guild" and "territorial unit"

Most generally, those living on the sandy dunes were not allowed by the rest of the Vietnamese population to settle on the land and, hence, they remained outside of the state's purview. Thọai, a retired fisherman in Sa Huỳnh born in 1940, described fishermen as "stateless" people in the following words:

> In the past, the beach was only for those involved in marine professions, while the inland was controlled by the government, the state. (…) When you do fishing you do not have any land, even any plot of ground to bury yourself; when you die your family has to ask the village [*làng*] to bury you. This is the custom of the forefathers of the poverty-stricken northern people who came here to work…

Nguyễn Duy Thiệu (2002: 334) points out that in the pre-colonial and colonial times the *vạn* in the southern part of Central Vietnam did not have a formal administrative apparatus and was, above all, a *religious* organization. However, Thọai's statement suggests that the *vạn* in Sa Huỳnh was also a settlement. Indeed, Sa Huỳnh *vạn* has its genesis in a *professional* and *religious* organization, but it was also a "territorial unit" which functioned according to its own rules similar to a village in which residents formed patrilineal groups and had the same occupation. It is worth repeating that unlike the northern *vạn* that consisted of only those who lived on the water in boats, the *vạn* on the South Central Coast was established by those living on the beach and was modeled after the social structure of the village but characterized as a looser and more open entity. For the clarity of my analysis I will return to this important aspect in the next section of this chapter, and here I focus on presenting a general characterization of the *vạn*.

More importantly, the *vạn* had its own communal temple where fishermen venerated their guardian spirit and discussed public matters, similar to the agricultural village that had a *đình*. In this temple, literally called "mausoleum" or "tomb" [*lăng*] or simply *vạn*, fishermen kept bones of the beached whale usually known as Mr. Nam Hải. According to Nguyễn Duy

Thiệu (2002: 334-335) the charters [*sắc phong*] granted to the fishermen's temples by the Nguyễn dynasty [1802-1945] indicate the religious character of the *vạn*. The common feature of these charters, which certified the *vạn*, was a royal title for whales conferred by the King Gia Long: High-ranking Spirit of the Southern Sea [*Nam Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Lân Thượng Đẳng Thần*] or Great General of the Southern Sea [*Nam Hải Đại tượng quân*]. However, Nguyễn Duy Thiệu's argument about the religious character of the *vạn* could also be applied to the *làng* which in a similar way acquired the legitimate rank of village through the royal charter recognizing the cult of the guardian spirit in the local *đình*.

Another important aspect of the *vạn* on the South Central Coast was the non-hereditary position of the head of the *vạn* [*chủ vạn*], a kind of professional leader and ritual master elected every three years from among the most experienced and well-off fishermen. This institution has survived in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn almost unchanged through the present day. Xướng (born in 1933), a head of Vĩnh Thạnh *vạn* (Lý Sơn), stressed that since long ago the election of the head-fisherman took place according to egalitarian principles:

> This position cannot be kept for long. The fishermen's chief has to resign from the post, and the next chief arises to continue the plans, projects, and much work; thanks to them, all matters are discussed again, materials are purchased, everything for the people.

The chief's wealth had never been a determining criterion, but more important was his moral conduct and authority among fishermen. His unblemished reputation and nomination was "spiritually" approved by the Whale Spirit through the spirit medium *séance* held in a local temple. For Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn fishermen, the function of the head of the *vạn* always had far-reaching meaning because he could facilitate or constrain their relation with the sea. A chief's breach of good manners or corrupt behavior might prevent the entire *vạn* from good catches or even cause accidents. Xướng described it in the following words:

> The head of the *vạn* is responsible and takes care of the profession and the people working at sea. For example, at the beginning of a year he prays for a good sea season and for the fishermen who go to sea. If they do not have any accidents it is that because of him. If the head of the *vạn* acts contrary to the regulation of the divine [*thần linh giao*], the working people run into difficulties, something terrible might happen, for example bad weather, and people would die. The head of the *vạn* has to take responsibility before the divine and the people. (…) He is elected by fellow villagers but it is the Whale Spirit who decides whether he has enough merit. Most important are his authority and reputation; to select him to be the head he has to have a sincere heart [*có tâm*] and to be in service of the Whale Spirit; he would be elected

for the first, the second, and the third year if he had a sincere heart and was virtuous to serve people making a living. Second, he has to have merit [*công*] with the local community, like me when I am doing social works. A good service allows one to be promoted to the head of the *vạn* position, to supervise the "private office" [he meant the Whale Spirit temple] of the divinity [*coi sở tự cho thần linh*], to be responsible, to contribute ideas and opinions and to mend if something goes wrong.

Here, we have the head of the *vạn* whose proper conduct assured the generosity of the sea and the well-being of the entire fishing community. The fishermen and their families respected him and benefitted from his knowledge, experience, advice and his "spiritual" relationship with the Whale Spirit. Xướng's interpretation captured certain aspects of the genesis of the *vạn* in Central Vietnam as a religious, professional and more egalitarian organization than the *làng* and to some extent confirms Nguyễn Duy Thiệu's view. In the next paragraphs I will develop the argument that *vạn* might be both a "territorial unit" and a "guild." In order to show how these two categories overlap I first refer to Sa Huỳnh's arrangement of the *vạn*, which according to local narratives still keeps its traditional structure and then to Lý Sơn in order to demonstrate that the *vạn* might take a different form from that established on the mainland. By looking at the two settings I aim to provide background for the subsequent analysis of the relations between farmers and fishermen in the littoral society.

4.4   *Vạn* as ambiguous category

As I already emphasized, Thạch By and Thạnh Đức are fishing settlements located on the narrow sandy strip of beach which gave them direct access to the sea. The majority of the population of Thạch By and Thạnh Đức's lives from fishing, or alternatively from trade, but they have never been engaged in rice cultivation. The fishing settlements of Thạch By and Thạnh Đức are called in vernacular Vietnamese *vạn chày*, which literally means "floating fishing community." In the context of Sa Huỳnh the term denotes the fishermen who are clustered along the beach in separate "territorial units." Describing their profession and religious organization, fishermen also use the shorter form, *vạn*. In this sense the *vạn* could be compared to a kind of "guild" such as those of medieval Europe, which were established as professional associations and sanctioned by secular and religious authority. They were also religious fraternities and, under the patronage of specific saints, carried out feasts and ceremonies. In the previous section, I noted that the *vạn* was certified by the royal charter which recognized the religious character of the fishing organization. In some cases the king granted selected fishing communities the right to collect goods from wrecked ships. Similarly,

made up of experts in their field of handicraft, the medieval guild was established by a city charter or a ruler and held a monopoly on trade in its craft within the city where it operated (Grafe and Gelderblom 2010).

Some analogy could also be drawn concerning certain rules that the medieval guild in Europe imposed on its members. First of all, the guilds in Europe had their own statutes. According to these statutes, the admitted members were under oath to use the craft techniques that were standardized and controlled by their guild. Additionally, the statutes regulated feasting, religious ceremonies dedicated to the guild's patron saint, funerals, and contribution to a common fund for mutual assistance in distressful times. In the case of Vietnam, the self-ruled *vạn* remained outside of the (agricultural) village and regulated its matters through its own convention [*hương ước*].[42] Administered by a chief of the *vạn*, this convention allowed the outsiders to join the *vạn* and become its members after contributing a small amount of money. The main regulations concerned the duty of mutual assistance in the profession and in case of storms and typhoons at sea, indicating a place where boats of the individual *vạn* had a right to anchor and to catch fish, specifying the fishing season, and prohibiting the catching of certain species of poisonous fish. Furthermore, the convention regulated religious festivals, life-cycle rituals such as births, weddings, and funerals, and works for the restoration of temples (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 135-137).

In Sa Huỳnh, the *vạn* of Thạch By and Thạnh Đức traditionally employ diverse fishing techniques. In Thạch By there are two groups of fishermen whose methods to catch fish were quite different from the very beginning. Each of these two groups owns an individual Spirit Whale Temple, forms a distinct *vạn* and has its own chief. Using a different fishing technique, Thạnh Đức represents a separate *vạn* and has its own temple. These three *vạns* are divided on the traditional basis of their fishing tools—the net, the hook, and the lift net—but, at the same time, they are bound together through ritual and seafaring ceremonies.

When compared with the *làng*, the *vạn* appears as a more egalitarian organization due to the nature of the fishing profession that often involves considerable hazard. Work at sea requires cooperation, mutual trust and equal investment of labor from the whole crew on

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[42] Under the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties a clash of the dual system—official and nonofficial—of village administration brought about the "convention" [*hương ước*], which was a "mixture of administrative rules, customary laws and religious guidelines. The purpose of the convention was to regulate the interactions and relationships of each village's society" (Tonan 2008: 748; see also Grossheim 1996; Phan Huy Lê 2006). See also Nguyễn Thị Kim Bình "Đời sống làng xã tỉnh Quảng Ngãi qua các bản hương ước [Village Life of Quảng Ngãi Province through the 'Convention']", http://www.archives.gov.vn/cong_bo_gioi_thien_tl/mlnews.2006=9-18.75735954401, access on 18 September 2006.

board regardless of whether one is a captain or a "common" fisherman. However, it does not mean that within the *vạn* there are no hierarchical relations. Such relations exist also between different *vạns*. Thạch By and Thạnh Đức provide a good example. Until today, the "net *vạn*" [*vạn lưới*], Thạch By, claimed to be the leading organization and the leading territorial unit because of its direct access to Sa Huỳnh port that is located off its shore. Note that in the past, the further from the land the fishing settlement is, the more inferior its status, however this has changed in recent years. The superior status of the "net *vạn*" is contested from time to time by the inhabitants of the big sandbar adjacent to Thạch By who claim to be more experienced and skilful in the art of fishing. Territorially, this big sandbar is part of Thạch By, but it forms a separate small fishing "guild" called the "hook *vạn*" [*vạn câu bủa*] operating in the open sea in contrast to the "net *vạn*" which prefers to fish close to the shore. Thạnh Đức constitutes the "lift net *vạn*"—representing the third type of fishing device. Although Thạnh Đức considers itself as an independent *vạn* it has a duty to show up at the ceremony devoted to the Whale Spirit's anniversary in Thạch By. Moreover, during the Lunar New Year it is the chief of Thạch By *vạn* who represents the entire community of fishermen in Sa Huỳnh and opens the new sea season. The forty-five-year-old U, who spent most of his life at sea, compared the structure of the three *vạn* of Thạch By and Thạnh Đức to an office:

> The *vạn* is ruled by the chiefs. Each craft village [*làng nghệ*—U means the "hook," the "net" and the "lift net *vạn*"] has a different specialization. The head of the "net *vạn*" of Thạch By is like a director, the individual chiefs of the two others are like vice-directors; so to say the staff like in an office. On the third day of a new year, the head of the *vạn* is the first to go to sea in a new season.

Note that U, comparing the *vạn* to an office, also used the phrase "craft village," the term usually applied in the context of villages that specialized in a particular profession in addition to agriculture. In U's speech these two categories of "guild" and "village" overlap. This suggests that for U the *vạn* was both a "territorial unit" and a "professional organization."

However, on Lý Sơn Island the two *vạns*—Vĩnh Thạnh and An Phú—form neither clusters nor occupy a separate territory from that of An Vĩnh and An Hải villages in a manner similar to that found in Sa Huỳnh. They, indeed, resemble "professional organizations" or "guilds" rather than territorial units. Intriguingly, their members never made distinctions between themselves on the basis of fishing techniques. The ecology of Lý Sơn does not allow for the kind of techniques found in Sa Huỳnh. Operating in the open sea and in the same waters, the two *vạns* used the same fishing methods. Consequently, the two *vạns*

differentiated themselves on the basis of their incorporation into the *làng*. This affiliation with the village resembles the medieval guild in Europe, which was an integral part of the city. It also implies that in the past the *vạn* in Lý Sơn had a stronger position than the Sa Huỳnh *vạn* which remained outside the agricultural village. However, at the same time, they were much more controlled by the *làng* than were the *vạn* on the mainland.

All this suggests that the nature of the *vạn* itself is far from being stable and fixed and it is rather ambiguous. On Lý Sơn Island the *vạn* constitutes a "fishing organization" or a "guild" rather than a separate "territorial unit." Yet, if we draw attention to Sa Huỳnh history, the overlapping identity of the *vạn* as a "professional organization" and a "territorial unit" (or "community") becomes more visible. In the next section I aim to show that the two identities of *làng* and *vạn* exist *in relation* to each other. However, they become irrelevant in the situation when members of the *làng* and the *vạn* face "another community." In relation to "others" they consider themselves as one community.

4.5   *The* làng *and the* vạn *as relative categories*

In his study of the Southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard (1940) showed the relevance of ecological conditions for social structure. He demonstrated that seasonally, Nuer people might separate from village communities in the rainy season and might unite in a common camp in the dry season. This makes the Nuer a dynamic and fluid rather than static and fixed society. Evans-Prichard concludes that the Nuer society and its divisions should be understood "as a relation between [the] two contradictory, yet complementary tendencies" of fusion and fission (1940: 284). He shows that this society forms a single community with "common culture and feeling of exclusiveness" (ibid: 279). Nuer are grouped in tribes which in turn, are divided into separated communities—segments. Within the tribe those segments might have internal conflicts, disputes, and contradictions, but in relation to others they see themselves as a united entity.

Evans-Pritchard's theory of segmentation is particularly helpful when thinking about the dichotomy of the *làng* and the *vạn* as relative categories. To put my argument in a nutshell: the *làng* and the *vạn* have a tendency to consider themselves as a single unit if they have to deal with pressure coming from the outside. In order to show how this process works within reference to Central Vietnam's littoral society, let me first refer to Lý Sơn's seafaring history. I will demonstrate that if confronted with "outsiders" the *làng* and the *vạn* saw themselves as one community. These categories also appear to be relative if we take into consideration Sa

Huỳnh and Lý Sơn together. Despite the internal sub-divisions of farmers and fishermen, Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn still look at each other respectively as "totally land-based" and "totally sea-oriented" people and emphasize this difference in their daily conversations. However, referring to the more recent phenomenon of migration (see Chapter 3), I shall argue that if villagers of the two settings find themselves together in the environment which is alien and unfamiliar to both of them, they tend to refer to their common origin as "Quảng Ngãi people" and see each other as "one community."

Local family annals [*gia phả*] provide information that from the 17th to the 19th centuries many members of two *làngs* of An Vĩnh and An Hải were part of the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa navy, which played an important role in exploitation of the South China Sea under the Vietnamese feudal state. Charles Wheeler (2006) reports that during the imperial period specific fishing communities were given the right to collect goods from wrecked ships in exchange for giving the best share of the spoils to Vietnam's rulers. Such practices were not unique to Vietnam, but also took place in other regions of Southeast Asia. In his interesting account on the 18th- and the early 19th-century migration and trade practices of "sea people" in Southwest Kalimantan, Atsushi Ota (2010: 69) writes that during this period many migrants, called by Europeans "pirates," set up their communities in the coastal areas and "were engaged in various profitable activities such as trade, fishing, and cultivation, supplemented by occasional raids on traders, fishermen, and the villagers." By calling these maritime migrant communities "sea people," Ota makes an interesting point that those communities, were "within the political reach of states and settled under state rulers' approval, but they were not completely politically integrated, maintaining privileges in certain activities, such as settlement in certain places and plundering" (2010: 69). This was exactly the case of Lý Sơn. The 18th-century Vietnamese historian Lê Quý Đôn (1972 [1776]: 210) reported the case of Vietnamese fishermen who were allowed to move to Lý Sơn and were granted a royal concession to explore the sea. This connection was formalized as the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa navy consisted of villagers recruited from Lý Sơn Island who operated in the vicinity of the Paracels and Spratlys, which historically constituted the fishing grounds of Lý Sơn fishermen (Lê Quý Đôn 1972 [1776]: 203, 210; see also Chapter 7).

Thanks to the annals and local narratives, we know that the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa navy consisted of both those who were members of the founding lineages and those who belonged to the two *vạns*. Intriguingly, the established groups of the *làng* claimed not only superior status on the basis of being the first settlers, but also attempted to reserve the right to

lucrative deals as members of the royal flotilla. Being unable to earn a living entirely from agriculture, members of the *làng* out of necessity engaged in fishing as well. This suggests that although on the island the division between sea and land activities was preserved in the social and religious organizations, the two activities and categories of fishing and farming were never fully stable.

Mainlanders were aware that selected fishing communities earned their living by collecting goods from wrecked ships. There was a popular saying that fishermen "soak up wealth like a sponge" [*giàu bọt nước*], hinting at the perception that their profit was not morally justified if compared with the hard work of preparing the soil for cultivation (Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2002: 118). The sea and fishing settlements were seen as the frontier of pirates and smugglers who could always find a good hideaway somewhere along the South China coasts (see e.g., Watson 1985; Murray 1987; Kleinen and Osseweijer 2010). Michael Pearson (2003: 6) wrote that "[p]irates and fisherfolk are ubiquitous, the former to be seen as macroparasites, human groups that draw sustenance from the toil and enterprise of others, offering nothing in return, the latter equally predatory, for unlike peasants they extract but do not cultivate, take but do not give." In this sense, fishermen were regarded by the agriculturalists as a "world apart," a group living in the margins of society, '"savages" and "barbarians" who did not really represent the traditional Vietnam.

Located 30 km offshore from Quảng Ngãi Province, Lý Sơn Island fell into this negative categorization. Skilful in navigation and shipbuilding, Lý Sơn villagers were seen as rebels who escaped the state and made easy profit by exploring the sea and engaging in suspicious business. It is significant to note that since its early colonization Lý Sơn was inevitably commercial. Islanders had to trade with the mainland and sell whatever they grew—beans, corn, watermelon and the like—in order to buy rice which was essential for their livelihood. Consequently, mainland villagers considered them the "sea people." Even today, Sa Huỳnh fishermen describe Lý Sơn villagers as those who live on a "sun-burning" piece of earth in the sea, who are "black" and are "Cham" [the ethnic group historically displaced by the Việt]: features that show their "inferior sea background." Despite the fact that in the past they also had the status of "stateless people," Sa Huỳnh fishermen thought of themselves as "land-based." Indeed, Lý Sơn villagers considered mainland communities as totally land-oriented—regardless of whether they were composed of farmers or fishermen— because they depended on the mainland for rice which could not be grown on the island. Moreover, the mainland communities symbolized for Lý Sơn villagers the state and land-

based taxation and hence were superior in their status vis-à-vis Lý Sơn villages. Therefore, we could say that Sa Huỳnh looked at Lý Sơn as if it was a *vạn* while Lý Sơn looked at Sa Huỳnh as if it was a *làng*. In present times, Lý Sơn villagers tend to underline their cultural difference with the mainlanders and present themselves as guardians of Vietnamese tradition which has disappeared from the mainland (see Chapter 7).

When confronted with "significant others" Lý Sơn villagers saw themselves as *one* community, although on a daily basis they made internal division between themselves as those oriented to the land and those who entirely depended on the sea for their living. Participation of both the members of the *làng* and the *vạn* in the operations of the Hòang Sa and Trường Sa navy suggests that they were willing to unite forces to play an important role in the exploitation of the South China Sea and to compete with mainland fishing communities to obtain the royal concession in order to collect precious sea products and goods from wrecked ships.

Although Sa Huỳnh people view Lý Sơn people as "the sea people," and for Lý Sơn people Sa Huỳnh residents remain the land-based people, these categories fade away if they find themselves in a new environment. In Chapter 3, I indicated that in recent times Sa Huỳnh has experienced flows of in- and out-migration. Particularly, many young people from Sa Huỳnh moved to Đa Nẵng, Quy Nhơn and Ho Chi Minh City in search of jobs. I observed a similar pattern in Lý Sơn, with the difference being that there was no inward migration on the island. However, what matters here is that in the new urban surroundings, Lý Sơn and Sa Huỳnh villagers (both farmers and fishermen) identify themselves as "Quảng Ngãi people" and are inclined to stick together in order to provide mutual assistance to each other. For example, one day I was sitting in the Sa Huỳnh coffee house when a group of familiar fishermen joined me. During our conversation they pointed out one of them and stated that he was from Lý Sơn and had come to visit some of his relatives. They joked about his dark complexion and the island as a "remote" and "unbearably hot place." In turn, when I talked to the daughter of the Thiên Y A Na temple's guardian, who worked as a seamstress in a factory in Ho Chi Minh City, she stated that she shared her room and worked with other persons from Quảng Ngãi Province. When I asked her whether she knew any persons from Lý Sơn she replied that so many "Quảng Ngãi people" were working in Ho Chi Minh City that she was not clear about their exact origin. Apparently, the most important information for her was that they came from the same province. From my own experience in Vietnam I know that when

asked about their origin, migrants were more often inclined first to give the name of the provincial city instead of the name of their natal village.

In his study on migration from Quảng Ngãi Province to Ho Chi Minh City, Hy Van Luong (2009b) reports that in contrast to other groups of migrants, Quảng Ngãi villagers gathered together and formed strong social and occupational clusters which range from same-origin associations to patrilineage branches. He gives examples of neighborhoods in Ho Chi Minh City where migrants coming from different villages of Quảng Ngãi Province formed a "textile village" (2009b: 81). He also reports that, in contrast to other migrants, Quảng Ngãi migrants more often helped each other with trade information, worked together as itinerant street vendors and shared rental living quarters (ibid: 99). Quảng Ngãi villagers usually followed a few pioneer migrants and clustered occupationally and spatially in Ho Chi Minh City (ibid: 100). However, the author also points out that when compared with other provinces, Quảng Ngãi villagers reflected "stronger inward orientation and less wide networks to the outside world" (ibid.).

Following Evans-Pritchard's (1940) argument that identities of the Nuer should be seen in relation to each other, I showed that the *làng* and the *vạn* are inter-related units and modes of life and, at the same time, relative categories. By looking at Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn together I conclude that they are not permanent and stable identities: they might change in one direction or another depending on the social context. Prospects of profit or migration, to give just two examples, might provoke the "tendency toward segmentation" and in such a new situation different social units might see each other as one (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 284). The environment of migrants in Ho Chi Minh City provides such an example.

In the next section I will briefly introduce the colonial and postcolonial restructuring of the political and religious order of the *làng* and its consequences for the *vạn*. I shall argue that in gaining a stronger economic position than farmers, fishermen try to turn the tables and reverse the old hierarchy. In order to overtake the *làng* they have begun to invest heavily in agricultural temples and rituals and, in consequence, enjoy more prestige than in the past.

4.6   Ritual boundaries and growing status of the *vạn*

Before I refer to fishermen and their strengthened position in the village in the last decade, it is necessary to say more about the political and religious structure of the pre-revolutionary *làng* and indicate some of the major changes in local village politics and their importance for the *vạn*. My aim is to show in more detail exactly how the ritual boundaries between the *làng*

and the *vạn* were constructed and reproduced and how they are transgressed by fishermen in present times. Finally, I hope to answer the question of why the *vạn* invest into ritual ceremonies of the *làng* and what the motivations are behind such investments.

In pre-revolutionary times, in order to attain the formal status of a village and administrative unit, each *làng* had to have a communal house or *đình* through which local village power was established. Economic, political, and religious aspects of rural life were sanctified in the *đình* through ritual procedures, collective feasts and a "straw mat." More precisely, during communal banquets after rituals the "corner of the mat" was a synonym for the position in the village hierarchy, the most desirable place in the *đình*. Therefore, the *đình* had secular and religious functions but its construction and its cult of guardian spirits needed the approval of the emperor who played the role of a patron (see Papin 2002).

"Our village lost its sanctity"—this was the bitter comment of seventy-year-old Hập of Lý Sơn when I asked him about changes in the structure of the village. He was a descendent of one of the founding lineages and he kept the memory of his great grandfather who held the position of village senior and ritual master in the local *đình* of An Hải village and was proficient in the Hán-Nôm [Sino-Vietnamese] script. Hập himself was a respected architect and a consultant for the state in reconstructing the communal houses in An Vĩnh village which were uncared for during the anti-superstition campaigns and eventually collapsed from age. When Hập explained the dramatic changes in the village politics in more detail I could sense a note of nostalgia for an old moral world and tradition which had faded and then vanished in the tumultuous history of Vietnam. Hập expressed it in the following words:

> Before [1975] our *đình* had the Council of Notables [*ngũ vị hương*]. The village senior of the council managed the *đình* and made ceremonies. Some years after the liberation the state restored beliefs [*tín ngưỡng*] but there is nothing left of the previous forces [*lực lượng*] of the *đình*. The chief of the hamlet [*xóm*] of the temple [of ThiênY A Na goddess] had to move up to run the *đình*…
> Our village lost its soul [*mắt tâm linh*] because in these days the representation in rituals does not come from the apex as it was in the past but from below ... The chairman of the commune [*chủ tịch*] over took the position of the village head [*lý trưởng*)] and nowadays he has nothing to do with religion.

Hập's statement captures the nature of the village ritual practice in Vietnam which was embodied in an array of hierarchical and social relations and expressed in terms of both material and spiritual resources. Most generally, until 1941 the backbone of the village power structure consisted of the Council of Notables with its three-tiered structure that formed the

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apex of village organization.[43] The highest rank included the titled and qualified people, examples of virtue and knowledge such as mandarins from the first to the ninth degree. They had the authority to decide on all village matters. The second tier consisted of old men over sixty. They were ranked in a strict hierarchy in accordance with their age, wealth, and patrilineage. The head of the village [*lý trưởng*] and deputy-chief of the village [*phó lý*] represented the third tier called *kỳ mục*. They were selected by the Council of Notables and had to demonstrate their maturity and good morality (Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1995 [1945]: 89). In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, the village headmen [*lý trưởng*] and the Five Notables [*Ngũ vị Hương*] represented the apex of the politico-administrative hierarchy. They also were obliged to fulfill their duties in the religious sphere in the local *đình*. The village senior performed ceremonies accompanied by the village headmen and some of the Five Notables.

In the French colonial period, the status hierarchy was still inextricably interwoven with the cult of the guardian spirit in the *đình*. It was the domain in which villagers competed with each other for the highest positions. Feasts held in the *đình* and associated with ancestor veneration were important arenas where this competition was carried out. The colonial author Ngô Tất Tố (1977) gives us a sense of how much struggle for power animated the village life and that, instead of a corporate entity, it was in reality an "arena of power and conflict."[44] He demonstrated how religious and political aspects were concentrated around the *đình* system and articulated by collective feasts and the place on the "straw mat." His reports depict especially well the peasants' desire to identify with the elite. Obtaining positions in the *đình* of their village, the place on the "corner of the mat" (*gốc chiều*), was a bit of power accessible and aspired to by only a few men. Those who received the nomination for a public function or received an honorary title had to pay for a banquet of honor for the entire village, which ruined them completely. Apart from titles and honors, the official positions did not bring in money, but as French colonial author Gustav Langrand (1950: 8) observed, "people desired such titles more than money."

Nghị (born 1922), another descendent of a founding lineage on Lý Sơn, clearly remembered that by 1975 performing rites as a ritual master of high sacrifice was the most important ceremonial function of the village senior who spiritually represented the *làng* before the divinity in the *đình*. He was required to be a descendent of one of the lineages that established the village. Although nominally this position was not included in the official

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[43] After 1941 the Council of Notables was abolished and substituted with the Council of Seniors.
[44] For an analysis of Ngô Tất Tố's accounts, see Boudarel (1991).

administrative apparatus, the village senior was held in high regard by villagers. Below him was the village headman whose power was authorized and legitimated in the local *đình*. Nghị described who, at that time, ran the village:

> Before the village headman occupied a position in the administrative apparatus, the village senior held the highest position in the village, he was bound to the divine [*thần linh*] and he got into contact with the sacred [*linh thiêng*]. As regards the system of power, the administrative apparatus included the village headman who managed village affairs; at that time he was like a [today's] chairman of the commune [*chủ tịch xã*]. At the top of the village stood the village senior, below him was the village headman who managed staff including the village officials: the keeper of hygiene [*hương dịch*], the guardian of public works [*hương mục*], the head night-watchman [policeman – *hương kiểm*], the treasurer [*hương bổn*], the registrar [*hương bộ*], and the group running various works [*ban chấp sự*] … The guardian of public works managed procurement [buying offerings for ceremonies], the registrar kept the records and the *ban chấp sự* was responsible for invitations and supplies ….

Similar to Hập, Nghị emphasized that the position of the village senior lost a lot of its former political power in the spiritual sense, but for him and many representatives of the older generations, the village senior still remains superior to the secular post of chairman. He said:

> Today there is no treasurer or village headman—the village dignitaries—anymore ... The positions were abolished in the time of "state distribution economy" [*thời bao cấp*][45], the old system was eliminated by the state administration … After the liberation [in 1975], everything was gone, only the position of village senior was left ... [In the present], the village senior has two duties: to keep the money contributions of the village and to record them. He stands higher than the chairman of the commune; he is the one who gets into contact with the divine [in the communal house].

Actually, the break in the relationship between religion and politics occurred long before the socialist procedures definitively separated the two domains. Referring to Francophone scholar Lê Văn Hảo, Thien Do (2003: 60) reported that the southern *đình* served a solely religious purpose. The distinctive character of the southern *đình* was the consequence of changes in the village's social structure applied by the French administration in 1904. The *đình*'s decision-making model was split into "two unequal parts": the ceremonial function and secular administrative activities (ibid.). A booklet, *Geography of Quảng Ngãi Province* [*Địa Dư tỉnh*

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[45] Vietnamese people often use euphemisms that cannot be translated into English directly. In this case the expression *thời báo cấp*—literally "subsidy era"—in a loose translation means "the state distribution economy" and denotes the time of collectivization and dependence of the state's handouts. "The state distribution economy" lasted from 1977 to 1986.

Quảng Ngãi],[46] provides evidence of the colonial division of administrative and religious spheres in the province in the form of two separate formations: the Assistants District Chief [*Quan Bang Tá*] and the Festive Committee [*Ban Khánh Tiết*]. It meant that theoretically the notables who were responsible for performing rites in the *đình* were not allowed to take part in any administrative affairs of the village, which were subsequently reserved for a committee of officials.

Therefore, the question arises: Why did Hập and Nghị state that the "village dignitaries" of the *đình* system lost their political influence? From my further conversation with them and other villagers, it appears that the village notables and elders who were theoretically left out of village politics due to the colonial regulation, still had significant influence over the village officials to whom they ascribed ritual roles during the communal ceremonies. These officials might have wanted to participate in those formal religious procedures in order to increase their authority. In practice, it meant that the village headman was dependent upon the notables and elders who were keen or reluctant to transmit administrative decisions to the villagers depending on their knowledge, experience and debating skills. This old pattern of village power was still intact in the early 1960s when the southern authorities abolished the institution of village headmen and the Five Notables and introduced new forms of village administration. After 1975, in southern parts of Vietnam, the office of the People's Committee and the Administrative Committee was established and the *đình* system was ultimately abolished. The new structure was for the first time established in the North with the Việt Minh reforms after 1945, represented by a chairman [*chủ tịch*] and a vice-chairman [*phó chủ tịch*] of the *xã* [municipality] and then adopted with some significant changes by the socialist regime all over Vietnam.

In Lý Sơn the religious buildings, including the *đình*, survived the First and the Second Indochina War unscathed. As I already indicated, the traditional hierarchy of the *đình* was kept on the island until 1975. However, in Sa Huỳnh the *đình* extensively suffered during the resistance struggle against the French. Moreover, according to local narratives, after 1975 the *đình* was completely destroyed by villagers themselves. Taking advantage of the antireligious campaigns, some of them felt justified in tearing down the communal house they associated with social inequality (see Chapter 6). According to my informants, fishermen of Thạch By were involved in the destruction of the *đình* and used its building material to support construction of their own houses.

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[46] See Nguyễn Đoá and Nguyễn Đạt Nhơn. (1939) *Địa Dư tỉnh Quảng Ngãi* [*Geography of Quảng Ngãi Province*]. (Huế: Imprimerie Mirador (Vien –De), Quai de la Susse).

In contrast to Hập or Nghị (Lý Sơn), Thoại, a fisherman from Sa Huỳnh, did not lament the decline of the *đình* hierarchical order or the socialist restructuring of local village politics and had his own explanation for the separation of politics and religion:

> In the old days, the village senior, the village headman, and the vice-village chief [*phó lý*] all took part in religious ceremonies. In that time, there was little social work to do (…) But now, there is a great need for public service in the society. In the old days, with the *feudal* order, they were called *lý trưởng* [village headman] and *phó lý*, but now their positions have changed and no one used these titles anymore. (…) In the present society, there is much need for public service so the authorities are busy with other matters, while the work concerning "spirituality" is done by the elders who serve to the divinities in these days.

Thoại's opinion is more interesting if we take into consideration the fact that he himself was assigned by the elders of La Vân village to lead the organization of annual rituals in the Thanh Minh Temple [Temple for the Dead) which replaced the *đình* in Sa Huỳnh (see *Map 2 [3]*; p. 90). Note that Thoại called the old system "feudal," implicitly pointing out its non-egalitarian character and its significance in terms of public service. In his previous statement regarding the *vạn* he said that the hierarchical division between the village and the fishing community and the lower position of the latter was "the custom of the forefathers of the poverty-stricken northern people who came here [Sa Huỳnh] to work (…)" (see page 111 in this chapter). Fishermen were excluded from the *đình* system but still depended on the *làng* in many ways, for example to obtain permission to bury their family members or to buy rice. However, the times had changed and old rules had lost their power. In Thoại's eyes, today's authorities have much more important matters to deal with than supervising rituals in local temples.

In their study of two working-class neighborhoods in a small English town, Elias and Scotson (1994: xvi) show that the "established" group has a tendency to attribute "superior human characteristics" to its members or to exclude all members of other significant groups from social contact with its own members. They justify their group's superior status on the basis of cohesion of families who have known each other for several generations. By means of social control, particularly praise-gossip about those who observed the implicit rules and by threat of blame-gossip against those who offended, they reserve positions in local organizations for members of the own group and exclude others (1994: xvi).

As Elias and Scotson (1994: xviii) argue, exclusion and stigmatization of the outsiders by the established group are the most powerful weapons employed by the latter "to maintain

their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping others in their place." In the case of Vietnam, a fisherman without land property and unregistered in the village was not allowed to marry into a farmer's family. Moreover, fishermen were forbidden by the village to settle on the land. In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn the *làng* drew and kept alive its superior status through the ritual and political center of the village—the *đình*—including collective feasts, rituals and memories about the common origin of its members. It despised the fishing hamlet and excluded its residents from local affairs taking place in the *đình*. In Sa Huỳnh the position of fishermen was particularly inferior and weak because, as I showed, they were permitted to occupy only the narrow strip of sandy dunes. They did not have landed property and, thus, could not produce rice. As Nguyễn Duy Thiệu (2002: 88) indicated, in most cases fishermen were contemptuously called *Hạ*, meaning "lower rank, inferior people" or *Mọi,* the term used for ethnic minorities in the Highlands meaning "barbarous" or "savage."

The new administrative structure of rural units, *thôn* [village], to some extent erased the social differences between the *làng* and the *vạn*, but members of the fishing families in many respects remain disadvantaged regarding their access to higher education or jobs in the public sector. According to my observation, children of fishermen drop out of school early in order to help parents make a living and it is common for fourteen-year-old boys go out to sea. I also observed that fishermen were rarely appointed to leading positions in the local administration due to "lack of qualifications." However, it would be misleading to see the fishing community only as a marginal group. Fishermen are taking advantage of the political changes and new economic prospects that have appeared in recent years as demands for marine products in domestic and international markets increase. The methods of preservation of fish have changed dramatically since the introduction of refrigeration technology that enables preservation of fish from a few hours to a few days. In turn, better roads and easier transport have expanded the fish trade to include distant markets. Consequently, fish became a commodity that brings a substantial income in a short time in contrast to rice which became cheap and widely accessible. At the same time, due to lesser incentives to secure a more stable socio-economic position in the village through land and agrarian resources, villagers now look for new sources of income (Kleinen 1999, 1999a).

As an illustration of this process I would like to introduce the conversation I had with a forty-three-year-old woman from Sa Huỳnh who lives close to the house of my landlady. On one occasion I heard her regretting that she and her husband moved away from the sandy dunes to the other side of Highway A-1 where Tấn Lộc (Phổ Châu Commune) village is

located. She stated that at the beginning of the 1990s her husband sold their small plot of "land" next to the highway and bought an arable plot for rice cultivation. They hoped to improve their material situation through farming. However, not being able to earn a living from growing rice, the wife opened a small shop and supported her family selling basic foodstuffs and various commodities for home use. During our conversation, she pointed at the other side of the highway where a solid three-storied building with a sea view stood and stated that she and her family lived there in the 1990s. The new owners apparently made a much better investment by buying the land on the sea side and building a motel in which passing travelers can rent a room to stay overnight and treat themselves to seafood.

Since the cultivation of rice ceased to guarantee a good income, the negative attitude toward fishing has become less pronounced. At the same time, fishermen ceased to be as dependent on farmers as they had been in the past. However, it does not mean that fishermen are entirely free from poverty. They still struggle to make a living for various reasons: limited access rights of fishermen to the grounds adjacent to their communities, privatization of common resources, overfishing and destructive fishing, an acute decline in marine animal populations, the clearing of mangrove forests, pollution and wastewater from the industrial zones, negative ecological consequences such as flooding and typhoons, and non-resident harvesters from China and Hong Kong who heavily exploit fishing grounds, just to list a few (Kleinen 2007). Nevertheless, many of the recent socio-economic changes had a positive effect on the fishermen's material situation and in comparison with farmers, they became relatively better off.

Among indications of economic prosperity such as better houses, modern mobile phones, TV-sets, new motorbikes, etc., the fishermen's financial "recovery" becomes most apparent in their increasing monetary contributions and lavish sacrifices to the "agriculture" village temples and participation in their seasonal ceremonies. Both Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn authorities declared that in recent times the *vạn* has gained a stronger economic position in relation to the *làng*. They based such statements on their observations of money contributed to offerings and ceremonies in the temples. The villagers of La Vân confirmed this statement and revealed that most of the money for the reconstruction of the Thanh Minh Temple came from Thạch By's two *vạns* that showed "sentiment" [*tình cảm*] and "solidarity" [*tình đoàn kết*] towards the village. For the New Year ritual in one of the village temples of An Hải in Lý Sơn, several captains of fishing crews contributed a total of 44 million VND (about 2000 Euros).

The example of the Thiên Y A Na temple in An Hải village well illustrates this recent dynamic. Whenever I attended anniversary ceremonies for Thiên Y A Na Goddess in An Hải, I was always astonished by the large number of fishermen who visited her temple and took part in religious observance there. In this temple the *làng* carried out an important ritual aiming to ensure the fertility of the land. However, I witnessed fishermen sacrificing to the goddess—once they gave two, or even three, fine porkers. They stated that whenever the goddess blessed them with good catches they gave her back more than was expected. The ceremonies always took place in the late evening, lasted long hours and ended with a feast before the sun broke the darkness.

However, the *làng* is not always happy with the ostentatious sacrifices made by the *vạn* and in some cases has tried to regulate this matter. At the beginning of this chapter I introduced the vignette which referred to the internal dispute between the *làng* and the *vạn* in Lý Sơn about the rights to the Spirit Whale. I noted that this dispute was solved by building two separate temples. The *làng* assigned two different dates for the Whale Spirit anniversary. In June 2007 I had the opportunity to take part in the ceremony organized by the *vạn*. I was surprised to learn that the *vạn* was not allowed to offer a pig, as this sacrifice was reserved for the *làng* , and were only permitted to present a chicken to the divinity.

According to Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1995[1945]), during the ceremonies in the *đình* the master of high sacrifice received "a first cup of sacrificial drink" [*ẩm phước*] as blessing from the divinity, which was extended to the entire community in the form of the feast. This included also the *kiếng* or "presenting of sacrificial meat," which was a common practice following the royal model of offering the sacrificial parts of pork to the notables in accordance with their rank after the ceremony. On one occasion I observed the ceremony organized by the *làng* in Âm Linh Tự Temple [Temple for the Dead] in An Vĩnh village (Lý Sơn) and I saw the orator [*chủ văn*] receiving "a first cup of sacrificial drink" and "presenting of sacrificial meat." For the duration of the ritual he loudly chanted invitations to the tutelary spirits and all divinities from the neighboring temples to taste the offerings. After the ceremony, he received half of the pig's head. The other half was taken home by his assistant. In Sa Huỳnh, the function of the "first cup of sacrificial drink" and "presenting of sacrificial meat" survives today and it has been adopted by the *vạn*. I witnessed that the *ẩm phước* in the form of a cup of alcohol and the pig's entrails were offered to the head of the fishing community who held the position of Master of the High Sacrifices in the ceremony in honor of the Whale Spirit. Therefore, one might ask the question: What are the fishermen's

motivations in assuming the right to make lavish sacrifices of pigs in agricultural temples, a ceremony which for a long time was reserved only for the *làng*?

Referring to Edmund Leach's (1954) study of the political systems and social structures of Highland Burma, Thomas Kirsch (1973: 3) argued that Leach overlooked important "religious" factors in which the political and economic system was embedded. He argued that it was impossible to state what units such as "village," "villagers" or "a village cluster" meant to the Kachin society without referring to their religious ideas (1973: 9). He emphasized that these various units were ordered on the basis of "shared religious ritual and *right* to this ritual" (emphasis added). More precisely, Leach (1954) presented Kachin society as oscillating between the extreme poles of social organizations: the *gumsa* and the *gumlao*. The basis of *gumsa*, or "autocratic" political power was a "chiefs ritual rights to sacrifice to the spirits controlling fertility of the domain" (Kirsch 1973: 11). This right was reserved by the erection of separate "sacred groves" for each of the village groups that could be compared to the *đình* erected by the *làng*. According to Kirsch the formation of the *gumsa* counterpart, the *gumlao* that was the more "rebellious" and "egalitarian" type, was a struggle for greater "religious freedom" and a "repudiation of exclusive ritual control by a chief" (1973: 11). I am not sure whether we could describe *vạn* in those terms, but I shall argue that fishermen attempted to establish themselves as a separate and independent unit.

Kirsch (1973: 14) showed that death and burial provided occasions for ostentatious feasting in order to display and reproduce the "social status" of the family of the dead person. The Kachin *gumsa* "chief" had exclusive rights to sacrifice to the spirits and made the "land of the dead" fertile. However, if his sacrifice turned out to be ineffective, his position was threatened by somebody else who wished to overtake and posses his prestige (1973: 16). Kirsch argued that in Kachin society the economic ability to give the feast raised the ritual status of sponsors. Therefore, the "prestige" was not given, but had to be proved by giving feasts; through such feasts the giver proved his "potency" which qualified him for prestige (ibid.). The economic ability to perform such feasts was an important indication of the "virtue" and "heavenly reward" of sponsors and at the same time, indicated that those who were too poor to give the feast "have done evil things" (ibid: 12).

In a similar sense, we could look at the recent phenomenon of ritual investment by fishermen in the village temples. Taking advantage of the weakening position of the *làng* and its "spiritual chief," fishermen started to play a more important role in the village ritual domain to which the *vạn* had no previous access. Renovating temples and sponsoring village

agricultural rituals became a means of displaying their ritual "potency" and thus their growing status in their littoral community. Moreover, like in the past when the feast in the *đình* served to increase status differences within the village, today the *vạn* use the same means in order to earn "permanent prestige and status relations" as well as social recognition (cf. Kirsch 1973: 17). More specifically, fishermen assumed the traditional right of the agricultural village to sacrifice pigs. The sacrifice of porkers rather than chickens raised the rank of fishermen in the eyes of the *làng* residents. Emulation of this practice in the temples of the *làng* is an attempt to display fishermen's growing economic and ritual position in the land-based village. Each lavish sacrifice made by fishermen in agricultural temples served as evidence of their good catches, their material well-being and, hence spiritual "reward." By resisting the exclusive ritual control of the *làng* by the "village seniors," they turned the tables on the old hierarchy.

4.7   Conclusion

Pearson (1985: 3) states that "land and the sea intertwine in complex and various ways" arguing that we have to be careful to see the people living on the shore as totally land- or sea-oriented. In his classical monograph on Malay fishermen, Raymond Firth (1964) demonstrated that in coastal areas the fisherfolk often live side by side with people of other occupations, including farmers with whom they maintain economic and frequently intimate relations. While I do not refute these statements, my aim in this chapter was to show that people in Central Vietnam's littoral society dichotomize two modes of life—farming and fishing—even though in everyday life they might mix the two activities. In my analysis I referred to the two vernacular terms—*làng* and *vạn*—which appeared in almost every conversation with villagers I had and which expressed that they recognized a social difference between the *land* and the *sea*. The distinction between the two domains was manifested in the erection of two separate temples—*đình* and *lăng*—which marked spiritual and hierarchical boundaries between the land-based village and the fishing community.

Nevertheless, such distinctiveness between sea and land activities preserved in the social and religious organizations of the littoral society does not exclude the possibility that these two types of community are in a constant state of flux. As I have argued, the identities of the *làng* and the *vạn* "merge" in the face of "significant outsiders." I have pointed out that in the situation of migration, for example, Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn villagers might see each other as "one community" without regard to whether they belong to the *làng* or the *vạn*. I also argued that these identities remain rather firm in everyday life but this is not to say that the

làng and the *vạn* are fixed and stable categories. The socio-religious organizations of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn are not enshrined in a permanent and immutable situation and structure (Kirsch 1973: 35). Following Kirsch, I argue that the structure of the littoral society is undergoing a "continuous process of change" along with the ever-changing ecological, political, and social conditions of its environment. Thus, the structure of the *làng* and the *vạn* in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn are not permanent and static but constantly modified to the current situation.

As I have noted, the hierarchical *đình* system was abolished by the Communist government. In Sa Huỳnh, the *đình* was never rebuilt. In Lý Sơn, one of the buildings survived and has provided a basis for recovery of old rituals. However, as the narratives I introduced illustrate, these ritual practices had to be adjusted to the present socio-political context. At the same time, the recent enhancement of the fishermen's economic position *vis-à-vis* the farmers and their ritual investment in agricultural temples suggest that fishermen are not just a disadvantaged group but that they exploit the situation in a way that helps them to demonstrate and cultivate their "prestige." First, by transgressing hierarchical structuring between *land* and *sea* and *vạn* and *làng* and various homologies derived from that, fishermen aspire to present themselves as full-fledged members of the land-based village. Second, by emulation and mimicry of the *làng* and its lavish sacrifices they refute exclusive ritual control by the village and seek to establish themselves as an important independent entity. Following Elias and Scotson (1994), this process could be also interpreted as the *van's* way of resisting "stigmatization" by the "established" group. Growing in ritual status they show its virtue, high moral standards and "ritual efficacy"—the motivational basis of their acts—as Kirsch (1973) forcefully argued in the case of the Kachin society.

Understanding diverse local dynamics in the communities in question is indispensable for grasping the context of the religious revival in Vietnam. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will turn to the Party-State project of legibility and "simplification" of various vernacular expressions of religion.

Religious Plurality and "State Simplification"

Figure 2. The altar in the yard of the house for the Earth Spirit, Central Vietnam 2007

5.1. Introduction

What is "religion" in Vietnam? To answer this simple question one has to ask more generally what is "religion" in Asia?[47] I have pondered these questions since I first visited Vietnam in 2002 and was confronted with the bustling, vibrant and diverse culture of the Vietnamese people about which, at that time, I had very little knowledge. As a Polish woman who grew up in a majority Catholic society, I knew only the solemn atmosphere of the Roman-Catholic churches and a serious monotheistic God, who, as I was taught during religion class, resided in a *tabernacle* located at the main altar. Since my first step on Vietnamese land I have come across spirits and gods who exist in multiple variations in many localities, dwelling in mountains, forests, rivers and the sea. Like saints worshiped by Catholic believers, many of them were born as humans and their biographies were marked by unusual events. However, in contrast to Christian saints, in their earthly existence Vietnamese spirits were neither ascetic nor austere. Violent and enigmatic death or death that breaks the natural order such as suicide and capital punishment or crime and sin have turned common people and even criminals into powerful spirits worth worshiping as guardians in village communal houses.

Most generally, in this chapter I seek to conceptualize the category of "religion" in the Vietnamese context. To get a broader perspective on the issue, I begin my analysis by situating "religion" in Vietnam against the backdrop of the debates glossed as "postsocialist studies." I point out important differences between polytheistic Vietnamese religious traditions and monotheistic modes of religiosity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. I shall argue that although my analysis of the invigoration of Vietnamese religious traditions in recent years does not fit simply into debates about religion in the postsocialist countries, nevertheless, it could contribute to the general debate on postsocialism because it shows that different processes are taking place in a different historical and social environment. In the next part of the chapter, following Talal Asad's (1993, 2001) argument that "religion" was historically constituted and its concept and terminology derived mainly from a Christian background, I pay more attention to local religious practices that I believe are pivotal in finding the most suitable analytical tools to conceptualize religion in Vietnam. I shall argue

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[47] A similarly formulated question has been analyzed in the context of China in Andrew Kipnis, "The Flourishing of Religion in Post-Mao China and the Anthropological Category of Religion," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12: 1 (2001); of India in Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press 2009); and, generally, of East and Southeast Asia in Thomas D. DuBois, *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

that "religion" in Vietnam was formed as a local, *emic* category in the context of colonial hegemony and Western intellectual influence (Salemink 2009). In the subsequent part, drawing inspiration from James Scott's (1998) argument that modern states are inclined to "simplify" society in order to standardize the complex and diverse vernacular classifications and hence make landscapes and people legible, I analyze how in the case of Vietnam the state incorporates, regulates, and standardizes the religious landscape through administrative procedures and cultural policies. Last but not least, I introduce strategies Vietnamese people use to respond to the state project of legibility and simplification.

5.2   What is religion in Vietnam?

As mentioned above, I felt confused when I first entered Vietnam in 2002, and my confusion grew as my colleagues from the Institute of Religious Studies at the Vietnamese Academia of Social Sciences in Hanoi took me to urban and rural temples, pagodas and shrines. The historical and mythological gods enshrined in the freshly restored buildings, sustained by diverse revitalized religious practices, blended with the commercialization of everyday life in the *Đổi Mới* [*Renovation*] era and the global capitalist version of "modernity" that Vietnam has just started to adopt (Taylor 2001). Along with these acute social changes, the socialist state nervously tightened its grip on Vietnamese society by strengthening cultural campaigns to preserve "authentic" Vietnamese traditions and promotes its own version of modernity after its withdrawal from a socialist modernity. Perhaps the most telling example is Resolution No. 5 adopted in 1998 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. [48] I will return to this important document later in this chapter when I analyze the state's redefinition of its policy toward sacred spaces. At this point, it is worth noting that Resolution No. 5 created the basis for the Party-State to identify selected religious beliefs, customs and rituals as part of "national culture" and, thus, opened a space for "alternative historical and cultural narratives of the Vietnamese nation" (Salemink forthcoming; see also Malarney 2003; Norton 2009).

My understanding of the religious domain in Vietnam grew out of my direct encounter with both the intellectual and the political debates on "Vietnamese" culture and religion, which I had a chance to follow in the course of my enrolment at the Hanoian academic institution and of my stay in Sóc Sơn (North Vietnam) where I interacted with different

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[48] See *Nghị quyết hội nghị lần thứ năm Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (khóa VIII) về xây dựng và phát triển nền văn hóa Việt Nam tiên tiến, đậm dà bản sắc dân tộc* [*Resolution No.5 of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on building progressive culture, imbued with national identity*], số 03/NQ-T ngày 16/17/1998, retrieved on 2 December 2010 from http://www.na.gov.vn/sach_qh/chinhsachpl/phan1/p1_iv_16.html.

groups of Vietnamese people and their religious practices. However, the question, "What is religion in Vietnam?" returned to me as even more troubling when in 2007 I completed my PhD field research in Quảng Ngãi Province (Central Vietnam) and returned to Germany in order to begin writing my dissertation thesis. I was a member of a small research group on "East and Southeast Asia" at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and I participated in the project "Religion and Morality" which explored norms, values and the meanings of religion for individuals experiencing the dramatically changed social conditions (mainly of Eastern Europe and Central Asia) after the collapse of Communism. However, the framework of our seminar discussions was dominated by empirical and theoretical problems deriving from monotheistic religions which I found quite different from the patterns of Asian "religions" that often, as I shall show in this chapter, lack exclusive membership and devotion and an institutional place in society in the sense of the Christian Church. It is necessary to note that in my study I do not take into account the monotheistic religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism which are beyond the scope of this dissertation and were not present in my field site.

Consequently, the focus of our project on "morality" offered me less promising analytical tools for assessing the role of religion in the lives of individuals in contemporary Vietnam than had my colleagues working on Christianity. A number of them saw the "new morality" proposed by charismatic protestant movements in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union as a way of allowing people to improve themselves through personal conversion (Naumescu 2007; Pelkmans 2009; Peperkamp and Rajtar 2010). For instance, Jarret Zigon (2009) identifies his morality as "working the self" in a Russian Orthodox rehabilitation program for drug addicts. However, the new Vietnamese forms of religiosity hardly offer the orientations in life which explain existential issues including death, a sense of life or suffering. Instead, they are often highly pragmatic and transactional as they offer multiple orientations towards ways to cope with the social and cultural instability brought about by transition to a capitalistic market and ways to approach sources of power in order to address these worldly desires—these rather than unified moral guidance or a "moral order" which individuals and communities might want to follow in their everyday life (Taylor 2007: 49). A similar phenomenon has been acknowledged by Andrew Kipnis (2001) in the case of post-Mao China where, he points out, even participation in a single type of religious practices within the Protestant Church or Falun Gong Buddhism hardly guarantees a unified interpretation, since desire for healing and the quest for wealth are other motivations among innumerable religious

understandings. He argues that participation in "symbolic communities" provides the basis for pursuing larger social, political or economic goals and it "can always be seen as both an end in itself and as a means to other ends" (ibid: 43).

Moreover, discussions on "morality" in the context of Vietnam involve reference to politics rather than religion. The issue of morality has been explored in depth by Shaun Malarney in his monograph, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* (2002). Malarney (2002: 53) shows how, drawing on a Neo-Confucian legacy, Hồ Chí Minh recast the meaning of Confucian virtues and introduced "new virtues" of "revolutionary ethics" [*đạo đức cách mạng*] such as "benevolence," "righteousness," "knowledge," "courage" and "incorruptibility." This "new morality"—promoting collectiveness and solidarity against individuality—was supposed to replace "old habits and customs" associated with feudal regimes (ibid.). Since Hồ Chí Minh took on the task to introduce the "new morality," he himself served as "moral arbiter of his society" similar to emperors in pre-colonial Vietnam who represented exemplary models of morality (ibid: 53). Malarney (ibid: 76) clearly demonstrates that in modern Vietnam the official policies, ideas and terms are a "critical part of the framework in which people discuss and debate culture, ritual morality and other aspects of socio-cultural life." Consequently, instead of representing some sort of "moral order," the religious domain in Vietnam has to conform to the "political morality" advertized by the Party-State. This issue will be analyzed in great detail later in this chapter.

In the context of the former Soviet Union, Paul Froese (2004: 73) notes that decades of religious repressions have led not to new levels of religious freedom but to a *return* to the pre-communist relations between church and state. However, in Vietnam the relationship of religion with state has always been much different from the relationship of the Orthodox or Catholic Church with political centers, for the simple reason that there was no separation between *one* "Church" and *the* "state." A Chinese example is particularly helpful to illustrate this important point.

As Prasenjit Duara (1988: 156) notes, religion in China was not controlled by religious authorities organized independently from "secular" authorities but, on the contrary, religion was "diffused" in the different segments of society such as the state and the village communities and controlled by a "secular leadership" that simultaneously represented a cosmic order and acted as mediator between "this" and the "other" world. Already, Yang (1967: 192) explained that in China the entire system of administrative control over religion existed to ensure the interest of the ruling elite, including the emperor, and to prevent

"heterodoxy." In the traditional governance "heterodoxy" was understood as religious beliefs and activities not congruent with the state-approved orthodox version of Confucianism. The traditional state often exercised suppression and persecution toward those who worshiped a god or spirit which was not part of "the official registry of sacrifice." (ibid: 192).

The notion of deviation from official ideology—"heterodoxy"—was also known in Vietnam in the imperial period. For example, various precolonial monarchies tried to control sorcerers and mediums and to curb local practices of magic and extravagant ritual feasts. The most evident examples of repeated campaigns against the subversive influence of "heterodoxy" are the sixteenth-century Lê Code and the nineteenth Gia Long Code (Do 2003; Taylor 2007: 31-32; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). Therefore, attempts of the modern Vietnamese state to validate those forms of religious practices which remain in line with its objectives and mark those which bear a "superstitious" character might be seen as a *continuity* with the old authoritarian power rather than a *return* to the old relations of state with religion, as Froese notes in the case of post-Soviet Russia. I will elaborate this point later in the section dealing with the Vietnamese official policy of recognition of religious sites.

In the subsequent part of his article, Froese (2004) connects the contemporary religious revivals occurring throughout Russia with forced secularization and promotion of "scientific atheism" (2004: 73). He argues that soon after the Communist Party lost its political power and scientific atheism became a "thing of the past" the ensuing "spiritual vacuum" led to a proliferation of various religious groups competing with each other to recruit members from religiously-unaffiliated populations (ibid: 73). Although in Vietnam anti-religious campaigns implemented by the state, especially in rural parts of the country, had unquestionable influence on the decline of religious practices, I doubt whether we could directly connect the ritual revival with "forced atheism" since many traditional religions are neither based on faith in a sense of shared beliefs or unified doctrine nor on the notion of a "Jealous God" who commands exclusive devotion (Salemink 2009, 2009a). I am also skeptical about attaching the return of "traditional" religious practices to a "religious vacuum" caused by decades of secularization. Chris Hann (2006: 6) aptly points out that this argument is often far-fetched and misleading. This is particularly true in the context of South Vietnam where people had only ten years of socialism before the *Đổi Mới* Reforms. Therefore, rather than connecting the recent religious boom with a "moral and spiritual vacuum" left after the collapse of Communist ideologies, I am in sympathy with Adam Chau (2006: 2) who, in the case of China, pleads for a less simplistic analysis of religious revival. He argues that the

religious resurgence should be seen in the context of many social forces that came together, such as local and national political demands, economic considerations, or quests for communal and individual prestige and recognition—just to mention a few examples of the vast arena of desires and aspirations of different social actors.

Along this line, Mathijs Pelkmans (2009) writes that it is not enough to examine the boom of new religions in the former Soviet Union exclusively in terms of postsocialist change and the advance of free-market capitalism. He argues that intensified incorporation of Islam in national ideologies in post-Soviet Central Asia often creates discontent with "national" forms of religion and, as a result, paves the way for more, stricter religious group formation. Such a situation, inevitably, generates tensions and creates space for evangelical missionaries who attract those who feel that they cannot meet the rigid demands of the new Muslim movements (2009: 7).

In turn, Virginie Vaté's (2009) work explicitly shows the role of the "religious monopoly" in the conversion of indigenous people of Chukotka in north-eastern Siberia to Pentecostal Christianity. The already inferior status of the Chukchi worsened with the growing prominence of the Orthodox Church, which labeled them "pagans" because of their engagement in shamanic rituals. Vaté demonstrates that, although uncomfortable with this negative classification, Chukchi were unwilling to accept the dominant Russian religion and, instead, have become increasingly responsive to Pentecostal Christianity, which offered them "modernity" in the form of transnational support and connections.

While I do not refute some of the common patterns characteristic of both the former Soviet Union and Vietnam, such as the growing role of religion in the public sphere and the specific role of the state in relation to religion, I wish to point out further important differences. Whether anthropologists of Post-Soviet Russia choose to explore the state religion (appropriated as the embodiment of culture, tradition and nation) or indigenous religions (such as Shamanism in Siberia) the discussion always entails taking into account monotheistic modes of religion. For example, in post-Soviet Central Asia Islam has been appropriated for nation-building purposes in order to emphasize the distinct character of nations (Hann et al. 2006). Another example could refer to ethnic groups like the Altai people, willing to embrace a "Western notion of religion" (Broz 2009: 17) and become "modern," militating against the label of "pagan" given to them by the dominant Russian Orthodox Church. However, in the context of Vietnam, it is difficult to talk about monotheistic religions or a state-sponsored "religious monopoly." Rather, I shall argue, a vast repertoire of religious

traditions competes with the official ideology since the Party-State has attempted to control and appropriate religion as a representation of culture and nation. Such institutionalization of religion serves the state's purpose to legitimize its power and engage people in institutional and emotional actions and foster a sense of national unity.

For these reasons the analyses of the religious revival in "postsocialist studies" have less relevance in my case since most of the works on religion in postsocialist Eastern Europe or Russia reflect "monotheistic modes" of religiosity and deal largely with institutional religious organizations. On the other hand, my research could contribute to debates on religion in postsocialist countries because my "case" does not fit simply in the analyses of "monopoly churches" that re-emerged with the support and political favoritism of postsocialist states and new religious movements which demand exclusive devotion and have to compete with states-sponsored religions (Froese 2004; Hann et al. 2006; Pelkmans 2009).

5.3   Religion in post-Socialist Vietnam

Most recent studies analyze postsocialism against a backdrop of dramatic social transformation, including the phenomenon of returning religion to the public sphere after its decades of being relegated to the margins (Hann 2006: 2; see also Dragarze 1993; Froese 2004). Various authors underline that such a dramatic upturn in many countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union cannot be properly analyzed without taking into account the economic changes which are at the heart of the postsocialist transformation (e.g., Hann et al. 2006). Here, however, the trajectory of abandoning socialist modernity differs from Europe and Vietnam or China. Before I pursue this issue further, let me first refer to the term "postsocialism" in an Asian context.

Since socialism has been substantively abandoned and retained in rhetoric, authors are not unanimous in their usage of the term "postsocialism" to characterize contemporary countries such as China, Vietnam and Laos which still claim to be "socialist." Nevertheless, the term "postsocialism" continues to be employed in academic literature as a theoretical framework to describe socio-economic changes in these parts of the world. At the same time, the concept of "postsocialism" referring to Asian countries has little to do with the term "postsocialism" that describes changes in socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Dirlik 1989; Evans 1990; Zhang 1997; Latham 2002; Kipnis 2003, 2008).

It is noteworthy that Arif Dirlik (1989: 362-384) was the first who coined the term "postsocialism" to denote the political and social situation in China before 1989. By

"postsocialism" he referred to the "condition of socialism in a historical situation" where socialist states adjust "actually existing socialism" to the demands of a capitalist world order and, at the same time, avoid a return to capitalism "no matter how much it may draw upon the latter [capitalism] to improve the performance of 'actually existing socialism'" (1989: 364). Kevin Latham (2002: 230) also uses the term postsocialism, but he refutes Katherine Verdery's (1996) argument against the notion of "transition" for Eastern Europe. According to Verdery many former socialist countries evolved from a planned economy into Western-style market capitalism. Latham (2002: 230) says that in the case of China we cannot talk about a "straightforward transition to market capitalism and Western democracy." He argues that such a transition took place "*in the local rhetoric*" (italics in original) playing a crucial role in retaining Party legitimacy (see also Feuchtwang 2002; Kipnis 2008).

Kipnis (2008: 5, see also 2003) points out that both Dirlik (1989) and Verdery's (1996) usage of the term "postsocialism" denotes a "particular set of historical circumstances" and illustrates social conditions in a specific time and place. He sees limitations in such a conceptualization and argues that it is more helpful to use the term "postsocialism" in a similar manner as the term "postcolonial" is employed, namely as a reference to the particular historical circumstances and as a form of theory (Kipnis 2008: 2-4; see also Zhang 1997; Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008).

Oscar Salemink (2007; 2008a) is one of a few authors who prefers to label Vietnam as "post-Socialist" (see also Vasavakul 2003) rather than "socialist" (Kerkvliet et al. 2003); "late Socialist" (Endres 2007) or "post-revolutionary" (Jellema 2005; Taylor 2007; Werner 2009). Salemink (2007, 2008a) draws our attention to the fact that the transition from a centrally planned economy to an open market was not connected with the fall of the Communist Party but rather with the practical abandonment of socialism which still is maintained in the state's rhetoric. Indeed, some analogy to China could be drawn with the *Đổi Mới* program announced at the 6th Party Congress in 1986 and with the shift in the official rhetoric (see e.g., Bui Tin 1995; Fforde and de Vylder 1996). Philip Taylor (2001: 61) gives a few examples of the party leaders who in the early 1990s tried to cast the reforms of *Đổi Mới* as a "revolution in interpretation (of socialism) rather than conversion to (capitalism)." In their public admissions of errors, Marxist-Leninist thought was not dismissed but "renewed" by more correct interpretation (ibid.). However, it is highly doubtful if anyone believed in the story depicting a turnaround in Vietnamese politics and dependence on market as a "correct" interpretation of Karl Marx. Rather these public speeches were seen by most of the

Vietnamese population as an attempt to maintain the primacy of the Party through ideology (see e.g., Bui Tin 1995).

In real life, but not in official discourse, the ideals of anti-foreign resistance lost their meaning since Vietnam endorsed the neoliberal reforms in partnership with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, and foreign donors that affected the state and the market more than Marxist-Leninist ideology did (Salemink 2008a: 282; see also Taylor 2001). This led to the situation in which "the state partially retreated from various domains (health care, education, welfare) in a process euphemistically called *xã họi hóa* [socialization] – meaning that people themselves have to pay for the services they need – a shift that primarily affects the poor." (Salemink 2008a: 282). At the same time, the Party-State has not resigned its tight control over the Vietnamese society even though many remarkable changes are visible in the development of the mass media and civil society, including the proliferation of small religious groups such as Cao Đài[49], Hòa Hảo Buddhism[50] or Cult of the Mother Goddess[51] that influence official views (Kerkvliet 2003: 15-16; Vasavakul 2003).

In his analysis of religion in post-socialist China, Andrew Kipnis (2001: 33) asks: "[W]hat is this flourishing thing called religion, what is the significance of calling it religion, and why is it flourishing?" His questions send me back to the main concerns of this chapter and my own question about the nature of religion in Vietnam. In the next section, following Talal Asad's (1993, 2001) argument that religion was historically constituted and its concept and terminology mainly derived from a Christian background, I pay more attention to local religious practices that I believe are pivotal in finding the most suitable analytical tools to conceptualize religion in Vietnam.

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[49] Cao Đài is a syncretic religion established in South Vietnam in 1926. Cao Đài adapted various elements from other religions into a religious movement characterized by priestly celibacy, vegetarianism, spirit-mediums, veneration of ancestors, and self-cultivation. The followers of Cao Đài believe in Buddha Mother [Đức Phật Mẫu] but their pantheon consists of deities also coming from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism and Confucianism or even Victor Hugo or Sun Yat Sen. For Cao Đài religion see Oliver (1976), Werner (1981), Do (2003), Jammes (2006, 2010), Hoskins (2007). For Buddha Mother see also Chapter 8.

[50] Hòa Hảo Buddhism is a "specific form of Buddhist millenarianism" and of "unified (…) preexisting beliefs into a new religious system" which was founded at the end of the 1930s in the Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam), retrieved on 25 April 2011 from http://jsis.washington.edu/seac//file/_Pascal%20Bourdeaux.pdf. For more information on Hòa Hảo Buddhism see Ho Tai (1983), Bourdeaux (2003, 2004, 2010).

[51] The Cult of the Mother Goddess or *Đạo Mẫu giáo* refers to the worship of goddesses which includes among others the main deities like the princes Liễu Hạnh, Thiên Y A Na, the Lady of the Realm [Bà Chúa Xứ], the Goddess of Treasury [Bà Chúa Kho], and the cult of Four Palaces [*Tứ Phủ*] and is associated with spirit medium practice known as *lền đồng*. For the pioneer studies of the cult of Holy Mother in the context of folk beliefs; see Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996).

5.4 Religious plurality in Vietnam

If you are an accidental visitor in Vietnam you might find yourself confused by the diversity of such venerated animals as whales, tigers, snakes, white horses or legendary and historical figures such as famous generals, village founders and Buddhist monks. To your utter astonishment you might discover that some of these ancestors were bandits, beggars, thieves, prostitutes, murderers or people who committed incest. Curious nonetheless you may look for a dictionary of the Vietnamese deities, in which you hope to find some explanation of the pantheon in Vietnam. Your effort to find such a dictionary in English or any other Western language would be futile. If you are lucky enough to know Vietnamese, a local dictionary could be of some help to you; however it is unlikely that it would contain a full description of all the spirits worshiped in the country. Gods and spirits exist in multi-local variants in Vietnam; some known in one part of the country may be unknown in another place. They might disappear after some time only to appear somewhere else in a new form. To write such a dictionary, you would need to identify not only gods all over the country, in all provinces and villages, but also "catch" them in their historical existence, which would be a Sisyphean task.

My purpose in this chapter is to highlight that the religious domain in Vietnam is dynamic and, even more, in a constant state of change. Participation in religious practices does not imply a unified and coherent system of beliefs but, on the contrary, leaves room for individual interpretations and innovations manifested in worship of many deities and spirits. For some time, anthropologists have shown a historical process under which religious traditions are produced, fashioned and re-shaped. A number of ethnographic accounts illustrate that the impact of state power on religious practices created a kind of "ritual bricolage" or syncretic practices that blurred national and local narratives and revealed the absence of a "singular all-encompassing belief system" (Chao 1999: 505-506; see also Chau 2006; Malarney 2007; Kwon 2009; Salemink 2009a).

My focus on two aspects of religion in Vietnam, namely its lack of fixed norms and beliefs and its polytheistic nature, refers me back to the well-known critique of Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition of religion by Asad (1993). In The Interpretations of Culture Geertz (1973: 90) suggests that religion is a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." In light of Geertz's

definition, religion seems to be a coherent system of beliefs that does not allow for change. Asad (1993: 29) refutes such conceptualization and points out that the content of religion changes over time because religion itself is a creation of particular historical moment and a particular place (see also Asad 2001). More precisely, he says that Geertz neglects the role of social forces such as authoritative institutions which impose consistent interpretations of religious symbols, authorize religious practices and knowledge, and discipline religious subjects.

Kipnis (2001: 42) underlines the value of Asad's critique that brought to the table historical conditions producing a category called "religion" but he also points out that Asad's historization of the concept of religion is reduced to the power of "authoritative institutions to compel standardized interpretations." Kipnis still finds inspiration in Geertz's emphasis on symbols and models, especially in reference to China where the state defines what belongs to the domain of religion and science. However, instead of reading symbols as a sort of "shared beliefs," as Geertz's definition implies, he points out existing contestations over religious symbols that produce "variation in interpretation and manipulation of socio-symbolic worlds towards a multiplicity of purposes rather than a unified form of thought" (Kipnis 2001: 34).

I am inspired by Asad's masterpiece showing that "there cannot be universal definition of religion, not only because its constituted elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process" (1993: 29). However, my problem with Asad's analysis does not lie in his exploration of religions through authoritative institutions, as Kipnis (2001: 42) notes, but in the fact that it is reduced to *monotheistic* modes of religiosity that authorize practices and doctrines. Indeed, all religious traditions in Vietnam such as the Mother Goddess, village founders, or cult of the Whale Spirit are tied to some sort of institutions, even though these institutions might be very loose in nature. However, not all of them formulate and impose standardized religious knowledge and practice in the sense of the "unified authority" existing in monotheistic traditions (Asad 1983: 244). As I have already implied, many religious practices in Vietnam (excepting Christianity and Islam) have a non-exclusionary character since in contrast to monotheistic religions they are hardly institutionalized and not based on the notion of a "Jealous God" who commands exclusive devotion. As a result of their loose character they much more easily overlap with other religious practices and everyday concerns.

Religion in Vietnam could be defined neither in terms of blending indigenous beliefs with those belonging to the so-called "great traditions" (Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism)

nor as a Vietnamese syncretic religion as suggested by some scholars in Vietnam (see Trần Quốc Vượng 1992) for the simple reason that no Vietnamese people would define their religion in such terms. Salemink (2008a), drawing on works of Leopold Cadière (1955-1957) and Maurice Durand (1959), pointed out that rather we deal with the "interconnection and mutual influence between major religious traditions in Vietnam, through a wide variety of rituals and in overlapping cosmologies and pantheons associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism (…), built on a substratum of ancestor worship [*thờ tổ tiên* or *đạo ông bà Đạo Thánh*]" (Salemink 2008a: 272).

Therefore, in this chapter, my aim is neither to define religion in Vietnam nor to construct typologies of religious beliefs. Moreover, in contrast to recent studies of religion in Vietnam (Soucy 1999; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Taylor 2004; Endres 2011), on purpose I avoid limiting my analysis to a specific religious tradition such as cult of the Mother Goddess, hero worship, or Buddhism and I first seek to demonstrate the plurality of religious cosmologies and practices and then of religious landscape. To frame my discussion on Vietnam's religion in a wider theoretical debate I have selected works which are not only relevant to my own ethnographic material but also well illustrate this issue.

5.4.1 *Religious beliefs*

The Vietnamese people have two terms to describe their religious experience: *tôn giáo* [religion] and *tín ngưỡng* [religious beliefs]. Here, I will focus on "religious beliefs" as the *emic* concept, while in the subsequent part of my chapter I will analyze the general term "religion," showing that it derived its origin from the West and in the post-colonial period has been accepted as a universal category. In contrast to the notion of "religion," the term "religious beliefs" refers to the Vietnamese people's religious practices and their attachment to various spirits. The Vietnamese case is not unique; anthropologists working on non-Western societies have taken note of similar phenomena existing in other parts of the world where languages have their own distinctive terminology describing religious practices (Tooker 1992; Kirsch 2004; DuBois 2009).

Let me first refer to Deborah Tooker (1992) who conducted fieldwork among the Akha ethnic group of Highland Burma. She calls attention to the semantics of the local term translated as "belief" which in fact expresses the action of carrying tradition rather than a "religious faith." Tooker pays more attention to the practice and makes a dichotomy between "believing" and "acting" since among the Akha "being religious" does not mean "believing,"

but rather describes their ethno-religious identity and custom. However, the Akha's manifestation of their religiosity differs fundamentally from Vietnam to the extent that it separates "believing" from "action" because for Vietnamese people "believing in" implies acting on behalf of the spirits.

While the term "religious beliefs" might apply to informal, folk or ethnic minority religions including "superstitious" beliefs and practices [*mê tín dị đoan*] (Salemink 2007: 4), Vietnamese people have a separate term describing their internal relation with supernatural beings. For example, adherents of a ritualized form of possession [*lên đồng, hầu bong*] describe their unconditional belief in the power of spirits by using an idiom *có tâm* often translated as "sincere heart." Nguyen Thi Hien (2002), who studied the Vietnamese religion of the Mother Goddess (known also under the name Four Palaces [*Tứ Phủ*]) argues that a sincere heart can be understood as "faith" or "belief." She stresses the emotional element of the "sincere heart," understood as the "whole set of transformed symbols, the belief, of people in the manifestation, compassion, and help of the spirits" (2002: 115). In other words, "heart" is the deep belief in spirits and their supernatural powers.

Chau (2006: 64) relates the problem of "belief" to the idea of efficacy, which he understands as the "ability of the deity to respond (…) to the worshipers' problems." Drawing on his ethnographic findings, Chau characterizes religion in rural China as "essentially *a religion of efficacious response*" which requires "concrete social relationships, between deity or individual worshiper or between the deity and community" (2006: 64-65, italics in original). A similar analogy could be drawn with Vietnam, where the deities' power and responsiveness are expressed through the "means of a process of authentication" (Do 2003: 17). For example, depending on the problem followers of the Mother Goddess cult face, they might make a pragmatic selection of a particular spirit or turn to a whole pantheon of gods while at the same time putting to the test their efficacy and power. The same followers might also reject the spirits that fail to grant their whishes. Although, in all cases, the interaction of people with deities requires trust, respect and reciprocity as common relationships, it does not exclude the possibility that the deities' supernatural power is liable to human manipulation (2003: 10). Responsiveness and real divine power are socially constructed: a deity is sacred because people experience his power and the more they experience a deity's power, the more efficacy is attributed to the deity (Chau 2006: 65).

This distances us from perceiving belief—in the sense of Geertz's interpretation—as a stable interior condition of religious adherents in favor of a stance in which the "will to

believe" is a "continuous process of interpretation and social negotiation" between humans and spiritual power (Kirsch 2004: 703). In my thesis, I understand "religious beliefs" as a dynamic and negotiable arena that might not be congruent with the views on religious practices shared by secular and religious authorities but, nevertheless, is meaningful for individuals and groups who try to establish evocative relations with their gods and spirits.

5.4.2 *Popular religion*

There has been widespread debate in the study of Chinese religion and the history of religion concerning the issue of "popular religion." Catherine Bell (1989) identifies several trends that have been talked of as: "popular" and "official," or "folk" and "elite" religions or "great" and "little traditions" or "unity" and "diversity." Based on her reading of works of Davis (1974) , Yang (1967), Freedman (1979), Jordan and Overmyer (1986), Johnson, Nathan and Rawski (1985), Sangren (1987) and others, Bell (1989) distinguishes three major approaches to the study of popular religion: (1) Chinese religion seen as a common system, a sort of cultural unity which underlies a socially diverse nation; (2) "popular religion" as a "social medium" of "fundamental values, traditional practices, and attitudes" that coalesces elite and peasant worldviews (ibid: 42); and (3) "popular religion" seen in the context of the "socioeconomic forces and real networks of social interaction" (ibid: 56) This third approach, drawing on Johnson, Nathan and Rawski (1985) and Sangren (1987), sees religion not as a result of social organization but rather social and cultural activity within specific historical and regional limits and conditions.

The third approach, adopting a perspective that highlights process over structure, brings me to the heart of my argumentation that it is more fruitful to think in terms of a religion of practices and actions rather than of "nouns." Stating that it is not possible to formulate an essential definition of religion, Asad (2001), emphasizes that researchers should pay greater attention to "practices" that play a pivotal role in religious experience. For Asad "religion" is "first and foremost an act" (2001: 145). His point was taken by other scholars like Nye (2000) who advocates that we should think of "doing religion" or "religioning" rather than "religion." Such "religioning" is located in action and mediated through performances, ritualization, or the creation and use of text.

Although Chau (2006) does not refer directly to Asad and Nye, he came to the same conclusion when he tried to characterize religion in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province of China). Instead of continuing the most debated topic in the anthropological study of Chinese

religion on whether there is one unified Chinese religion or many religions (see Freedman 1979; Wolf 1974), Chau (2006: 74) proposes to "identify and analyze the forces that pull or push Chinese religious ideas and practices centripetally or centrifugally and see how these forces contest and negotiate with one another." He points out that one of the focal limitations of the "one or many" debate about the unity or diversity of Chinese religion is its focus on conceptions rather than on practices (2006: 74). As a result, these debates miss the ways in which people factually "do religion" (ibid: 76).

Chau's plea for thinking in terms of "doing religion" rather than in the terms of religious conceptions I found particularly useful in my own attempt to characterize religion in Vietnam and in my next brief discussion on "syncretism/syncretization."

5.4.3 *Syncretism/Syncretization*

Like discussions on "popular religion," the term "syncretism" has also been subject to debate in religious and anthropological studies. Particularly, in religious studies "syncretism" appears to have weakness because it implies that something before was pure and now is contaminated by "non-standard" elements. As Pye (1971) argues, even in "prophetic" religions one can find "syncretism," and, in consequence, every religion is to some extent a syncretistic formation. As a result, purities and originals all appear to be historically constructed.

Stewart and Shaw (1994: 7) show that anthropologists attempting to reformulate "syncretism" are more concerned with treating scholarly "syncretism" as a *process* of religious synthesis rather than a *category* on the grounds that "all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing process of synthesis and erasure." Stewart and Shaw (1994) point out that "syncretism" has to be confronted with what they call "anti-syncretism"—that is, "the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the deference of religious boundaries" and a kind of "authenticity" (ibid.). This authenticity has little to do with purity but rather with the situation in which people desire to preserve the religious space and boundaries of their religion and to take a position of anti-syncretism as cultural resistance.

Steward and Shaw again drew our attention to the process rather than the concept itself. Along this line, in his study on Javanese religion, Andrew Beatty (1999: 3) employs the concept of "syncretism" in a more abstract sense in order to refer to a "systematic interrelation of elements from diverse traditions, and ordered response to pluralism and cultural difference." For him "syncretism" refers to a "dynamic, recursive process, a constant factor in cultural

reproduction, rather than to a settled outcome" (ibid.). Therefore, his usage of "syncretism" emphasizes an ongoing process of accommodation, appropriation, indigenization and mutual influence of Islamic piety, mysticism, Hinduism and folk tradition.

Taking a similar theoretical stance, Oscar Salemink (2009a) talks about *syncretization* rather than "syncretism" giving priority to ritual process. Exploring how categories of religion [*tôn giáo*], religious beliefs [*tín ngưỡng*] and superstition [*mê tín dị đoan*] in Vietnam are used in ritual practices, he examines the process of change in ritual practices and their development into novel forms of religiosity in the context of a "widening political space for religious expression" (2009a: 2). He points out a trend in Vietnam's religion towards *syncretization* since contemporary religious practices transgress political, linguistic, religious, ethnic boundaries by drawing from a rich repertoire of symbolic practice (ibid.). In an analogous sense, in her analysis of a non-Han female shaman in Yunnan Province of southern China, Emily Chao (1999) uses the term "ritual bricolage" in order to shift her analysis from "ritual" to "ritualization" and to show how different social forces shape ritual effects.

To conclude this section I suggest that it is more fruitful to talk about *syncretization* than *syncretism* because, once again, to focus on practices gives us a more nuanced understanding of the sociocultural process of "doing religion" in any historical or cultural context as Chau (2006: 240) argues.

5.4.4   *Religious plurality*

Recognition of religious mobility and the people's willingness to engage themselves in different sorts of religious practices finally led me to describe the religious landscape in Vietnam as "pluralistic." Johannes Fabian (1985) in his essay indicates that the term itself used in popular jargon or in the language of politics and popular science is highly problematic because it presupposed a "hegemonic" or "observer's" position. Even sociologists and anthropologists who introduced "pluralism" as a "critical reaction against functionalism and its bias toward integration, equilibrium and moral consensus" placed societies emerging from the experience of colonization vis-à-vis the advanced Western world (1985: 143-144). Therefore, Fabian calls for an analysis of plurality "from below" in which the people "we study are given voice." Religious plurality acknowledges the existence of "*many* [italics in original] forms of religious consciousness, of competing beliefs and diverse expressions" that do not have to be "logical and coherent" (ibid: 147). "The ability of individuals to follow

more than one religious orientation at a time" is what he calls religious plurality (ibid: 139).[52] Fabian's standpoint was adopted by Thomas G. Kirsch (2004: 1-2) who characterizes religious pluralism as a "high degree of mobility in changing religious affiliation." None of these affiliations represent a "permanent or universally valid authority and in which (…) the will to believe had to be constantly reproduced afresh" (Kirsch 2004: 2).

Following this perspective, I prefer to present religion in the frame of "plurality" seen from *below* because it recognizes the dynamic and fluid character of religious traditions in Vietnam and enables me to approach their different parts. At the same time, as there is no "dominant religion" in Vietnam, it makes no sense to study popular religious practices in terms of alternatives, oppositions or resistance to the dominant, state-backed religion (Pye 1997; see Dror 2002; Do 1997; 2003).[53] Therefore, referring to plurality as one of the most characteristic features of religion in Vietnam, I present religion as an intertwined structure in which a range of religious traditions such as ancestor worship, spirit mediums, Mother Goddess cult, Whale cult, Buddhism, Cao Đài and the like interact on various levels (Salemink 2007)[54] Moreover, the recent resurgence of religion in Vietnam and its confrontation with the state's ideological objectives makes the picture even more complex. The state's effort to impose a sort of unity on popular expressions of religion leads to contestation, negotiation and investing those practices with new meanings (see Taylor 2007; Endres 2008; Salemink 2009, 2009a). But before I examine this issue in greater detail, it is necessary for my analysis to say more about the transformation and shaping of the idea of "religion" in Vietnam.

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[52] The concept of "plurality" differs from "religious pluralism," "religious market" or "marketplace of religions" used in the literature dealing with revival of religion in the post-socialist context (see Froese 2004; Hann 2002) or in the literature advocating a religious market approach (Barro 2004; Iannaccone 1995; Finke and Stark 1988, 1992) in order to describe and interpret the efflorescence of new sects and cults and the competition among them. In Vietnam where the Communist Party is still holding on to power, there is little room for "religious pluralism" since especially Catholicism and Protestantism are under threat and control. In contrast to Taiwan and South Korea where religious life became an open market of religions, in Vietnam Christianity is still treated with political suspicion (see Lee 1993; Taylor 2007: 42-49).

[53] Although more institutional forms of religion like Buddhism, Cao Đài or Hòa Hảo are present in Vietnam, it is difficult to consider them as "dominant."

[54] For instance, Beatty (1999) prefers to talk about *varieties* of religion in Java since differences are constructed within the same space and with great intensity. His focus on the effect of variations helps him to show how religion works in a complex society.

5.5   Situating Vietnamese religious traditions against a backdrop of "religion"

According to Ronald Inglehart et al. (2004) 81 percent of Vietnamese do not believe in God and for that reason Vietnam constitutes an "anomaly" among Southeast Asian countries which "contain almost no atheists."[55] Indeed, Vietnamese people who are asked *what their religion is* usually answer that they do not follow any religion. Moreover, most of them have indicated "none" under the rubric "religion" on their identity card even if they are engaged in all sorts of ritual practices (Salemink 2009a). Such a statement might seem peculiar to me, given that for nearly four years of my stay in Vietnam I was not only a passive observer but also, to some extent, an active participant: I joined Vietnamese people as they burned incense daily to their individual and collective ancestors, assisted in their consultation with spirit mediums and fortune tellers, visited temples and pagodas, made sacrifices for gods and spirits, took part in communal and Buddhist rituals and followed many other urban and village events. I cannot help but reverse the saying, "there are no wrong questions, only wrong answers." Indeed, asking about "religion" one could not be more wrong, because Inglehart puts forward the idea of "religion" as an "institutionalized doctrine" and "universal category," which rendered into the Vietnamese language has particular connotations and excludes, at the same time, other possible meanings. Apparently, he built his statement about "strong atheism" among Vietnamese people on the notion of exclusive modes of religiosity and did not considered polytheistic religions.[56]

In contrast to monotheistic religious traditions that involve churches, membership or any other institutional organization, worshiping a variety of "supernatural" beings such as ancestors, ghosts, gods and terrestrial and marine creatures does not require of Vietnamese people regular attendance at temples or regular praying to any of them. People's religiosity is mainly based on practical dependence on gods whose efficacy and responsiveness are the

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[55]   See   Zuckerman   2007:   10;   retrieved   on   28   May   2010   from http://www.pitzer.edu/academics/faculty/zuckerman/Ath-Chap-under-7000.pdf

[56] The same survey (according to the database of 2000, Inglehart et al. 2004) argues that 24 percent of Taiwanese are atheists. One could wonder why there is such a great variance in the results between the two countries since both bear a striking similarity in religious beliefs based on Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Rather than ascribing the difference in the score of this survey to decades of religious repression and attempts to convert Vietnamese society to atheism, I argue that in Taiwan, many Christian missions including charismatic Pentecostal churches have well established their position and are freer to manifest their religiosity and carry their evangelistic activities than in Vietnam. In Vietnam severe restrictions still exist for "foreign religions" which are seen as lying "outside the Vietnamese traditions" (Taylor 2007: 46). Therefore, I wonder about the way the questions in this survey were formulated and to whom.

most important features ranking a deity in the local pantheon of spirits (for China see Chau 2006). The question then arises whether we can talk about "religion" in reference to Vietnam. If we intend to discuss "religion" *per se* I would suggest we first look at the term in its vernacular form.

As I have indicated elsewhere in the chapter, in the daily discourse of contemporary Vietnam, there are two Sino-Vietnamese terms referring to religious experience *tôn giáo* known in Chinese as *zongjiao* [宗教] and frequently translated as "religion," and *tín ngưỡng* corresponding to Chinese *xinyang* [信仰], rendered as "religious beliefs" (Dror 2002). Olga Dror (2002: 64) explains that literal translation of the characters composing the word "religion" is "sectarian teaching" or "to follow a doctrine" while the term "religious beliefs" is "to believe in and to admire or to respect." Dror's analysis of Chinese elements constituting the latter term reveals that it "does not indicate the presence of a unified doctrine or teaching, but merely denotes trust in and a subordinate position vis-à-vis a power that can influence human beings" (2002: 64). Equally, the Vietnamese compound means a "person in the attitude of looking up or lifting something up, as if in worship or in offering something up." She concludes that the term "religious beliefs" describes concrete human actions rather than an abstract doctrine (ibid.).

Vietnamese people who stated on their Identity Card that they did not follow any religion answered in line with semantics of the word "religion" chosen to formulate the question about their religious affiliation. They had never employed this term to describe their belief in spirits. Dror (2002) makes clear that the term rather refers to Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Judaism, and Islam as religions. It follows that Vietnamese people make a distinction between the terms "religion" and "religious beliefs" based on the presence or absence of doctrine. When I went on with my questions about the difference between the two terms, my informants usually replied that "religion" indicates "world" religions while "religious beliefs" describe "personal" and "intimate" relationships with a spirit or, to put it in other words, the "internal state" of their "heart."

Here I take a step further by tracing some of the phenomena which led to understanding "religion" in Vietnam in a more categorical sense (Asad 1983, 2003). I believe that such a discussion is necessary to comprehend current policies toward religious traditions in Vietnam—the subject addressed in the subsequent parts of this chapter. Yet, the discussion on the Vietnamese terms describing religious experience refers us to a much wider debate that cannot bypass the issue of colonialism and the relationship between religion and

modernization that took place in the East and Southeast Asia over the last century. Van der Veer and Lehmann (1999: 4) remind us that the project of modernization that channeled colonial power across the world has "provided new forms of language," what in consequence led not only to transformation but also formation of local categories (see Mandair 2009; Salemink 2009). Arvind-Pal Mandair (2009: XIV), drawing on Derrida's approach, calls this process the "theology of translation" and argues that "religion" often has not existed in "the lexicon of a particular culture prior to its encounter with European colonialism, but 'suddenly' enter[ed] into their idiom as if it were their own." As a result, "religion" appeared and took shape in the language of colonizers as a response to the "imposition of a certain concept of translation" (ibid.). Indeed, as a number of authors argue, in pre-colonial Asia there were no separate terms that could refer to religion *per se* (Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre 1994; Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999; Van der Veer and Feuchtwang 2009; DuBois 2009; Kirichenko 2009; Sutton and Kang 2009).

A good example is given by Kirichenko (2009) who suggests that in the case of Burma the local terms describing religious practices associated with Buddhism came to be understood as "religion" in a more definite sense only under Western influence. Similarly, Sutton and Kang (2009) argue that the Chinese language did not have a term equivalent to "religion." The word *zongjiao* [Vietnamese *tôn giáo*] which today means "religion" entered China via Japan in the 19th century and initially was used in reference to Buddhism (see also Van der Veer and Feuchtwang 2009: 94). Later, in the Republican (1912-1949) and Maoist (1950s-1970s) periods the term "religion" gained a more neutral character. However, as the authors show, its general usage entailed that religious practices have not only been labeled and controlled but also understood as separate from the "secular" and juxtaposed with science. It is noteworthy that similar to "religion" the term "secular" was absent in the Chinese language since "all classes and teaching assumed the mutual interpretation of the working of Heaven and the works of humanity" (Sutton and Kang 2009: 193). It is not difficult to imagine that a similar process took place in Vietnam which based many of its policies on the China model (Woodside 1971; Marr 1981; Whitmore 1997; Pelley 2002; Taylor 2001: 56-88).

In consequence, both colonized countries and those which successfully resisted the Western hegemony "coined" a new definition of religion based on the terms which had an "intellectual genealogy that far preceded the Western impact" (DuBois 2009: 7). Such a process required the reformulation of practices and social meanings of religious traditions in congruence with the Western idea of "religion" and the design of new measures aimed at

controlling such practices (Sutton and Kang 2009). Analogically, the contemporary Party-State in Vietnam accepted a modern definition of "religion" understood, to use Comaroff's (1994: 301) phrase, as "living survival of an archaic order" and according to that understanding sought to institutionalize and standardize policies toward religion. Drawing on Scott's (1998) argument on state simplification, I discuss in the following part how the Vietnamese state standardizes a pluralistic religious landscape as moral reinforcement for its cultural agenda. This requires also a careful study of the highly localized contestations surrounding the state project of "legibility" and "simplification."

5.6   "State simplification" project and contestation of religious landscape

James Scott (1998), in his book titled *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, made an interesting argument that the state always attempts to make a society legible and arrange the population in a way that increases the state's capacity. Such an attempt—administrative ordering of society—includes the organization of the natural geography, settling mobile peoples, the establishment of population and cadastral registers, the standardization of language, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation, just to recount only the most basic efforts of the state to attach its "subjects to [their] environment" (Scott 1998: 2; see also Tsing 1993; Li 1999). This is often interwoven with state confidence in scientific and technical progress which Scott calls "high-modernism" – "uncritical, unskeptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic [ideology] about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production" (1998: 4). High modernism was employed by states in their ambitious plans to satisfy rising human demands and for that reason bore the hallmarks of faith since it depicted a utopian vision of "progressive future." Such a vision required massive changes in people's work habits, living patterns, and their moral convictions and perceptions of the world and, above all, a state that is able to use its power to put the high-modernist project into effect. Scott argues that war, revolution, depression and struggle for national liberation pave the way for the emergence of new power—the authoritarian state that rejects the past in favor of a new revolutionary vision for its society (ibid: 5).

Indeed, "progress" and detachment from "primordial" forms of classification took place in Vietnam against the backdrop of French colonial rule, the national political movement for independence, and the shock and trauma of the Second Indochina War. At the same time endorsement of a socialist modernity was accompanied by a strong critique of the

past (see Marr 1981; Endres 2002; Ninh 2002; Pelley 2002; Taylor 2003). According to Scott's (1998: 93) argument the simplified "prescription for a new society" implies a radical break with its history and tradition because in the view of the authoritarian state they provide fuel for backward institutions and customs, superstition and religious bigotry which hamper the achievement of high-modernism. Certainly, since the beginning of the formation of the modern state, Vietnamese traditional culture has become a subject of constant scrutiny by politicians and intellectuals. In revolutionary times, they put the blame for colonial hegemony and economic backwardness on certain aspects of the culture, such as hierarchy, waste, and irrationality, which they believed were not appropriate in a modern state and should be eradicated (Endres 2002).[57]

In line with this revolutionary rhetoric one of the main goals of the new socialist modernizing agenda was to strip traditional social arrangements of their sacred and mystical aura and power that "derived from hierarchy taken as the earthly manifestation of a cosmic order" (Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre 1994a: 4) and to transform the Vietnamese people into a new and advanced society, with its progress based on education and rationality rather than its reliance on a religious pantheon. The Party attempted to raise the masses' political awareness through instruction in the hope that people would voluntarily abandon superstition without the need to reinforce it with a ban. In its effort to make Vietnam a secular society, the government adopted Marxist-Leninist theory according to which religion will naturally disappear when humankind enters the period of Communism, and "highly advanced material production, culture and science" (MacInnis 1989: 116). The Party ideologists blamed religion for the hardship and backwardness of the life of the masses, saying that people wasted time and money that could be better spent on education or national agriculture production. The Party-State was convinced that a systematic selection of "proper" aspects of Vietnamese tradition would put an end to "depraved customs" originating from the "era of feudalism" (Endres 2002: 1).

It is not without significance that one of the early tasks of the state's "simplification" project concerned a total restructuring of local village religious domain in which politics and religion were merged.[58] Village festivals, life-cycle rituals, and places of worship—the spaces

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[57] Scott does speak of any state, not just authoritarian or socialist ones. Therefore, I found Scott's argument still relevant in *Đổi Mới*'s Vietnam since socialist modernity has been replaced with a new vision of alternative modernity and the enormous state's efforts to contrive the society that will fulfill global standards of 'progress' and 'civility.' I will address this issue in the following section.

[58] For a very similar case of redefining of the relationship between the sacred and profane in a Chinese village see Duara (1988, 1991).

that sustained old power and prestige—became targets of the state's campaign against superstitions (Endres 2002). Following a Marxist analysis, religious buildings such as village temples, pagodas, and shrines were defined in terms of class struggle and considered to be a hotbed of feudalism, ignorance, exploitation, and a waste of village resources. Concerned with introducing a "[n]ew way of life," the state undertook the task of turning religious buildings into spaces of secular rather than religious utility (2002: 3).

As a result, in Northern Vietnam, from the 1950s to the late 1980s, sacred spaces were converted into granaries, storehouses and schools, while the monks and nuns were forced to cast off their robes and return to secular life. After the unification of the country in 1975, this process spread across the South, including Central Vietnam and lasted until 1986, when the state relaxed its enforcement of anti-superstition laws.[59] The most severe persecution of religion occurred in the years 1976-79, when the state without success attempted to pursue a policy of collectivization in the South (see Taylor 2001).

Indeed, the Vietnamese procedures of converting temples into secular places did not differ markedly from those implemented in Republican and later in Communist China and in Revolutionary Russia. In the context of China, Yang (1967) and Poon (2004, 2008) report that a large proportion of urban temples was turned into modern schools and exhibition halls, and sacred objects were broken or smashed with hammers. In Luehrmann's (2005) analysis of desecularization in Post-Soviet Russia, one can find examples of sacred groves in the countryside turned into parks or of church cemeteries used as public toilets. Malarney (2002) also gives an account of what happened in North Vietnam after the land reform in the mid-1960s. Smashing many symbols, destroying the structure of temples, or turning them into private houses, granaries, and the like were performed with such great vigor that it is remembered vividly by the villagers even today.

Besides the goal to eliminate class differentiation, the next step of the state campaign of restructuring the village religious domain was to end superstitious practices by religious specialists such as diviners, geomancers and spirit mediums, a large number of whom were sent to re-education camps where they had a chance to "free" themselves from "harmful and backward practices" (Nguyễn Bắc 1958: 41-44; Luong 1992; Malerney 2002). In addition, the lunar calendar was replaced with the Gregorian calendar in an attempt to discover the division

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[59] Taylor (2004) points out that the integration of the North and the South posed a serious challenge to the Communist state, which was confronted with a large body of religious sects and practices that had been eradicated or seriously restricted in the North but still flourished in the South despite their selective control in resistance zones. In fact many of these religious sects, like Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, had never existed in the North.

of time into auspicious and inauspicious periods (Malerney 2002: 81). Thus the people would not waste their time staying at home or consulting with spirit practitioners about the best days for holding weddings and funerals and would have more time for building socialism (ibid: 80).

Various researchers working either on Soviet Russia, Republican China or Maoist China, and Vietnam describe the process of separation of politics and religion and of a total restructuring of local village politics as "secularization" (Yang 1967; Young 1997; Peris 1998), "desanctification" (Malarney 2002), "desecration" or "disempowerment of the religious domain" (Duara 1991), or "ritual displacement" (Anagnost 1985, 1994). However, regardless of the terms used, all authors point out that the attack against religious institutions or semi-institutions (churches, temples, sectarian organizations, geomancers, spirit mediums etc.) took place in the name of modernization that justified the state intervention into all aspects of local village life. In most of the cases the transformation of village politics and reduction of the role of religion in the village was successful. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe in this overwhelming narrative of the transformation of religious space—that the local landscape was completely "re-inscribed" in the Party's own "totalizing order," as Ann Anagnost (1994: 222) argues in the case of Maoist China. In order to better understand this process in Vietnam, I propose a brief analysis of the Governmental Gazette *Công Báo*, which reveals the failure of the secularizing agenda, its transformation over the years as well as the dissonance between the state's goals and their realization in everyday life.[60]

5.6.1 *From religious buildings to "national heritage": Debating the religious landscape*

Like in China, in Vietnam the ongoing process of the state taking control over religious affairs in local communities was an attempt to "disenchant" (Weber 2004) and simplify the local landscape in order to make it predictable and manageable. The first task of the state was to divest religious places of their sacred aura and show that local gods were nothing more than powerless effigies. As I have already pointed out in the previous section, this was done by removing sacred objects from temples, shrines, and pagodas and turning structures that were not destroyed into functional buildings.

Paradoxically, at the same time, in the Vietnamese official discourse there was a tradition of preservation of communal houses, temples, and shrines going back to 1945 when Hồ Chí Minh issued a decree in the context of land reform on protecting cultural heritage [*di*

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[60] All quotes from the *Công Báo* are translated from the original Vietnamese into English by the author. I am grateful to Kirsten Endres for drawing my attention to the *Công Báo* documents during our discussion in Hanoi 2004.

sản văn hóa] (Endres 2000). Historian Patricia Pelley (2002) demonstrates clearly that the Vietnamese postcolonial socialist state, ceaseless in the defense of the country against foreign aggressors, was extremely concerned about national history and its interpretation. As early as 1943, as the "guiding concepts for the project of building a 'new culture' and a 'new life'" the Vietnamese Communist Party, in its "Theses on Vietnamese Culture" introduced three principles: nationalization, popularization, and scientism [*dân tộc hóa, đại chúng hóa,* and *khoa học hóa*] (Endres 2002: 2; see also Ninh 2002: 26-46). "Nationalization" especially was understood as a defense against hostile forces—France and Japan—in terms of a "long-standing tradition of resistance to foreign aggression" and, therefore, occupied a particular place in the ideological and academic discourse (Endres 2002: 2). In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s scholars debated extensively about turning points in Vietnam's history as well as about the historical figures concerned that were often "repacked" and represented as national heroes (Pelley 2002). Such repackaging did not only refer to historic figures but also included religious structures which in the official view stood for a "national tradition." Close reading of the Official Gazette, *Công Báo*, from 1953 onwards reveals three phases in the official policy towards the local religious domain, namely transformation of religious buildings into (1) "secular spaces," (2) "cultural heritage," and (3) "national heritage." At the same time, however, it reveals that Hồ Chí Minh's directives were largely ignored.

In the North, during the land reform (1953-1955) and the time of collectivization and dependence on the state's handouts (1975-1986), religious buildings suffered extensive destruction and neglect as their facilities and properties were claimed by village agricultural co-operatives or simply cleared of clergy and left empty. The monks and nuns who depended largely on these properties were dissociated from the basis of their livelihoods. During the land reform, those pagodas that temporarily maintained their plot of land were taxed and their clergy was expected to work in its rice fields shoulder to shoulder with villagers instead of relying exclusively on the labor of religious followers (*Công Báo* 1955; *Công Báo* 1995a).

Comparing individual issues of *Công Báo*, it becomes apparent that the state had its own vision of how to make use of temples, although it was not always clear and consistent in its policies towards religious spaces. As a result, the state's inconsistency widened a gap between the official goals of a new usage of sacred spaces and their implementation. Moreover, the implementation of the new ideological agenda was not always as peaceful a process as the state intended. Ten years after Hồ Chí Minh issued his directives on protecting cultural heritage, Prime Minister Phan Mỹ in the *Công Báo* of 1956 lamented the pitiful

situation of destroyed sites of local cults, which in the official discourse underwent a metamorphosis into "historical monuments" [*di tích lịch sử*], "heritage of feudalism" [*di sản của phong kiến*] or "monuments of resistance to foreign aggression" [*di tích kháng chiến*] (*Công Báo* 1956: 189). Thus his lament referred to the dilapidation of these buildings because they were officially of national, not religious significance. However, as the next issues of *Công Báo* show, in the process of appropriation of religious buildings for secular purposes, national aspects were often ignored by local cadres as well as villagers.

Religious structures were demolished not only by the communist guerillas, who had used well-tried scorched earth tactics in order to deny the enemy any space to quarter their troops, but also by villagers who tore down the buildings or simply used their material for constructing their own houses. Consequently, in *Công Báo's* later issue of 1960, the state showed its disquiet over popular reactions and feelings about the "dilapidated situation of temples falling into ruins [*đổ nát*] and with pieces lying scattered around [*hỗn độn*]," which might have resulted in a "negative political impression among local visitors and foreign guests," and recommended to provincial offices of culture and the People's Committees to remove all defacements from monuments and to beautify the local landscape by planting trees (*Công Báo* 1960: 338).

In its rhetoric, the government proclaimed that although the "communal houses, Buddhists pagodas, shrines, temples, and imperial tombs have for centuries been exploited by feudal tyrants, who turned them into places giving them prestige in order to be close to all classes of people and to sow superstitions to captivate people," they should be utilized in accordance with a new cultural project of building a modern nation (*Công Báo* 1960: 338). As I have already noted, the state's concern was dictated by practical considerations to develop them as places of historical interest, cultural value, or scenic beauty that the masses could visit as tourists rather than as places of religious activity. More importantly, this development aimed to replace superstitious beliefs with a new socialist creed. Thus, the fate of these places was not a trivial and unimportant matter since their new role was supposed to substitute for their religious function and to serve the state machinery in building a new society. The Ministry of Culture, conscious of losing control over the management of temples and of the fatal consequences of anti-religious zeal, blamed its own followers for "lack of proper view" (ibid.). In a self-critical mood, the *Công Báo* (1960: 338) describes the temples' destruction:

> …as a result of the need for material for building new projects, a number of the
> objects of our age-old architectural legacy [heritage – *di sản kiến trúc cổ truyền*] have

been demolished; some of them have been used to support the art of cooperatives [*văn nghệ hợp tác xã*] or the production of oil lamps for meetings, others have been turned into retail outlets, storehouses and markets; while some of them remain in the hands of superstitious old ritual masters, the majority has no one looking after them; some people with little consciousness destroyed these places or used them as private houses.

Then, it continues:

It is prohibited to defile architectural monuments [*công trình kiến trúc*] or to use them in illegitimate ways such as: making improper drawings on the walls, pillars, and statues, or on the objects of worship; raising chickens and ducks; piling straw; storing excrement in communal houses, pagodas, shrines, and temples, or imperial tombs [*lăng tẩm*]; taking memorial plaques, tiles, wood, wooden panels with Chinese characters, or lacquered boards belonging to communal houses in order to demolish them or to make piers, plank-beds, or chairs or to bake lime. (*Công Báo* 1960: 338).

To rectify all "committed mistakes and shortcomings," local authorities were strongly encouraged to protect and preserve "all old architectural and other locales of scenic beauty and to use them in an appropriate way without wastage" (ibid.). The "appropriate way" was understood as "turning all places of worship into schools, exhibition halls, gathering places, and cultural houses," which in the official discourse, were presented as places of education and thus better alternatives for once sacred locations (ibid.). However, before the implementation of the state policy, the same issue advised local government to consult with villagers, owners of religious buildings and provincial cultural offices about the most suitable form, in their view, of utilization of religious structures. According to the government order, all sites of historical interest including sites of scenic beauty that could be Buddhist pagodas and temples were managed by local People's Committees [*uỷ ban nhân dân*] and cultural offices [*sở văn hoá*] (*Công Báo* 1962). In practice it meant that any renovation and construction work in places of worship and of historical and cultural value had to be officially approved by these bureaus. This rule is still obeyed in Vietnam.

After the public admission in the *Công Báo* of 1960 of shortcomings in the management of religious structures, the next six years did not bring a significant improvement in the situation, and the Party had to sharpen its tone. Still in a self-critical mood, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng reacted to the destruction of pagodas and temples by pointing out the poor record of administrative committees [*uỷ ban hành chính*] to "preserve all places of historical interest, to teach people about their value and to transform them into museums" (*Công Báo* 1966: 270). He stressed that these places have been lost and destroyed due to the

lack of interest or even awareness of the official duty of preserving the historical monuments [*di tích lịch sử*], and, hence, to the low level of training of local cadres (ibid.).

In 1973, two years before the end of the Second Indochina War, the state, specifying its policy towards Buddhist pagodas and the clergy, had to again remind local authorities of the policy of protecting all places of historical and cultural interest. The government directive (*Công Báo* 1973: 253) called for "preserving thoughtfulness [*chu đáo*] and cleanliness [*sạch sẽ*]" vis-à-vis Buddhist pagodas and forbade "hurting the feelings and beliefs [*tín ngưỡng*] of the people" by destroying Buddhist sculptures and instruments or using them in an inappropriate way. Vice-Prime Minister Lê Thanh Nghị reminded authorities in all communes [*xã*] and cities [*khu phố*] that they have a duty to coordinate mass organizations [*tổ chức nhân dân*] responsible for protecting and "bringing into play the notion of historical monuments" (ibid.). He pointed out that these committees must invite and help monks and nuns to take direct responsibility for protection and preservation of "historical spaces" but, at the same time, they should not interfere with religious activities. Therefore, the state was concerned not about religious but, above all, about national spaces.

Theoretically, the Buddhist clergy could count on official guarantees to continue their religious activities if they voluntarily handed their land to the village co-operatives and joined common production. The co-operatives were expected to assign the monks and nuns to brigades based on practical abilities and their religious tasks in order to ensure their livelihoods (*Công Báo* 1973). In reality, however, the clergy had little choice: the state recommended training the most suitable local clergy as tour guides. It was supposed that monks and nuns could help local cadres with instructing visitors on the history of pagodas and scenic sites (*Công Báo* 1973: 253).

One year later, in attempts to complement the policy of "preservation" and "protection" the state introduced a procedure of "classification" [*xếp hang*] of pagodas and temples as "historical and cultural monuments" [*di tích lịch sử và văn hóa*] (*Công Báo* 1974: 51). Note that the Ministry of Culture for the first time added the adjective "cultural" [*văn hóa*] to the term "historical monument" (ibid.) and, consequently, broadened the definition of "heritage." The subsequent issue of 1975 continued to list twelve pagodas and temples that qualified according to this new criterion (*Công Báo* 1975). However, between 1975 and 1979—the time of the most zealous anti-superstition campaigns and destruction of many religious buildings in the South—the *Công Báo* kept notable silence over the protection and preservation of temples.

At the beginning of the 1980s the state returned to its policies of preserving historical sites. In consequence, the next issues of the *Công Báo* continued classifying temples according to their historic, cultural and artistic importance (*Công Báo* 1980; *Công Báo* 1982). In 1984, when the instructions concerning cultural preservation received a higher legal status of "state law" [*pháp lệnh*] the provincial authorities were encouraged to apply for official recognition of all cultural and historical sites (*Công Báo* 1984; see also Endres 2002: 5). Judging from the growing number of official recognitions published in the *Công Báo* after 1984, the state's initiative met with an enthusiastic response from local officials and villagers.[61] All these events took place on the eve of the *Đổi Mới* Reforms.

For a further analysis of the *Công Báo* and the Party-State discourse on culture it is necessary to take into account this significant turnaround in Vietnamese politics. Since the introduction of the *Đổi Mới* Reforms in 1986, Vietnam gradually withdrew from a socialist modernity and opened its borders to the international community. As a consequence of the much more liberalized environment, traditional religious practice experienced a phenomenal revival. At the same time, integration with global capitalism posed an enormous threat of an inundation of foreign culture, prompting the state to attempt to devise an alternative Vietnamese vision of modernity in which national identification was the main indicator (Salemink 2008a). As already mention at the beginning of this chapter, a milestone in the state's policy on preservation of those local cultural practices that would simultaneously symbolize "traditional" and "modern" was "Resolution No. 5 of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on Building a Progressive Culture, Imbued with National Identity" [*Nghị quyết Hôi nghị lần thứ năm Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng về xây dựng và phát triển nền văn hóa Việt Nam tiên tiến, đạm đà bản sắc dân tộc*], which was adopted in 1998. Although this Resolution does not refer explicitly to religion, it, nevertheless, allowed for the interpretation of religious revival in terms of "culture" and, above all, "national heritage." Salemink (forthcoming) interprets Resolution No. 5 as, on the one hand, an "umbrella for all sorts of local, bottom-up efforts to reinvent traditions and invest these with new forms and meanings," and on the other hand, as a useful tool for the state to "claim a greater role in the organizations of rituals and festivals (…) in an attempt to channel the discourse over Vietnam's identity in new directions after the withdrawal from Socialist modernity."

Due to its particular emphasis on the national aspect of Vietnamese modernity, it seems that the Party Resolution No. 5 is much more binding for official authorities and even

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[61] Based on her survey in archives of the Ministry of Culture, Endres (2002: 6) points out that until 1996, altogether 1860 historic sites and monuments were officially recognized as historical and cultural sites.

academics than the 2001 State Law on Cultural Heritage published in the *Công Báo* (2001: 2232). While the 2001 law describes in general terms "cultural heritage" as a "spiritual product which has historical, cultural, and scientific values preserved in memory, writings and handed down orally, through art and craft, science, oral philology, folk performances, a way of life, a traditional lifestyle, festivals, handicraft techniques, knowledge of traditional medicine, food culture, traditional national costumes, and different terms of folk knowledge" the Resolution No. 5 offers reconciliation between divergent tensions such as "socialism" and "market" or "cultural chauvinism" and "cosmopolitanism" (Salemink forthcoming).

In 2002, specifying the 2001 Law on Cultural Heritage, the government pointed out that historical and cultural sites had to meet at least one of the three criteria of (1) "provincial" [*tỉnh*], (2) "national" [*quốc gia*], and (3) "special national" [*guốc gia đặc biệt*] significance. While the first criterion referred mainly to archeological, historical and cultural sites important for local regions, the two latter criteria stressed explicitly national aspects of such places. More precisely, the Law of 2001 indicates that all places designated as "national" [*di tích quốc gia*] and "special national monuments" [*di tích quốc gia đặc biệt*] must refer to important events in national history or to "national heroes" [*anh hung dân tộc*] or "famous symbolic persons having influence on the course of national history" (*Công Báo* 2002: 4051). In the further part of the *Công Báo* of 2002, Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải gave a detailed list of all documents necessary to apply for the official recognition usually known as "Certificate of Designation of a Historical and a Cultural Relic" [*công nhận di tích lịch sử văn hóa*]. In most cases, it was required that the file for application, certified by local authorities, must include a "life story," a written statement by applicants, and a map with the exact location of the site (ibid.).

Paradoxically, the modern practice of the socialist state to grant certificates to heroes, divinities, and temples with historical and national importance has a long tradition in Vietnam, dating back to imperial times (see Boudarel 1991; DiGregorio & Salemink 2007; Do 2003; Wolters 1988). By the 16th century the imperial court was already attempting to gain control of the spirit cults in the villages through the establishment of a spiritual hierarchy for the spirit world that fitted the Confucian model. Spirits were certified with a royal charter [*sắc phong*] and, at the same time, their "spirit record" [*thần tích*] was standardized and cleansed of elements that were not congruent with dominant and official ideology. The central authorities required that the new spirits had to be those of deceased individuals who had been moral exemplars or good officials. The central state acted as patron of these spirits and through their

standardization tried to integrate the country and enforce a sort of unity on regional and local levels. A closer reading of the *Công Báo* shows a continuity of the postcolonial socialist Vietnamese state with this precolonial practice. Like the imperial court, the modern state seeks to increase its legitimacy through the careful selection and canonization of those historic figures who demonstrated moral and patriotic values and heroic resistance against foreign invaders (see Malarney 2007: 529; Pelley 2002: 177-189; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Salemink 2007).

In line with the slogan of Resolution No. 5 of "building a progressive culture, imbued with national identity," local state agents are encouraged to apply for official recognition of commemorative sites of artistic and historic value or historical or cultural character of the residing deity which they can prove have the potential to be included in the category of "cultural heritage" (Endres 2001; 2002: 6). At the same time, villagers who want to re-claim their sacred spaces and to reaffirm their institutional significance try to obtain such a certificate, which not only provides state recognition for the temple but also, like in the imperial past, enables people to worship their divinities in any way they wish; and it is also a source of personal consolation and communal pride.

However, as Salemink (forthcoming) points out, the state recognition goes beyond the cultural and historical assessment of the site as heritage since the state "authenticates, reifies and instrumentalizes local process under the umbrella of the nation." By giving local practices and the spaces the label of "cultural" and "national heritage" the state appropriates them for its own purposes. This involves not only selection, appropriation, and changing meanings but also controlling and disciplining the people who are emotionally engaged in rescuing their sacred sites (ibid.). Anagnost (1994: 222-223) defines this process as the "politics of ritual displacement," a sort of "uneasy accommodation" that engages both the local community and the state in a struggle over the symbolic meanings of temples.

To sum up, in this section I have aimed to underline that the public admission of shortcomings in the *Công Báo* was not tantamount to a lessening of the tension between religion and official ideology. At the same time, I sought to demonstrate that the state itself is an arena of diverging interests and changes over time; thus the official policy towards sacred buildings continues to be redefined and adapted to the "spirit" of the times. As we have seen, the communist procedures of converting temples into secular places were replaced with the new guidelines on how to transform them first into "cultural" and, then, into "national heritage" sites as better substitutions for sacred locations. Keeping in mind all these changes

in the official policy, in the next section I will show more explicitly the place of religion in national discourse.

5.6.2 *Revival of religion in Vietnam and the quest for a "national identity"*

In 2005, on a hot summer afternoon in Hanoi I met with my Vietnamese language teacher. I asked her to help me interpret an article entitled, "Is it right that religion is at variance with socialism?" [*Phải chăng tôn giáo mâu thuẫn với Chủ Nghĩa Xã Hội?*]. It was authored by Đỗ Quang Hưng (2004), the director of the Institute for Religious Studies, where I was affiliated from 2002-2005. She took a look at the title and then said:

> Religion still exists and this is a fact the socialist country has to accept. Marx said that religion was the opium of the masses. But now, the Party has a new interpretation, mainly that religion could have a positive effect, similar to a drug that gives people a release when they suffer a great deal of pain. In a modern society there are many different problems people have to deal with on their own and sometimes they feel hopeless. They go to a pagoda or temple and pray, after that they feel relieved.

As Charles Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre (1994) demonstrate in their seminal volume *Asian Visions of Authority*, the thesis that modernization and re-structuring of Asian societies in the name of "progress" would lead to their secularization, as predicted by Marx, Durkheim and Weber and their followers, failed to materialize. The marginalization of the religious sphere did not lead to a break with religious traditions but quite the opposite; along with modernization they became even more significant (Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre 1994a: 3). The authors aptly point out that state agendas to control and standardize religion have been formed not only by theories of modernization which sought to free people from superstitious and time-consuming practices but also by the need of Asian modern states to legitimize their rule and consolidate the "masses." This necessity expressed in the nation-building process entailed a different attitude to the past and to religion from that of socialist modernizing agendas.

Mandair (2009: 13) argues that the ability to establish a connection between past and present concentrates around a re-evaluation of the role of religion and language which are "crucial components in the formation of nationalism." Transforming and shaping local notions of "religion" congruent with a quest for national identity stimulates the state not only to change its attitude towards popular culture but also to extract these values and moral guidelines from a rich repertoire of religious traditions which give legitimacy to the State.

Mandair (2009: 4) calls such process a return of "the political to its religious sources" which is a "self-legitimating or self-referencing phenomenon."

Indeed, in 1990, the Vietnamese Communist Party debated how "to strengthen the task of religion in the new situation" and, as a result, approved the resolution:

> Religion is a legitimate requirement of a part of society. The pending question of religion existed in the socialist system for a long time. Religious virtues and morals are suitable, for many reasons, for the new and great undertaking of national construction. (Government Regulation 24-NQ/TW 16/10/1990)[62]

However, as Salemink (2008a: 276) argues, only when the Party Central Committee adopted Resolution No. 5 in 1998, the religious revival "began to be translated into the official imaginary of the nation." In light of this document, ancestor worship, communal houses and rituals associated with them appeared to be legible to the state in the sense that they constitute fitting material for re-shaping the representation of the past in modern Vietnam and narratives about national and revolutionary martyrs (Taylor 2007; Salemink 2008a). As in other Asian countries where the dead were "employed" in the service of national unity (see Evans 1998; Keyes 2002), in Vietnam the belief in life after death and especially in the "exceptional dead" became a potent symbol of national integration linking society with its heroic history (Malerney 2007; see also Ho Tai 2001; Endres 2008; Kwon 2009). Van der Veer and Lehman (1999: 11) argue that "death and afterlife form the stuff of which both religion and nationalism are made." Consequently, in Vietnam ancestor worship has recurred as a "hero-centered political culture" in which the center of gravity is the exemplary service of the ancestors rather than their peaceful afterlife (Kwon 2006: 104).

A gradual change of state attitudes towards culture and religion was accompanied by scholarly debates reacting to the revival of religious traditions. Special attention was given to the "cultural identity" [*bản sắc văn hóa*] of Vietnam, which was seen as the "essence" of the nation. Along this line, scholars produced articles describing at length how "national cultural identity" contributed to the "skills and spirit," "vital power" and "experience" of the Vietnamese nation, which, in turn, made it possible for Vietnam to emerge triumphantly from the trials of history. The sense of being a "patriot" [*yêu nước*] and "patriotism" [*chủ nghĩa yêu nước*] were acknowledged as the most important characteristics of national cultural identity.

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[62] Quoted from the *Vietnam's Communist Party: On Religious Issues Resolutions of the 7th Plenum [9th tenure]* (The Gioi Publishers 2004).

For example, Ngô Đức Thịnh (2001), one of the most devoted scholars of folklore studies, found symbolic elements of patriotism in the realms of the supernatural [*linh thiêng*] and spiritual [*tâm linh*] which developed into "religious beliefs" [*tín ngưỡng*], encompassing all these meanings. Vietnamese academics saw a "will to build and preserve the country" in traditional society, especially in the popular culture of the peasants who appeared as the guardians of the "pure" and "authentic" Vietnamese tradition" (Pelley 1993: 114).[63] Similarly, Kendall (1996a; 2009: 17-19) reports that, in the 1980s, a new Korean middle class of intellectuals believed that the real essence of a people was in their "folk traditions." This subordination of the sacred dimensions of religion to the state's secular objectives is found in many other Asian countries, where religion is seen as the essence of national culture (Hann 2006; Kehl-Bedrogi 2006; Kendall 1996a, 2009; Mandair 2009; Van der Veer and Feuchtwang 2009). It should not come as a surprise then that in Vietnam tutelary spirits and craft ancestors, who were previously erased from local landscapes during the campaign against superstitions, have come back in full glory as historical characters. So-called "folk culture" and "village community" became the arenas where all these notions could be articulated according to the official slogans *Family-Village-Nation* and *Preservation, Wealth and Development of National Cultural Character* (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2001).

Although during the *Đổi Mới* era some popular practices, previously labelled as superstitious, have been recognized as "folk beliefs" [*tín ngưỡng dân gian*] and "national heritage" (Endres 2002; Taylor 2003; Salemink 2008b), though the pejorative category of superstition has not disappeared entirely. In opening public space for religion, the socialist state neither admits limitations to its political power nor gives up control over religious practices. Although the state no longer plays the strong ideological role in people's lives that it did before *Đổi Mới*, it still tries to standardize religious practices. One of such efforts is the validation of those popular religious practices which remain in line with the state objectives and marking those which bear superstitious character. While identifying the first category seems to be relatively easy, the latter creates a problem for the state due to its ambiguous nature.

Above I discussed the etymology of the words "religion" and "religious beliefs," (see pp. 151-153) and in these paragraphs I will analyze in depth the etymology of the word

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[63] In the post-colonial time Vietnamese culture was divided into "popular" and "official" based on division into peasant class and ruling class. According to this division folklore studies focus on the "little people"—the idealized peasants without local and historical specifity (Pelley 1993: 199). For a critique of defining Vietnamese culture in terms of class conflict see Trần Quốc Vượng (1992).

"superstition" and its association with the term "religious beliefs." The Sino-Vietnamese term *mê tín* (in Chinese: *mixin*, 迷信) or superstition[64] is associated with certain aspects of religious expression within the boundaries of the so-called great traditions of Islam, Buddhism and Christianity and popular religious practice (Anagnost 1987). In the case of China, Sutton and Kang (2009: 193-4) show that when the term "religion" was paired with "superstition," "religion" "under the shadow of superstition" appeared archaic and unscientific. Asad (1993, 2003) points out a similar phenomenon when he brings our attention to the concept of the "secular" that emerged historically in conjunction with the notion of the religious. Like "superstition," the concept of "secular" cannot do without the idea of "religion."

In 1999 the Ministry of Culture published a collective volume titled *Religious Beliefs-Superstitions* [*Tín ngưỡng – mê tín*] (Hà Văn Tăng and Trương Thìn 1999) which pose the problem of depicting "superstition" with reference to the new socio-economic situation Vietnam faces. Trương Thìn, the Vice-Director of the Department of the Ministry of Culture and Information in Hanoi and the volume's editor argued that each faith and religion has a "superstitious" [*mê tín*] character, which does not automatically mean that its nature is heterodox [*dị đoan*]. Only in cases when the *mê tín,* understood here as a feeling of confidence and unwavering belief, is "used unfairly" does it become something deformed, strange, odd and nonsensical and, as a result, turns out to be *mê tín dị đoan* or heterodoxy (1999: 112-115). [65]

As argued above, in the *Đổi Mới* era the Vietnamese state gradually departed from an essential interpretation of religion as "unscientific" and "irrational" practices while still attempting to draw a line between those prioritized religious practices which were assigned as having a "national character" and superstition that goes against the modern project of building a "progressive nation." In its attempt to define "out-dated practices" the socialist state prepared a precise list of the religious practices considered superstition. Life-cycle rituals and village festivals that should be in tune with a "civilized way of life" [*nếp sống văn minh*] were the focus of its concern. With reference to such rituals, one government regulation states:

> The state respects religious freedom [*tự do tín ngưỡng*] or the freedom not to have
> any religion [*tôn giáo*]. Practices of ancestor worship, ceremonies in churches,
> temples and pagodas…are the beliefs [*tín ngưỡng*] which the state respects. Astrology,

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[64] The term itself, similarly to *zongjiao* [*religion*]*,* entered China via Japan.
[65] According to the *Dictionnaire Vietnamien-Chinois-Français* by Eugène Gouin (Missions Étrangères de Paris 2002) *mê* could be translated as "to adore," "to devote," "to be mad about," "to love," "to be blind," or "to be unconscious" while *tín* means "trust," "to believe," "faith" and "faithful."

fortune telling, soul-calling, geomancy, prophecy, amulets and incantations, ghost exorcism and healing by spells and magic… are superstitions that the state strictly forbids. Burning of votive paper (mannequins, many-storied houses, vehicles, dollars, and cheques…) inside cultural and historical monuments or during festive occasions is prohibited. Installing incense-bowls inside public service buildings, production facilities, state enterprises, socio-political organization or military installations is forbidden. (Government Regulation 04/1998/TT-BVHTT in Trương Thìn 1999: 121).[66]

Note that the government regulation prefers to use the term "religious beliefs" instead of "religion" when referring to "religious freedom." According to Western usage, "religious beliefs" here are relegated to the private realm and considered as a mainly personal matter (for China see Sutton and Kang 2009: 194). Nonetheless, the lack of a clear differentiation between "religious beliefs" and "superstition" still posed a challenge for the state's officials. In her essay on "Politics and Magic in Contemporary China" Anagnost (1987: 44) points out that the practice of superstition "does not refer to a fixed body of religious dogma but a rather diffuse belief system that may become crystallized through charismatic performance." In consequence, *the lack of institutional organizations* and the fluid and charismatic character of its belief system and authority makes the practice of "superstitions" resistant to state control (ibid.).

Trương Thìn (1999) argues that superstitions are connected with inadequate public education, and an atheist education is one of the most important parts of a socialist upbringing that could help abolish superstition. In a self-critical tone he points out that not enough attention is paid to "scientific atheism," which should be universalized in schools, among Party members and "mass organization" (1999: 122-23). Despite their spiritual character, "religious beliefs" and "religion" are also a favorable environment for developing "social evils," "out-dated practices" and "superstitions" (ibid). Therefore, it is required from all levels of government that they plan, guide and manage religion in order to build a cultural, civilized, clean and safe environment (ibid.).

Trương Thìn furthermore argues that the "ideology of fatalism and predestination," and "psychology" of praying for luck are often connected with illicit business, embezzlement, bribery and the damaging of public health (1999: 125). Hence, in the *Đổi Mới* era when temples and shrines are mushrooming in one place after another, many popular religious

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[66] See also *Ordinance of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly No.21/2004/Pl-UBTVQH11 of June 2004 Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organizations*, retrieved on 2 December 2010 from http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Phap-lenh/Ordinance-No-21-2004-PL-UBTVQH11-of-June-29-2004-on-beliefs-and-religions-vb76132t14.aspx.

specialists and their clients still remain shrouded in an aura of suspicion of malpractice and the misappropriation of funds. In its struggle against superstition the state is creating stricter laws in order to more easily ban fortune tellers, physiognomists, and astrologists, and to eradicate suspect places of worship such as temples and shrines in the recesses of rocky caves or on street corners. Consequently, article 199 of the Vietnamese Penal Code treats the practice of superstition as a crime that is liable to punishment:

> Those who use fortune-telling, spirit possession or other superstitious forms to trigger off serious consequences are liable to re-education for one year or to imprisonment from three months to three years. In case the crime of superstition has led to a death or other extremely serious consequences, the time of imprisonment will be from two to ten years. (Trương Thìn 1999: 124).

Yet, the socialist motivation to abolish superstition is not limited to popular religious specialists. Since the early years of the Communist Party, the family also came under socialist scrutiny as a source of "backward customs and habits" considered to be bound to the practice of everyday life. Since the 1990s, however, family and lineage rituals were presented as the cement of the village communal spirit, as having an educational role in the life of the people as well as teaching basic concepts of morality. Trương Thìn (1999: 125-126) claims that the most effective method for combating superstition here was in expanding the campaign for building "cultural families" [*gia đình văn hóa*], "cultural villages" [*làng văn hoá*], "cultural quarters" [*khu phố văn hoá*] and "civilized housing estates" [*khu tập thể văn minh*].[67] The cultural campaigns were adapted to the new conditions of a market-oriented society and constituted a crucial component of the new nation-building process that should help to "prevent and drive back negative practices, social evils, and harmful cultural products" (ibid: 125).[68] The state arrogated to itself a role of educator and patron of Vietnamese society and

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[67] The "Civilized Way of Life" campaign, of which the main focus was the "Cultural Family," had already started by the early 1960s and experienced a number of different phases; for more information see Drummond (2004). This campaign bears a striking similarity with the Chinese discourse on civilization. However, in the case of China, the concept of *wenhua* [*văn hóa*] or "culture" was used in the Cultural Revolution and had a class character. Consequently, since the 1980s it has been replaced with *wenming* [*văn minh*] or "civilized" which refers to the idea of modernization. In Vietnam, the association of the terms "cultural" and "civilized" with "class" is much weaker than in the case of China, although it is present. For example, the term "cultural villages" [*làng văn hoá*] refers to the "peasant class" while the "civilized housing estates" [*khu tập thể văn minh*] denotes educated urban elite living in residential blocks in a city. Nevertheless, in Vietnam, the two terms "cultural" and "civilized" are used interchangeably and are associated with both the whole development of society and nation-building. At the same time, the term "cultural" is more "refined" than its Chinese counterpart as it also connotes education and literacy. For an excellent discussion of *wenming* campaigns in the context of China, see Anagnost (1997).

[68] For more detail on the governmental decision on promulgation regulations on granting an honorable title of "cultural family," "cultural village" and "cultural quarter" see also *Công Báo* (2002a: 4045-4066).

granted certificates to those who reached the standards of "modern behavior" that includes well-being, progressiveness, hygiene, and good health, preservation of traditional order, good customs and civilized ways of life during weddings, funerals and religious festivals. (Drummond 2004; for China see also Anagnost 1994, 1997).

Drawing on Scott's (1998) argument that the state is inclined to "simplify" society and make it legible, in this section of the chapter I discussed in detail how the Vietnamese state appropriates and standardizes the religious landscape through administrative procedures and cultural policies. As we have seen, the state approach to religion shifted over time from hostility to a more pragmatic attitude. In the *Đổi Mới* period, ultimately, the Party-State withdrew from socialist modernity and appropriates religion by converting some of its influential forms into "cultural" and "national heritage." At the same time, it continues to see religion as a competing source of power that needs to be controlled and managed. Nevertheless, the recent resurgence of religion in Vietnam shows that the state does not have the last word in the symbolic sphere and that people are active actors shaping a national drama in which religion plays its part.

5.7 Strategies of the Vietnamese people to cope with "state simplification"

In the last section of this chapter, I am concerned with strategies of Vietnamese people to cope with "state simplification projects" and restrictive state cultural policies. However, for the clarity of my analysis I have decided to reserve my ethnographic descriptions for others chapters in which I aim to strengthen my argument empirically. Here, I limit myself to the introduction and testing of certain of ideas about the nature of the relationship between state and people and their response to the official agenda and I argue my position in these debates.

As I have analyzed in the previous section, in the *Đổi Mới* period the state has been less successful in anti-superstition campaigns and has allowed for a certain degree of religious freedom, albeit in the framework of detailed prescriptions, proscriptions and guidance. Furthermore, when globalization and "foreign" culture became a real threat the state spared no efforts in connecting religious revival with nationalism. The state's appropriation of religious traditions to forge a sense of national culture provoked a reaction from local communities which seek to position and articulate themselves in the context of the official policy. At this point, the relationship between state and people unavoidably calls for a more precise statement about *who is* "the state" and *who are* "the people" and in *what kind of relationship* are they entangled.

Before I try to answer these questions, I will refer to those authors who deal with similar issues. The phenomenon of the recent revival of popular religion in juxtaposition with the state's attempt to regulate religious life has been broadly examined in academic works. A wide body of literature referring to this problem shows dynamics in Vietnam similar to those in China, and here I will do a quick review of some of them. A number of authors like Anagnost (1994) sees the resurgence of community rituals in post-Mao China as a weakening of the Party-State and a strengthening of the community that now reclaims its own sacred spaces and tries to restore a localized and religiously sanctioned moral order. The legitimized sites of memory are steadily subordinated to the "dictates of local practice" (1994: 245) which is seen as an antithesis to the more "total" claims of the state and as "the little resistance of everyday life" (ibid: 247). Chau (2006), on the contrary, proposes to look not at popular religiosity but at the actions of local elites and local authorities which have facilitated the revival of popular religious practices through the legitimization of the politics employed by temples and their leaders. He contests the view that sees the relation between state and local community as a binary opposition; instead he argues that, on the local level, their communication is more complex.

DuBois (2005) switches to another line of thought. He emphasizes the forces of historical change and argues that the Chinese society, previously monitored by the state, is now increasing its control over religion. To preserve the stability of the society, the state recognizes the educative and moral function of religion. In the case of Vietnam, in a comparable manner, Malarney (2002, 2007) shows that through employing rituals commemorating national heroes and revolutionary martyrs in the ideological discourse, the Party-State advances its role as a patron of the Vietnamese society. His point is that the state is fully aware of how influential such religious practices are, and that it has been using them deliberately to shore up its legitimacy in a process he calls "state functionalism" (Malarney 1996).

Perhaps the comparison between these studies would be an interesting exercise, but for our purpose the conclusion can be drawn that the relationship between state and people appears to be complex and multifaceted, especially when it comes to the domains of everyday practices that escape direct control. In reality, the process of restoring religious practices in Vietnam is taking place on two overlapping levels. In the public discourse, there is approbation and encouragement for obtaining official recognition of historic figures who had demonstrated moral and patriotic behavior by heroically resisting foreign invaders and of

gods and spirits with a long-standing presence in popular religion. As Taylor (2007: 13) points out, the state is "quite accommodating" towards the religious domain provided that it is compatible with its own interests. Privately, however, local officials and local communities often have their own ideas and motivations regarding the recovery of local memories and sacred spaces. They sometimes promote particular spirits, which they pursue independently of state directives. Therefore, in this thesis my aim is to demonstrate that Vietnamese people neither resist nor submit to the state's modernizing project. Rather they engage with the state's modernizing policy, showing their agency exercised in the articulation of their *locality* in a way that fits into national discourses. The relationship between the state and the local community is much more flexible and dialogical than can be assumed in a country where the Party-State outlines the legal, social, and political constraints on religious space. Such a perspective goes beyond a simplistic view of the role of religion in Vietnam as the renewal of traditions, the people's resistance or state co-option, and suggests that both the state and society are "mutual protagonist[s]" in the recent revival of religion (Taylor 2007: 13).

Once again it is noteworthy that such a confrontation happens not just between the two sides—state and society—because neither of them constitutes a "monolithic entity with a singular agency," but rather between multilevel "arena[s] of contestation in which conflicting interests are played out and resolved" (Salemink forthcoming; see also Migdal 1994). To summarize my argument, there is no clash of views between "the state" and "the people," because there is not one state view and not one people's view. In other words, the state consists not only of institutions and policies but also of norms and values which are articulated by its various cultural initiatives, projects, and tasks as acted out by diverse protagonist (Truong Huyen Chi 2001, 2004). Their interpretations vary depending on region, interest, and position. In consequence, people are not just confronted with the state *per se* but with its multiple identities taking the shape of local agents and intellectuals including anthropologists, folklorists, historians and archeologists, just to name a few, who have diverse visions and are never outside of a web of social relations. In turn, "the people" are neither a uniform category nor a harmonious group as they are divided not only by age, gender and class, but also by different aims and aspirations. All these groups and individuals have different memories and interpretations of history, and they often adopt conflicting strategies to achieve their goals.

The relationships are never equal: there are always those who are more powerful due to their position, knowledge, connections and so forth. However, even the "subordinates" are

not entirely deprived of "agency" and also have powers and projects of their own (Ortner 1995, 1997, 2001, 2006). Ortner (1995), drawing on Comarroff's (1985) study of the ways in which the Tswana consciousness has been transformed during their encounter with missionaries, argues that in the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate the latter group does not just simply produce a mechanical reaction, but has its own strategy which is the outcome of frictions and tensions between various local categories within the group itself. Hence, agency is always part of a process, is culturally and historically constituted and never free but always interactively negotiated. Ortner (2006: 139-151) distinguishes between "agency of power" which is organized around domination and resistance of one person/group over other(s), and "agency of projects" that is defined by a culturally constituted logic of the good and the desirable. The two types of agency are in practice inseparable because both domination and resistance are always defined by prospective goals as people seek to achieve them in their own culturally and historically established terms (ibid.).

Achille Mbembe (1992) also pays attention to the "agency" of the "subject" and her/his confidence in his- or herself, although he does not use such a term to describe relationships of power in the African "postcolony."[69] However, I have found his insights useful when thinking about the strategies that Vietnamese people undertake to accomplish their aims in situations when the state attempts to control and standardize public and social life to define collective goals and to proclaim the unity of the society. Similar to Ortner, Mbembe (1992) advocates going beyond binary categories in the interpretations of domination and resistance. He argues that the relationship between state and people is not in a dialectic of "either" resistance "or" collaboration, but that it could rather be characterized as a "promiscuous relationship," a "convivial tension between the commandment and its 'target'" (1992: 5). In this relationship, which he calls "indiscipline" and "insubordination," people have to learn how to manipulate the "representation that state power projects of itself and society" and how to bargain and improvise in order to pursue their goals (ibid: 7).

I will demonstrate how this argument works with my own ethnographic data in Chapter 6, examining the ways in which villagers negotiated their religious landscape with authorities during the anti-religious campaign. I argue that being "undisciplined" they had success, albeit limited, in forcing through their own vision. In Chapter 7, drawing on Ortner's

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[69] The term *postcolony* refers to the societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and to the "specific identity of a given historical trajectory" (Mbembe 1992: 2).

(2006: 145) argument that people always "seek to accomplish valued things within a framework of their own terms [and] their own categories of value," I argue that people in the littoral society do not just adapt to the state policy; on the contrary their most commonly deployed strategy is the integration and adjusting of personal narratives to official histories, with a view to gaining the government's recognition of ancestors, divinities and heroes. National history and heroism became meaningful for people only when they could be incorporated into people's local concerns. The other way around, local histories, heroes and gods only have significance at the national level if they are incorporated into a national "pantheon" and "national" religious landscape.

5. 8   Conclusion

My analysis of Vietnamese religion carried out in this chapter has been an attempt to deconstruct the term itself by looking more closely at the local indigenous terms. This led me to formulate a hypothetical argument that religious domain in Vietnam is not a unified and stable system of beliefs in Geertz's sense; neither is it something easily translatable and having firmly defined boundaries (Mandair 2009: 3). Consequently, I have decided to talk about the "plurality" of the religious landscape since in Vietnam I have observed diverse forms of religious expressions and beliefs which co-exist and interact with each other but do not represent a universal and everlasting authority. Furthermore, I have suggested that the interaction between different religious traditions is intertwined with the current phenomena of religious revival and the state cultural policy which aims to control, standardize and appropriate the rich vernacular repertoire of religious traditions.

While I have attempted to deconstruct the term "religion," I have also sought to illustrate how in Vietnam cultural and historical trajectories led to the reformulation of local, *emic* categories referring to religious practices in a more definite sense. Following Asad (1993, 2001) who shows that "religion" is historically constituted and its concept and terminology derived from a Christian background, I have implied that the concept of "religion" in Vietnam was formed as a Western idea similar to other Asian countries, which either directly experienced colonization or otherwise remained under Western intellectual influence. As a result, Asian states are required to draw up new means of control over religion. In order to build a "progressive" country, the Vietnamese postcolonial state declared war on "unscientific" [*phi khoa học*] superstitious religious practices which eroded the confidence of people in their own abilities and trust in their own minds (Bùi Thị Kim Quý 2002: 175-32; Taylor 2004: 38).

In his analysis, Scott shows (1998: 95) that the state project of legibility and transformation of society in the name of progress focuses almost entirely on the future. In Vietnamese official discourse the past has been criticized as economically and technologically backward in contrast to the future that appeared glowing, predictable and achievable but required a heroic effort from the entire population. At the same time the socialist state arrogates to itself the role of leader, educator and vanguard [*tiên phong*] of the "perpetually" undeveloped population (Drummond 2004: 160; see also Ninh 2002). With the socio-economic liberalization, a religious revival could be observed, triggering an important shift in the official perception of religion. Especially "popular beliefs" previously associated with "backwardness," "feudalism" and "irrationality," just to mention a few illustrative pejoratives, have become crucial instruments for preserving a tradition-oriented national identity against the "negative effects of foreign culture" insidiously slithering into Vietnam in the form of mass culture (Endres 2002; Taylor 2007). Drawing on official and academic discourse we have seen that the modern state is inclined to "simplify" society in order to standardize the complex and diverse vernacular classifications and hence makes landscapes and people legible. The implementation of changing state objectives usually occurs through administrative procedures and cultural policies. However, this process also requires a careful study of the highly localized contestations surrounding the state project of "legibility" and "simplification."

My purpose in this chapter has been to go beyond simplistic perceptions of an antagonistic relation between state and religion or defining it only in terms of resistance or domination. Following Ortner (1995, 1997, 2001, 2006), I have argued that Vietnamese people do not just automatically react to the state agenda but have their own projects in mind and accomplish them by deploying different strategies. By zooming in on the *locality* understood as various strategies and actions of individuals and groups, we may comprehend the complexity of these strategies in which resistance is just one form of human agency alongside "indiscipline" (Ortner 2006; Mbembe 1992). Thus, such an understood *locality* is the main focus of my attention in the following chapter as I trace changes in the religious and cosmological landscape caused by the antireligious campaigns of the late 1970s.

In Defense of Local Gods: Contestation over Religious Sites between State Agents and Villagers

Figure 6. Head of the fishing community worshiping Quan Âm, Sa Huỳnh, 2006

In winter 2006, I visited the Buddhist pagoda of Sa Huỳnh with Lợi, a representative of the Commune People's Committee. The leading monk Giác Đức (born in 1945), whom I intended to interview, came from Sa Huỳnh but had received Buddhist instruction in the pagoda of Thắng Quang, in Bình Định Province, since his childhood. Lợi (born in 1975) was a young, energetic and devoted office worker in the Department of Culture who obtained his training at the province level and who was responsible for my introduction to the village and logistical matters. He was not local but came from a mountain village which he usually described as "backward" and not yet "developed." He preferred life on the coast and was proud of his status in the state office. During our visits in the houses of local villagers I often witnessed Lợi instructing interlocutors with authority on religious policy and superstitious practices. This time, however, I was surprised watching the scene in which the roles of an "instructor" and "instructed" were reversed.

"What's your name, uncle?" Lợi asked as usual. I noticed that the monk became indignant over the way Lợi addressed him and reprimanded him smartly: "You, young man, call me 'uncle' [chú]. That is wrong. You call me uncle meaning that I am an ordinary person, don't you? In religion [Christianity], if you go to church you must call a priest 'Reverend Father' [cha đạo]. You, young man, are working on culture but you come to a Buddhist pagoda and you are calling me uncle. You cannot address me properly, huh? If you come to the pagoda you must respect the social status and the religious title of the person here. For example, if one is a Venerable [đại đức] then call him 'Venerable,' if one is a Master [thầy], call him 'Master'"

Then, the monk warned the young official that he was visiting a sacred place and not a secular one and that he was obliged to follow religious rules. I saw that Lợi was disconcerted and felt uneasy about the monk's tirade, especially because of his declared atheistic orientation. Nevertheless, much to my surprise, he did not argue about the issue with the monk. He simply asked how he should address the monk and eventually the two sides agreed that Lợi should call him "Master." The rest of the interview went smoothly.

6.1   Introduction

In most general terms, this chapter is about the contestation within and around the religious landscape that occurred in the past but the consequences of which continue to influence the present. As I argued in Chapter 1, the activities related to religion such as building, renovating and maintaining sacred spaces, conducting ceremonies, evoking and consulting spirits, making offerings and the like are integral components of the religious landscape. People carry out these activities in order to be in command of their lives by exercising a certain control over their local environment. In Vietnam such activities might be contested by the state authorities who want to organize the religious landscape in a fixed and strictly defined manner. In such a situation, the religious landscape takes on a whole new dimension in which political implications are played out and can provoke widespread contestations.

In line with this argument, in Chapter 5 I emphasized the active role the state plays in the process of "simplification" and "legibility" of the religious landscape; in this chapter I take the analysis a step further by showing more explicitly that the relationship between state and villagers' religious practices is necessarily a two-way process. The vignette of the encounter between a "political official" and, hence, secular authority and a Buddhist monk representing religious authority illustrates that more than twenty years after the Vietnamese Party-State relaxed its anti-superstition policy, some of the tensions between religious groups, that are subjected to the official cultural policy and the state, though less visible, are still present. However, instead of seeing this relationship as antagonistic, I would argue that there is room for negotiation over religion that includes both complex contestations and cultural accommodation on both sides. At the same time, this process involves more players than one would assume in the case of the relationship between state and village. Those players are situated in different political and religious niches and represent diverse visions of religious spaces and practices. As I shall demonstrate, villagers were confronted not only with various proscriptions towards their religious traditions coming from the state but also with the more rigid views of the village monk about what constituted "proper" and "pure" religion. In consequence, my characterization of a two-way process goes beyond dualistic interpretations and stresses complexity and interactions within and across relationships between state, villagers and more institutionalized versions of religion, such as Buddhism.

At this point it is necessary to explain that in tracing local legacies within the littoral society in the form of physical structures, sacred objects, memories of the past and individual narratives, I refer entirely to the Sa Huỳnh community. I chose to focus on Sa Huỳnh instead

of Lý Sơn for two reasons. First, Lý Sơn authorities were much more lax in implementing anti-superstition campaigns than Sa Huỳnh authorities, mainly because of Lý Sơn's physical distance from the mainland. Second, the turmoil of the two Indochina Wars as well as the anti-superstition campaigns had a much more dramatic effect on the mainland than on the island and on the social memory of ritual life. In contrast to Lý Sơn, many of the religious structures in Sa Huỳnh were destroyed or heavily damaged and some have never been rebuilt. Today, Sa Huỳnh villagers have recreate a new cosmological landscape by piecing together fragments of memory and sites and by adding new elements that significantly transform the symbolic meanings of those sites, spirits and ritual practices.

In this chapter I aim to explore contestations over religious landscape from the perspective of individuals charting how they articulate and position themselves in a particular social context. I introduce a few idiosyncratic stories which fit into a larger whole and give the reader a more intricate picture of contestations over this religious landscape. I start the first section by sketching a general picture of the anti-religious measures undertaken in rural communities shortly after liberation in 1975. Then, I discuss the villagers' response to the state policy and their strategy in defending the local gods. By introducing the story of a local leader of fishermen who was, at the same time, a village healer, I demonstrate that villagers were not passive recipients of state action, but acted on behalf of their gods and sacred spaces and at the same time made conscious compromises. On the other hand, local agents who were supposed to carry out the state policy were not entirely free of attachment to religious practices and furthermore, they were rather reluctant to engage in a violent anti-superstition campaign. In turn, people faced dilemmas of trying to be a good person according to the official communist ethics on the one hand and fulfilling obligations to ancestors and spirits on the other. Like Malarney (2002: 209), I argue that the ability to resolve or integrate these tensions in everyday life is crucial to the process of constructing a sense of self-respect.

In the next section of the chapter, I complicate the picture of contestations over religious sites between state officials and villagers as I focus on the monk Giác Đức, already introduced in the opening vignette. Analyzing the conversation between Lợi and the monk, I point out that contestations over the religious landscape did not simply take place between the state and the village but also involved religious authorities who often had contradictory views about what constitutes "proper" or "pure" religion. In Sa Huỳnh, villagers had to face not only the state's control over their sacred sites but also the appropriation of the village pagoda by the monk who refused to fulfill the usual ritual obligations for the local community that were

normally required of monks in the village and who claimed that local customs had no place in "pure" Buddhism.

In the last section, I address the question of how, facing antireligious campaigns, Sa Huỳnh villagers reworked their religious landscape and cosmology. I aim to illuminate an overall constellation of ideas connected with the religious domain that were constructed in the process. I show that the disruption in the physical composition of sacred sites involved further creative modifications in the villagers' cosmological landscape and opened a new alternative understanding of the local world that had undergone significant changes in the previous few decades. More precisely, by looking at how villagers deal with the destruction of village temples, the state's restrictions on religious sites and practices and the more rigid vision of religion represented by the monk Giác Đức, I shall argue that Sa Huỳnh people are in the business of recreating new balance, restructuring their cosmological landscape and accommodating it to the present realities of post-Socialist Vietnam.

6.2   Antireligious campaign in the village

Similar to China and Soviet Russia, though much less aggressively, the Vietnamese official propaganda against the backwardness of, and superstitious practices in, rural society aimed to "disempower the religious domain and redefine the [local] relationship between secular and the sacred" (Duara 1991: 76; see also Anagnost 1987; Young 1997) throughout the whole country. However, the integration of the North and South with their different historical legacies and diverse economic and cultural backgrounds posed a serious challenge to the Communist government. Still, in the late 1970s a number of religious sects, millenarian movements, and charismatic practitioners that had been eliminated or domesticated in the North burgeoned in the South, even in those parts that were considered to be a stronghold of the communist government. Consequently, antireligious campaigns accompanied by the policy of economic collectivization introduced the "new order" to the recalcitrant South in its effort to put an end to the widespread "superstitious" practices.

Calling this period the "catastrophe" [hảm họa], Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn villagers reported that beginning in the late 1970s when co-operatives were introduced, the village temples were stripped of their property and, in some cases, suffered severe destruction. The sacred statues were removed from the temples and placed in the local offices of the People's Committee while the temples were closed. Lý Sơn villagers reported that those who had wooden panels embellished with Chinese characters or lacquered boards at home were forced

to bring them to the communal house, now turned into a warehouse. However, some of the local cadres were aware of the great value of these objects and allowed people to take them back home piece by piece.

While in Sa Huỳnh villagers were entirely denied access to their sacred spaces, islanders tell of stealthily arranging simple ceremonies in temples to avoid "punishment from spirits." Although their memories were not always congruous, they remembered that in the time of "the state distribution economy" [*thời báo cấp*] the shortened and simplified versions of rituals were carried out with the utmost haste and in secret.[70] Local authorities were aware of these illicit practices and deliberately left the temple keys in the hands of village elders after clearing the temples of sacred effigies. When in the 1990s the state's anti-superstition propaganda loosened its hold, Lý Sơn villagers, with the tacit agreement of the local authorities, resumed their religious practices. Villagers also remember that in 1991, there was still no official permit to hold rituals, nor strict prohibition. Between 1993 and 1994 the local offices of the People's Committee allowed the temples to be opened, and local authorities pretended they did not see the ceremonies that villagers organized there. In the majority of cases the temples' interior infrastructure survived intact. Two years later relaxation of religious oversight reached Quảng Ngãi and villagers began to openly hold communal ceremonies and to worship their spirits in the temples.[71] All confiscated statues in both Lý Sơn and Sa Huỳnh were given back. At that time in the North the ritual revival was in full swing, while in Central Vietnam it had just started.

Contrary to Lý Sơn, Sa Huỳnh villagers remembered a much stricter implementation of anti-superstition campaigns. Mạnh (born in 1943), who, at the time of my fieldwork, was responsible for donations and organizing religious ceremonies in Sa Huỳnh's temples, depicted a time of total religious suppression and compared it to the time of "the Americans" and "the Communists." By 1963 Sa Huỳnh served as a base for the American army and the Vietnamese Southern government. In reality, as Mạnh stated, the villages were trapped between two forces—the National Liberation Front that ruled the countryside at night and the American troops, who were in control during the day. The American forces had been stationed in the vicinity of the local temples, which faced the south perched on a high hill (the Forbidden Hill) covered by green shrubs west of the open sea and east of Sa Huỳnh port (see *Map 2.[5],[6],[8],[9]*; p. 90).

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[70] "The state distribution economy" [*thời báo cấp*] denotes the time of collectivization and dependence on the state's handouts. For more information see Chapter 4.

[71] The mass media as well as the Vietnamese people called this process "freedom of religious" or *tự do tín ngưỡng*.

According to Mạnh, the place was strategic; no boat or junk could come into or leave the seaport unnoticed. Those who dared to come near the place were fired upon and bombarded. "How could people practice worship under such conditions?" he asked rhetorically. In the beginning the Americans did not permit incense offerings, but the situation eased by 1967-68 when they ultimately gave people permission to perform simple rituals, burn incense and votive paper, and to make modest offerings to the local Goddess Thiên Y A Na every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. Mạnh remembered the Americans as generally respecting the places of worship and even for giving permission for the temples' renovation.

However, in 1978 the Communists forbade the performance of rituals and worship. Mạnh continued his story:

> We lived in peace at last but oppression [*sự áp bức*] remained. It was not allowed to worship profusely [*thờ phượng cúng*). Some folks adhered to [religion] so they were politically [suspect] [*bị chính trị*], they were arrested, imprisoned in the province or the district, hence no one dared… All temples were tightly boarded up, superstitions were not allowed [*không cho mê tín*], no permission was given to lead a religious life, to enter a monk order [*không tu hành, Phật đạo hết*]… Only at home did we have the right to believe [*quyền tín ngưỡng*], during the full moon to burn incense and pray while outside no one dared or else risked going to prison.

My landlady's forty-eight-year-old brother-in-law continued this motif, drawing a picture of complete control of religion and of the local community. He recalled that shortly before 1975 he had become a Buddhist monk as an attempt to escape conscription into the South-Vietnamese Army, which supported the Americans. In his view, the American Army at least respected the status of monks and sacred places in contrast to the Communists, who did not hesitate to destroy temples. He reported that soon after the war had ended, the Communists burnt Từ Phước pagoda and confiscated the statues, with the exception of the image of the female bodhisattva Quan Âm [in Chinese: Guan Yin] that stood outside and was earmarked for demolition (see *Map 2. [10]*; p. 90). Risking punishment by the police, the local people, who felt that they should rescue it, transported the two-meter high statue of Quan Âm to the Forbidden Hill where the temple of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na was located. I will elaborate upon this in the next section (see *Map 2. [5], [6],[8],[9]*; p. 90).

It is worth explaining that Guan Yin is the Chinese form of the Indian Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara whose cult spread throughout Asia. Although in the Indian symbolism this figure was masculine, later in China this embodiment of the Buddha became

perceived as feminine and represented the most important Chinese female deity (Yü 2001; Overmyer 2002). In Vietnam Guan Yin is known as Quan Âm or the Goddess of Mercy. The images of the standing Quan Âm are particularly popular in the central and southern parts of Vietnam. In Sa Huỳnh she is considered a patron of fishermen and creator of the Whale Spirit who, under her command, helps fishermen in storms (see Chapter 4). The image of Quan Âm hanging on the wall above the ancestor altar is one of the most common representations one can find in a fisherman's house. On board their ships, fishermen also arrange small altars with her image.

Locals emphasized that religious activities were seriously restrained in Sa Huỳnh from 1975 until the late 1990s. For a long time no one dared to go up to the cliff and burn incense for Quan Âm and the Goddess Thiên Y A Na. The people also reported that they had already ceased to worship some of the local deities in the late 1940s and to make offerings in their shrines that were hidden in the bush for fear of being confused with French collaborators (*Map 2. [11]*; p. 90). The Communist guerrillas, using well-tried scorched earth tactics as practiced by the Việt Minh, destroyed the sites of local cults in order to deny the enemy any space to quarter their troops (see Malarney 2002: 45). After the Vietnam War, the villagers still could not resume the cult because of religious restrictions.

Ann Anagost (1994: 222) argues in the case of Maoist China that the state launching anti-religion campaigns aimed to "reinscribe the local landscape within its own totalizing order." With reference to Anagost's article, in the next section of this chapter, I attempt to discern whether, in the context of Central Vietnam's littoral society, it is possible to see the local landscape as totally re-inscribed by the state's vision, and especially whether this was the case in the late 1970s when religion endured the most severe restrictions. Following Achile Mbembe (1992, 1992a), I shall argue that facing pressure from local authorities, Sa Huỳnh villagers oscillated between yielding and standing firm, between accommodation and "indiscipline." In other words, they learned how to accept and at the same time reject the antireligious measures and finally learned how to "collaborate and fight simultaneously" (Mbembe 1992a: 128).

6.3   Defense of the Quan Âm statue

I learned about the confiscation of sacred statues by the police from Hưng (born 1948). Thanks to him I also got to know the whole version of the Quan Âm's story. I met Hưng, a widower, through another villager who knew that I would be especially interested in meeting

Hưng because he was responsible for the renovation of the Thiên Y A Na temple in 2001 and he might know quite a lot about this place. One day, we sat down together on a low wall by the road to the fish market. Hưng had struggled with loneliness since his wife was killed in a motorbike accident a few years earlier. He wanted to build a small shrine in honor of her but he was afraid that people might accuse him of being superstitious. Hưng, reluctant to stay alone in his spacious but empty house, usually divided his spare time between local affairs and friendly chats with people from his village. In addition, he attended all fishermen's gatherings organized by the People's Committee of the commune. Hưng explained that he had been "head of the fishing community" [*chủ vạn*] ten years ago and modestly added that he could introduce me to some other people who knew better than him, such as someone who might know how things had looked in Sa Huỳnh in the past. This person could give me an accurate history of the village and tell me about the statue of Quan Âm. Hưng said: "You want to collect materials, then you have to do it up to standard, to have both a head and a tail!" and took me to meet Gia.

When we arrived, we saw Gia's wife in the courtyard busy preparing fishing nets. She froze on the spot when she saw our delegation—Hưng with a foreigner! Hưng greeted her and I also joined in his greetings saying, "Good morning aunt!" The woman, still surprised, timidly produced a smile, hearing my heavy northern accent. Hưng asked about her husband. She invited us in and called Gia. He emerged from the other room and asked us to take a seat around a big table right in front of the family's ancestral altar. The men greeted each other warmly and Hưng introduced me and explained the aim of such an unexpected visit. Gia ordered his wife to prepare a pot of green tea and we began our conversation in the usual way in such situations with questions about my age, nationality, and marital status. The woman brought tea and sat down next to her husband. Gia poured us small cups of tea and invited us to taste.

I had already heard about Gia, although not in the context of the matter of the Buddhist statue. In the first month of my research in Sa Huỳnh the local official Lợi introduced me to selected respected elders, religious specialists who could enrich my knowledge about local tradition and culture. Later, during many conversations with locals I got to know about specialists who were less prominent in the eyes of the commune's authorities, like a geomancer [*thầy địa lý*] or a master in warding off evil spirits [*thầy đuổi tà ma*].

As stated by villagers, after 1975 the activities of "sorcerers" [*thày bói, thầy phù thuỷ*] were strictly banned. Gia was well known in Sa Huỳnh as a gifted healer and for driving away evil spirits. During my visit to his house with Hưng I also learned that in the late 1970s he was chosen by local folks as the head of the *vạn* in Thạch By village. Villagers confirmed later that he was held in high esteem by most in the village, and that he had "talent and was virtuous" [*có tài có đức*]. He was an "ordinary" man until he was twenty-five and was taken ill. Later during our conversation he recalled that an "invisible" [*vô hình*], "ghostly" [*huyền bí*] being entered his body at that time, controlled him, threatened him and prevented him from working or going fishing. This state lasted one hundred days during which he abstained from eating meat. At noon he was able to eat a small bowl of boiled rice. At night Gia, when possessed by the ghost [*ma*], received villagers at his home and cured them of their illnesses. He stated that when a hundred days had passed the spirit allowed him to resume his daily chores, but on every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month Gia was obliged to serve the ghost and cure people. In contrast to other self-cultivating men in the village, Gia has never given up his profession as exorcist and healer. Although the zeal of the anti-superstition campaign has cooled in the last ten years, Gia still maintained his habit of secret nightly gatherings. He justified this practice by arguing that the ghost to whom he served possessed him only at night.

Hung stated that when liberation came, Buddhist pagodas belonging to *Giáo-hội Phật Giáo Thống-nhất Việt Nam* or the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)[72] were considered by the communist government to have incited unlawful action against the political order and, as a result, were shut down. Shaun Malarney (2002: 46-47) also reports that due to official hostility towards Buddhism, most Buddhist pagodas in the North have been deprived of their sacred status, clergy and, in consequence, destroyed. Từ Phước pagoda, which belonged to the UBCV, shared a similar fate. Gia clearly remembered that it was a hot summer day in 1978 when the district police arrived at the pagoda. All statues and Buddhist instruments were confiscated and taken away to the People's Committee. Their only problem was the statue of Quan Âm that stood outside and was too big to transport. As a consequence, the police ordered the locals to smash the figure. Gia recalled:

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[72] In the 1960s a Catholic-dominated state of South Vietnam provoked Buddhist protest in the streets of Huế and Sajgon that included cases of self-immolations among Buddhist clergy. The conflicts between Buddhists and Catholics led the Buddhist organization to political mobilizations and emulation of the more institutionalized form of the Catholic Church. As a result, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was established at the An Quang pagoda in Saigon in 1963 (Salemink 1995).

At the time of "state distribution economy" [*thời bảo cấp*], revolutionaries did not rely on any religion, any superstitions [*mê tín dị đoan*], they were eradicating all of them... I had the opportunity that year to represent the fishermen in Sa Huỳnh and gained the people's trust and confidence. Hence, I came to the pagoda and stood face to face with the police. I said: "This is a statue, in fact, cement and plaster only, if you want to beat the statue you have to hire people. Instead, please give it to me, I will take it to the hill to beautify the place!" "Did the police agree?" I asked. "The police was unanimous in their decision; they said that it was urgent that I transport the statue as soon as possible. I called folks together and, first, we transported it by boat close to the Whale Temple. Then we changed the boat, crossed the channel and carried it up the cliff. I also planted a small Bodhi tree in the place where the statue was put. It took 5-10 years to grow." Then he added, "But it withered and later people made an artificial tree of cement. They wanted the Quan Âm statue to look important [*quan trọng*] and older and to make it more dignified [*nghiêm trang*].

Gia denied that the pagoda was burnt by the police, only cleaned out and shut down and allowed to fall into ruin. Hưng explained: "All monks were taken to the district and jailed. If Gia had not interceded for the statue, if it had remained without worshippers, all of us would have been guilty [*mang tội*]." Gia was also arrested several times and accused of spreading superstitious practices. At the time of the antireligious campaigns, he was banned from curing and carrying out exorcisms. He recalled:

I cannot count how many times the police came here and said that I am spreading superstitions and the occult [*huyền bí*], that I am unintelligent and unaware [*vô trí vô giác*]. I wanted to save people; I have never taken a single *đồng*,[73] I have been helping the people at large [*người đời*]. You, young lady, know the people's level here, they only finished elementary school and even this cannot be certain. In the war time, they just learned to spell, that was all. And that was why they called it occult practice!" Gia smiled and continued: "Once, the provincial police sent a letter and summoned me to the commune office. They detained me for two days. During this time, people gathered, around 300 persons from Sa Huỳnh alone.[74] The police officer understood it wrong; he thought that I had alerted them. I answered him: "Honourable officer, I am sitting here for two days working with the cadres. How could I have asked the people to come here?" Their presence reflected that I worked in their interest [*có lợi*] and it cost nothing. I wanted to stop healing but the village and the neighborhood did not let me stop; people came in crowds, I had a lot of work to do, [I could not refuse] you know... a sense of community [*tình làng nghĩa xóm*].[75]

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[73] Vietnamese currency.

[74] I suppose that Gia overestimated the number but nevertheless villagers' accounts confirmed both that he was detained by the police and even that some of the villagers tried to intercede on his behalf.

[75] Gia quotes the popular saying "*tình làng nghĩa xóm*" which describes strong ties and solidarity between villagers in everyday life, duty and readiness to help fellow villagers in their time of need; see Toàn Ánh (2005).

The notion of the community's total submission to the new cultural politics loses its credibility when we look more closely at the Sa Huỳnh villagers' experience in which resistance and domination are inseparable and occupy "the same space and the same time" (Anagnost 1997: 97). The story of the defense of the Buddhist statue and Gia's detention raises the question of how Gia ultimately transformed the norms and objectives of the new political culture and used them for his own purpose and how he identified himself with it. This story also touches on the problem of whether the state's norms and objectives contradicted or agreed with Gia's values. Mbembe (1992a: 132) suggests that in the relations of dominant and dominated there is a "vast space created for equivocation, simulacrum, bargaining, and 'improvisation' by both 'agents of power and common folk[s].'" As the story suggests, Gia's defense of the Buddhist statue might be seen as a combination of resistance and collaboration through which he opened a new space for improvisation and bargaining which takes place in this particular social context.

Although Gia regarded the police's actions as profanation, he publicly confirmed the legitimacy of the state and used its rhetoric to save the statue on behalf of which he felt an obligation to act. Creating an atmosphere of familiarity, he displayed his "secular" rationality by pointing out that in fact, the statue was nothing more than a plaster effigy, not really worth wasting the effort of smashing it. Being aware of the state policy of preserving places of historical, cultural, or aesthetic interest and of the "socialist beautification programme," he used the argument that the Quan Âm statue could beautify the local landscape. By planting the Bodhi tree, he referred to the new tradition inaugurated by Hồ Chí Minh during the Land Reform known as a "National Planting Day" [*Tết Trong Cây*] and his famous saying that "Forest is gold if one knows how to protect..." [*Rừng là vàng nếu minh biết bảo vệ…*].[76]

Gia's simultaneous protestations and simulation of "comradely feeling" [*tính đồng chí*] presented the policemen with the dilemma of how to deal with his arguments and left them somehow ineffective. According to Hồ Chí Minh, "comradely feeling" or *tính đồng chí* was a crucial part of the critique and "self-critique" practiced among members of the Party whose aim was "self-improvement." Gia played with this expression in order to convince the policemen to give him the statue. The other reason that the local authorities had a hard time refuting Gia's argument was his position as the head of the fishing organization [*vạn*]. He *practically* represented the fishermen—not just "ritually"—and because of this status it was

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[76] The Party-State sought to replace local village traditions with more profane celebrations. Hồ Chí Minh invented a new tradition of a National Planting Day in order to replace more traditional festive occasions in village ritual life (Kleinen 1999: 184 and 189, note 35).

difficult to counter him. The police, carrying out the task of desanctification of the local pagoda, also had to make a decision about what to do with the troubling object, which was too big and heavy to take to the People's Committee. As we have seen, the officials could not just leave the statue since they received the order to cleanse the village of "superstitious symbols," but they were also not very keen on dirtying their hands to destroy it. The policemen let themselves be convinced by Gia's proposition, thereby accepting a silent form of collaboration. They ordered Gia to remove the statue as soon as possible and, loading the remaining statues onto their truck, they left the pagoda empty and maintained the appearance that their task had been carried out properly.

In Chapter 5, through the analysis of the Official Gazette, *Công Báo*, I demonstrated that the state has its own vision of how to use the temples and manage the place of local religion according to Marxist-Leninist principles. I also showed that the official directives do not constitute transparent guidelines for local authorities who interpreted the central state commands in their own terms. Paradoxically, the lack of lucidity and "misreading" of the official directives allowed room for a variety of new narratives, interpretations and understandings between both local leaders and different groups of villagers. Thus, my point is that villagers who experienced the conflict over the role of religious belief and everyday practices during the anti-superstition campaign particularly strongly sought, in Young's (1997: 135) words, "'[to] pass' as sympathizers or adherents" of the Party in order to avoid the consequences of open conflict with local authorities. But at the same time, they tried to figure out how to make the official regulations work for their own benefit. In turn, local officials, who often were members of the local community as well, were aware that their antireligious activities might widen a rift between themselves and fellow villagers, and therefore took the liberty of more or less freely interpreting the state's rules and their application to those who were supposed to obey them.

In the domain of everyday practices that escape the direct control of the state and in which the compromises and negotiations are an intrinsic part, it is often difficult to say who is dominant and who is subordinate. Mbembe (1992, 1992a) argues that the actions of the dominated do not necessarily lead to resistance and accommodation but rather to a tactic of insubordination and continuous bargaining and invention—a tactic that he glosses as "indiscipline" in contrast with the Foucaultian concept of "discipline." His discussion points out that the relationship between the two sides transcends the standard dichotomy of resistance and domination that is often interpreted in terms of "passivity, subjection,

autonomy, state, society hegemony and counter hegemony" and is more complex than such dualistic visions predict (Mbembe 1992: 3; also Scott 1985). Such conceptualization of relations between dominant and dominated grants more agency to the latter and forces us to rethink what their position is vis-à-vis the state.

Ortner (2006: 144), following Giddens (1979), says that power is built on objectified structures like institutions and discourses, but those who remain "subordinate" have the capacity to transform them and "exercise some sort of influence over the ways in which events unfold." Ortner's argument sent me back to Hegel's famous parable of the "Master-Slave Dialectic." Friedrich Hegel argued that "there can be no master without slave and no slave without master" (Modell 1993: 99). Despite his greater power, the master is dependent on the slave. The master's power rests on the slave's obedience and a few conditional facts that enable his superiority over the slave. On the other hand, exposed to certain pressure, the slave reinforces his self-consciousness as he sees the outcome of his work, controls his desires and becomes aware of his feelings. As a result, the master is dependent on the work of his slave who, through arrangement of his labor, struggles against the master.

Although Ortner does not refer to Hegel, she argues that in an "asymmetrical relationship of dependency, desire and control" (Modell 1993: 99) the "subordinate" is not entirely deprived of "agency" and has powers and projects of his own (Ortner 2006: 153). Thus, resistance for Ortner is a form of "power-agency." However, it is inseparable from the "agency of project" according to which "people seek to accomplish valued things within a framework of their own terms, [and] their own categories of value" (2006: 145). In her approach, directing our attention to intentionality, neither "'individuals' nor 'social forces' have 'precedence,'" nonetheless there exists "transformative relationships between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture and history" in which the first turn the matters toward the desired end (Ortner 2006: 133). Mbembe (1992: 5) argues in the context of the African "postcolony" that the "postcolonial subject" faces the plurality of legitimizing forms, rules, arenas and their multilateral combination and brings together not just a single but several fluid identities which are continuously revised in order to gain utmost "instrumentality and efficacy" when it is necessary. He explains that the "subject" is publicly visible either in the common daily rituals or in his ability to deploy various skills for "play and a sense of fun" which makes him able to split his identities and to represent himself as different persona in official and unofficial situations (1992: 5).

This is no less true for Gia who, arrested and detained in the People's Committee office, politely mocked local authorities, calling his confinement serious "work" with "honourable cadres," thereby reproducing the official rhetoric in which the "masses" must be unified in a common goal of building a "new socialist progressive society." At the same time, he revealed the irrationality of the local authorities who assumed that he was able to mobilize people, while in fact he was for two days busy raising his "socialist moral standards" in detention. The presence of a group of villagers in front of the People's Committee building presumably had been seen by local leaders as something subversive, however Gia offered it as a proof that his conduct had not been exploitative of village fellows.

Finally, the "fluidity of identities" is no less true for Hưng—a previous guerilla fighter, a member of the village team responsible for rituals, and finally a fisherman—who shifted between joking about the Party; warning me that the same Party allowed me to carry out my research and for that reason my intentions must be pure; and finally, recollecting the stories of previous years of severe restrictions. Before he took me to Gia he had asked me: "Why is the Communist Party only one, not two?" and then, laughing, explained: "because it does not tolerate competition and for that very reason there is no religion." Then he continued: "But because of a new policy up there, the Communist Party must carry out propaganda of a return of freedom, freedom of religion [*tự do tín ngưỡng*], which was limited in the time of the state collectivization. Now, it is a satisfactory change but [the Party] watches closely. I tell you young lady (…) understanding Communism is not simple!" I remember that Hưng's remark about the complexity of communism raised much laughter from among the men gathered around, but I also recall his wish to share the bitter truth about the former events even though he publicly warned me that my purpose in knowing a local history must be "cultural," not "political."

To end this section it is necessary to add that many Sa Huỳnh people, including Hưng and Gia, believed that offending spirits and deities must bring supernatural punishments to those who misbehave towards sacred spaces. They conveyed the stories of the punishment of those who dared to remove the statues from the temples' altars and pointed out that even the offenders' status as previous guerrilla fighters would not help them avoid the "revenge of heavens." Such conviction is not exceptional for Sa Huỳnh villagers, as Malarney (2002: 92-95) quotes examples of the misfortune, suffering and death of all persons involved in the temples' destruction in Bắc Ninh Province, Northern Vietnam. For Gia and other villagers, the act of removing sacred objects from the pagoda was abusive enough, but letting the statue

be destroyed would have made the community even more guilty. Since the spiritual and material propitiousness of the entire community depended on Gia's irreproachable demeanor, he felt compelled to react and prove his moral conduct. I do not have any information on whether Gia was acquainted with the policemen, but he was aware of how far he could go with his arguments and when he should yield.

6.4   The Buddhist pagoda in Sa Huỳnh and its vicissitudes

The events surrounding the desanctification of the pagoda triggered the villagers' reaction in the form of defense of the Quan Âm statue, showing at the same time local tensions over the police action. There is sufficient evidence here that in critical moments, the villagers were able to act on behalf of their gods and negotiate with authorities, having success, albeit limited, in forcing through their own vision. My account illustrates that Sa Huỳnh villagers had their own politics. Local authorities, on the other hand, were not always negative about villagers' practices. In this section, by looking at the interaction between a Buddhist monk and an official, I intend to break new ground by taking the discussion beyond terms of domination and resistance. In demonstrating the confrontation between the monk Giái Đức and the local official Lợi, I display their different, sometimes contradictory, visions of religion that exist alongside villagers' interpretations.

Before I analyze the conversation that Lợi had with the monk, let me first say a few words about the history of Từ Phước pagoda. Like many village pagodas in Vietnam, Từ Phước is situated in the vicinity of a local market in Thạch By; well located, it attracted people and spread Buddhism among the entire Sa Huỳnh community. From the pagoda's chronicle [*tiểu sử chùa*], to which the current head monk [*trù trì*] kindly gave me access, I learned also that the proximity of the *đình*, the freshwater stream flowing down the mountains, and ponds favorable for planting water morning glory [*rau muống*] determined the choice of the former *bonze*, who established the pagoda in this place in 1956.[77] The *đình* belonged to La Vân village but was built on the territory that today constitutes Thạch By. According to Vietnamese belief, waterfalls, springs and riverbanks as well as the village market and the communal house are the places where the life forces of *yin* and *yang* meet. As in Chinese thought, *yin* [*âm*] *yang* [*dương*] constitutes a binary hierarchical opposition. *Yang*, symbolizing the principle of order, is positively valued in contrast to *yin* which is associated

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[77] See *Tiểu sử chùa Từ Phước*. (n.d.). Thạch By, xã Phổ Thạnh, tỉnh Quảng Ngãi [Từ Phước Pagoda's chronicle. Thạch By, Phổ Thạnh Commune, Quảng Ngãi Province].

with the production, reproduction and restoration of order (Sangren 1987). However, in isolation, each is incomplete and only together do they constitute the balance and hence, order. That is why for Vietnamese people *yin* and *yang* values are at the core of harmony (Jamieson 1993).

In the past, in order to reproduce the balance between *yin* and *yang*, villagers often built the Buddhist pagoda in the vicinity of the communal house. This was the case in Sa Huỳnh, where Tứ Phước pagoda was located close to the *đình*. In the village, the Buddhist pagoda symbolized a *yin* order while the *đình* was associated with *yang*. In contrast to the *đình*, which was an exclusively male domain where status, hierarchy and prestige were reproduced in public ceremonies, feasts and worship of the village guardian spirits, the Buddhist pagoda had no regular "congregation" and participation was voluntary and irregular (Jamieson 1993: 36). Having a more "egalitarian" character in terms of gendered lay participation, Buddhism attracted mainly women who were excluded from the *đình* order (see Chapter 8).

The Từ Phước pagoda's chronicle reported that a few years after the building had been constructed, the newly established temple could not accommodate the growing number of villagers attending worship; hence the leading monk appealed to their generosity to expand the building. The pagoda operated in relative peace until the liberation of the South. In the document, the anti-superstition campaigns of the late 1970s, imprisonment of monks, and their affiliation to the UBCV was passed by in silence, and the document stated only that due to lack of clergy, the pagoda had sunk into stagnation. Indeed, from 1980 to 1999 there were no clergy in the pagoda. Interestingly, the documents noted the fact that in 1984 the pagoda was officially admitted into the Vietnamese Buddhist Association [*Giao Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*], which is the official Buddhist umbrella organization with legal status in Vietnam.[78]

The state's recognition did not save the building from gradual decline. During the anti-superstition campaign some pagodas were considered historically significant and for that reason villagers and cadres refrained from destroying such places (Malarney 2002: 46). According to official directives these pagodas were qualified as sites of historical interest or scenic beauty and came under the direct management of local People's Committees and

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[78] In 1980, the Communist government ordered monks from all over the country to unify all disparate sects throughout Vietnam. In 1981, the state formalized the Buddhist Association of Vietnam (*Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*), which represents the Buddhist Church in the country and abroad. In the guidelines: *Buddhist Moral Rules – Nation - Socialism* issued by the Party-State about Buddhism, it is stressed that the clergy and believers must enhance solidarity with the whole nation in the framework of a socialist program. It means that the Buddhist Organization should share efforts to shape a strong Vietnamese society together with the Communist Party, the National Assembly and Fatherland Front (see Marr 1986).

Departments of Culture [*sở văn hoá*], which decided about their possible renovation and construction work regarding places of worship (see Chapter 5). However, Từ Phước pagoda neither had the good fortune to be rated as a place of historical importance nor could local authorities discern any of its aesthetic qualities. In consequence, the building suffered extensive deterioration.[79]

This miserable state of affairs lasted until 1999, when the current monk Giái Đức was appointed. As the monk stated during the interview, in 1999 he returned from Thắng Quang to Sa Huỳnh and found the village pagoda in complete ruins. In 1995, a fire had consumed a large part of the building and the rest of the structure was in danger of collapsing. As a result, he could not carry out rituals even if large numbers of followers with spiritual needs existed. With the support of the villagers, he started the renovation work soon after he gained the approval from the local authorities. In the meantime, the People's Committee of the district returned all confiscated statues, so that only the statue of Quan Âm was still missing. Unfortunately, in 2001 the pagoda burnt down once again. It took a few years for the monk to collect the money and necessary materials before he was able to apply for official approval a second time and with financial support of believers, to begin reconstruction work. In 2007— the year of my fieldwork in Sa Huỳnh—the reconstruction of the pagoda was nearly finished, although restoration of adjacent buildings was still in progress.

The monk Giái Đức was aware of the official cultural policy and the state's expectation that Buddhist clergy would support the official propaganda of protecting all places of historical and cultural interest, beautification of the landscape and the promotion of mass tourism. Yet, his discussion with the local official, Lợi, revealed that he did not share the interest in the state's efforts to convert temples into places of historical and cultural importance or into tourist sites. Such a policy aroused his reluctance rather than his keenness. Eloquently and carefully constructing his critique, he first emphasized the cultural and spiritual differences between Northern and Southern Buddhism and then created the category of "northerners" as "others." In this way he appealed to his and the official's mutual background.

However, Lợi's encounter with the monk Giái Đức revealed something else. For Lợi, "national" aspects of Buddhism, such as its relation with ancestor worship and selected "folk" religious practices, were the most important since they are supposed to reflect "Vietnamese

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[79] Issues connected with the land reform noted that although the cadres have the right to confiscate the land belonging to churches, temples and lineages they were also obliged to allot a small amount which would be sufficient to conduct rituals. However, in practice it was hardly observed (Malarney 2002: 48).

nationalculture." Therefore, he presented Buddhism as the national religion and the cultural core of the Vietnamese people. Certainly, in his view, Buddhism as a philosophical system should not propagate "superstitious" and "out-dated" practices within modern society. In turn, the monk was more concerned with "cleansing" Buddhism of local practices and beliefs, not because they were not in line with the Party-State policy but because he perceived them as impurities and deviations from the original teachings of the Buddha.

Ironically, Vietnamese Buddhism was criticized for a long time by the state for mixing with practices such as fortune-telling, healing and magic. According to this criticism, Buddhism lost its beautiful intellectual and philosophical character and became a superstitious religion. Since the door to the West has been opened, the state's approach to Buddhism has changed as well. An unexpected attribute of Buddhism was its affiliation to ancestor worship and, in consequence, Buddhism was presented as a "Vietnamese religion" in character.

Alexander Soucy (2007: 361) argues that the criticism of local practices and the desire to reform Buddhism was a part of a larger movement of Buddhist reform that took place through all of Asia in the 20th century, in which the encounter with Western colonial power played a role in this "self-conscious reformation process." In the Vietnamese context, the *Đổi Mới* program of political and economic changes, as well as the normalization with the United States in 1995 has significantly increased interaction between overseas Vietnamese with Vietnamese in Vietnam, and at the same time, influenced Buddhism there (ibid.). For example, venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh imported a "purified" version of Buddhism more in line with Western expectations that continues to transform Buddhist practice in Vietnam.[80] The other example of this trend is a local Vietnamese Buddhist sect which constitutes a religious "resurrection" of the old and short-lived Zen school known as *Trúc Lâm Thiền Tong* or Bamboo Grove Zen, established by Vietnamese king Trần Nhân Tông [1278-1293] in the 13th century. The new sect was re-established in the late 1960s in the South by Thích Thanh Từ, a monk who "discovered" meditative Zen and modified it in his Bamboo Grove Zen school. However, what matters here is that both Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Thanh Từ emphasized meditation in their attempts to purify Vietnamese Buddhism of alien, non-Buddhist elements, by rationalizing both doctrine and liturgical practice (Salemink 1995).

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[80] Thích Nhất Hạnh is the world's most famous Buddhist leader after the Dalai Lama. He was born in 1926 in Central Vietnam and at the age of 16 entered a Buddhist monastery near Huế. His association with the UBCV made him suspect in the eyes of Vietnamese authorities and consequently, led to a long-term exile. He was only allowed to pay return visits to Vietnam in 2005 and 2007. He is the founder of Plum Village Buddhist Center, a meditation community in France, the USA and other countries. I had an opportunity to meet Thích Nhất Hạnh and his followers during his visit to the Buddhist Institute in Sóc Sơn in 2005 where I carried out my pre-doctoral fieldwork.

The monk Giái Đức did not clearly say that he belonged to the Bamboo Grove Zen school, but from the way he responded to Lợi's questions I concluded that he must. Like the followers of the resurrected Bamboo Grove Zen school, Giái Đức contrasted his teaching with the "impure" Buddhist practices of Northern Vietnam (see Soucy 2007: 354) and then emphasized the role of instructions given by educated monks. He explained that the village pagoda did not have anyone qualified in Buddhist practice. When he came to Sa Huỳnh, a lay person was in charge of the building, and the only Buddhist practice taking place was the chanting of the *sutra* which apparently could not substitute for the teaching by a qualified monk. Giái Đức described his role in the following words:

> The war was over, but after the miserable time of restrictions and the hands of people who destroyed the building, at the end it felt into ruin. Then the years came in which the state had expanded religious freedom and activities and Buddhism could spread in the region. Without a monk there cannot be any development… Since I have been here, the pagoda has been renovated and become spacious. There are facilities to accommodate any group of Buddhist pilgrims who are passing by. I mean, they come to bring relief to flood-hit central regions; doing their duty, they stop over here. This is the closest point for the South and the North to meet each other. That is why I need to have a place for them when they are on their way back. The purpose of Buddhism is to bring prosperity and peace to all people, this is what Buddha teaches.

After listening to the monk who stressed his role in recovering "pure" Buddhist practice in Sa Huỳnh, Lợi asked him whether he considered the Centre of Buddhist Association (he meant the Quán Sứ pagoda in Hanoi) as the administrative head of all Buddhist sects in the country.[81] Lợi was aware of existing Buddhist pagodas around Sa Huỳnh which belonged to the "unofficial" UBCV and he discreetly tested the monk. This sect refrains from joining the state-approved Buddhist Association and thus is politically suspect. The monk answered directly that in his opinion, rather than a place of Buddhist devotion, the northern pagoda Quán Sứ was just a central secretariat in which the state monitors the religious congregation, approving and publicizing new administrative rules.

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[81] The Communist Party tries to maintain a complete monopoly by controlling all levels of society. In the case of Buddhism, the state mandated that all activities of the Sangha's Body be centrally located in the Quán Sứ pagoda. Sangha's Body includes the Council of Sangha [*Hội đồng Chứng Minh*] and Central Management Board [*Hội đồng Trị Sự*]. Both councils receive directives from the Communist Party. Officially, the Vietnamese Buddhist Association is the sole Buddhist organization in Vietnam. In fact, the UBCV established at the An Quang pagoda in Sajgon in 1963 and the Hòa Hảo sect of Buddhism are others Buddhist organizations, which exist in Central and Southern Vietnam besides the Vietnamese Buddhist Association. The UBCV refused to recognize the Vietnamese Buddhist Association because it is controlled and restricted by the Communist Party according to Marxist ideology. Some monks belonging to the UBCV remained under house arrest.

The monk continued his critique of northern Buddhism by claiming that northern pagodas remained under strong Chinese cultural influence and that is why people selfishly wish for wealth, health, passing exams and the like instead of self-cultivation as is practiced in the South. Then he allowed himself to express more explicitly his disapproval of those northern pagodas which, according to the state's vision, have become "scenic spots" and destinations for sightseeing tours and for doing business instead of being places for practicing Buddhism. Lợi listened patiently, but in more awkward moments tried to interrupt the monk and asked me to switch off the recorder. However, the monk continued his tirade, stating that for him many temples had nothing to do with Buddhist cultivation and only pretended to be places popularizing Buddhist practices, but in reality were simply earning money from visitors. The monk believed that such places could not develop as sites for Buddhist religious cultivation, similar to Từ Phước pagoda that, left without clergy, was doomed to decline.

Eventually, Lợi changed the subject and brought up the issue of the Quan Âm statue and its current location above Sa Huỳnh port. Although both Lợi and Giái Đức must have known the reason why the statute was moved to the cliff instead of remaining in the yard of the pagoda, this issue was passed by in silence by both of them. Instead, Lợi talked about the villagers' beautification and decoration of the place on the cliff and the role of Quan Âm in granting fishermen a peaceful passage at sea and a safe return home. Lợi pointed out the difficult location of the port and the hazards of the sea and argued that the presence of the statue had a positive psychological effect on fishermen who were pinning their faith on the Buddhist Goddess. Describing Quan Âm as simultaneously representing "Buddhist beliefs" [*tín ngưỡng Phật giáo*] and "folk religious beliefs" [*tín ngưỡng dân gian*] he stressed that the two sides complemented each other rather than clashed. In Lợi's view the statue was an example of the exchange between beautiful Vietnamese traditions and Buddhism, which—enriched with local flavor—entered the "reality of everyday life and expressed itself in daily practices." Lợi declared that he did not identify himself with any of the main religions [*tôn giáo*] including Buddhism and in his view, as a "worker of the state" he should represent an atheistic orientation. However, he explained, his statement had not restrained him from honoring his wife's ancestors during his wedding. In the discussions with the monk Giái Đức he stressed that he did not see any contradiction in claiming to be an atheist and following ancestor worship [*thờ ông bà*], which for him was a "beautiful Vietnamese tradition." After that he asked the monk what his opinion was about beautification of the cliff and whether he identified himself with the people's project. The monk replied shortly that whatever villagers

were doing had nothing to do with him and in this way strictly separated their "folk" practices and his teaching.

Lợi decided to delve further into the subject and asked the monk whether he would agree to carry out a ceremony on the cliff, especially in a situation when people might think that he is better qualified to perform rituals. Lợi considered himself knowledgeable about local culture and he also granted some kind of authority to the monk who, he believed, must understand more clearly the religious procedures in contrast to the people who, in his opinion, had a very weak understanding of religion. By referring to himself, in his authority as a "staff officer" [*tham mưu*], and an example of someone the villagers might approach for assistance during the village ceremonies, he indirectly inquired about the monk's position regarding those ceremonies.

The monk diplomatically answered that he did not have a clear understanding of the matter but in the last two years he had refused to lead the village ceremonies for local gods because he found them to be in contradiction with Buddhist teaching since villagers butchered pigs and prepared elaborated feasts. Then he used pre-*Đổi Mới* rhetoric which associated superstition with the "peasant class" and distanced himself from the official agenda prioritizing "folk" religious beliefs as "pure and authentic Vietnamese traditions" (see Chapter 5). He called the "folk" beliefs "superstition" [*mê tin gọi là tín ngưỡng dân gian*] which was in contradiction with the Buddhist faith [*tín ngưỡng Phật giáo*] and at the same time he disagreed with Lợi's vision of cultural crossover between "folk" beliefs and Buddhism. Note that when he stressed his role in recovering "pure" Buddhism, he mentioned pilgrims and North-South reconciliation as his project but not villagers who, apparently, remained outside of his main concern.

Giái Đức's attempt to purify Buddhism from non-Buddhist practice contrasted markedly with the point of view of one of the well-known and high-ranking monks from the North with whom I had several interviews in 2005. On one occasion, that monk described the relationship between "folk" beliefs and Buddhism in pragmatic words: "'Religion' [*tôn giáo*] and 'religious beliefs' [*tín ngưỡng*] always go together. To attract people to pagodas and satisfy their needs Buddhism had to offer practices which in fact are not Buddhist." Apparently, he accepted that the more usual devotional practices are a part of Buddhism. However, what is more important, his statement made clear to me that within Buddhism itself different tensions are present, since the understanding of religious ideas differs from region to region and there is no one interpretation or view among either Buddhist clergy or adherents.

Along with Giái Đức's effort to redirect his followers from devotional to more sophisticated practices such as self-cultivation or meditation, Sa Huỳnh villagers, in a way, lost control over the village pagoda. However, they were not willing to lose their control over the cliff which—"enchanted" by the rescued statue of Quan Âm—became even more potent. Despite Giái Đức's orthodox ideas, villagers saw nothing contradictory in leaving the Quan Âm statue on the cliff in the vicinity of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na. They felt that they had fulfilled their moral obligations by saving the statue from destruction and, following "Uncle Hồ" [*bác* Hồ - Hố Chí Minh] and the state's instruction, beautifying the local landscape. For them the Quan Âm statue made the cliff—a transitional point between Sa Huỳnh and the open sea—more powerful and sacred [*linh thiêng*]. The monk wanted the Quan Âm statue back at the pagoda but villagers insisted on leaving the statue on the hill. Ultimately it was decided by villagers that they would fund a new statue of Bodhisattva Quan Âm, so that the old one could remain on the cliff where it was better suited, even though the monk considered the Buddhist pagoda as a more appropriate place for the Quan Âm statue. Consequently, instead of the old statue, a new replica was erected in the yard of the pagoda.

6.5   The cosmological landscape under construction

Let me address more explicitly the problem of how the official measures had been influencing the geographical domain and how people in Sa Huỳnh altered the particular fragments of their cosmological landscape. Talking about the local events that shaped the fate of both the Buddhist pagoda and the Quan Âm statue, the villagers articulated their views in which the statue rather than the pagoda had became a symbol of the community's moral stance and its vision of religiosity, even though only a few men played a part in her defense. The statue's latest location, chosen by villagers, opened a new alternative understanding of the local world that had undergone significant changes since the Vietnam War.

In the old days, the section of the Sa Huỳnh coastline, lying on the margins of the community, was considered to be dangerously rocky and very treacherous for passing boats and junks. Thus, to ensure themselves a safe passage, the fishermen always prayed to the powerful goddess Thiên Y A Na whose temple was built on the steep cliff right in front of the entrance to the port, as is usual for former Cham temples. Sa Huỳnh men performed rituals and burned incense to the goddess, but most of them were afraid to approach her directly in the temple. Passing the cliff on board their vessels, they bowed their heads from afar out of

respect. The temple guardian from time to time conducted spirit possession and asked the goddess for a safe passage on their behalf.

Apart from the Goddess Thiên Y A Na—one of the more powerful deities in Sa Huỳnh—fishermen also worshiped two other seafaring deities such as the Whale Spirit who is believed to be their patron, and the Goddess Thủy Long who governs fresh and salt water. The Whale Spirit, bearing Cham origins, was especially important for fishermen since they believed that he was created by Quan Âm in order to keep boats from sinking during storms at sea (see Chapter 4). This pantheon was expanded some eighty years ago when Sa Huỳnh fishermen found a dead young woman—Bà Lao—among the rocks below the temple of Thiên Y A Na and buried her just next to the temple (see Chapter 2). As a potentially dangerous spirit of someone who died a violent and untimely death, she was mollified by regular offerings made by villagers in order to keep a peaceful relationship with her ghost.

In the previous section, I have already explained that within the local cosmological view the *đình* belonged to the *yang* domain—male-dominated, hierarchical, and competitive—while Buddhism represented the *yin* order, expressed in more cooperative, informal, compassionate, and less competitive practices. However, this configuration of *yin* and *yang* was not the only one in the village. The old arrangement of spirits at the foot of the Forbidden Hill was another example of villagers' efforts to keep the balance between the two forces and in this way to increase the potency of the place. Even today, Vietnamese in Central Vietnam pair the Whale Spirit called *ông* [Mr.] with the Goddess Thiên Y A Na (or any other female deity), usually addressed as *bà* [Mrs. or Lady], by constructing their temples next to each other.

However, as we learned, in the early 1960s the hill was appropriated by the American forces, and villagers lost access to their place of worship. Every day boats with American soldiers passed the cliff and one could hardly imagine that they bowed down their head as the local custom demanded. Rumors about sudden death or illness of the Americans circulated among the locals who connected them with punishment by Thiên Y A Na.

Having no access to the cliff, the *vạn* asked Americans for permission to move the Whale Temple to Thạch By (see *Map 2 [7]; p. 90*). For fishermen it was more convenient to carry out their ritual activities in the village because it allowed them to take proper care of their guardian spirit. The other important reason was that the Whale Temple constituted the space where the members of the *vạn* usually met and discussed important matters. It must have seemed the right time to change the location of the *vạn*'s temple since the most powerful

domain of the village elite, the *đình*, had been seriously damaged during the resistance struggle against the French and left empty. Being excluded from the "agricultural" *đình* order (cf. Chapter 4), fishermen took advantage of the situation and selected a suitable place in the vicinity of the Buddhist pagoda in order to erect a new modest temple for their guardian spirit. Since Mr. Whale [*ông* Hải] was considered a "servant" of the Buddhist deity Quan Âm, villagers believed that it was the best place to keep the balance between the *yin* and *yang* domains.

After the liberation in 1975 the hill was appropriated by the Border Police as a military observation post and access to the place, which had already played a strategic role during the Second Indochina War, was totally denied. Worship, rituals and spirit possession on this part of the coastline were seriously hindered by local authorities. Although the defense of the Quan Âm statue shows that villagers acted on behalf of their sacred gods, different fragments of the past contained in villagers' narratives suggest that they were far from being a unified and harmonious community that unanimously opposed antireligious measures in defense of their religious spaces. Later, during my discussion with Mạnh, he admitted that the local *đình* suffered mainly because of the violent actions of the villagers themselves. Taking advantage of antireligious feelings, some of them felt justified to pull down the local temple that they associated with social inequality and use its building material to construct their own houses.

Malarney (2002) reports that many villagers were aware of the inequality implied in communal house rites which were mainly reserved for the local educated elite, while the men of lower status were forced to take non-prestigious seats or were completely excluded, as were the fishermen in Central Vietnam (cf. Chapter 4). Therefore, when local cadres gave their assent to destroy these structures, those who had been previously humiliated by these rules, responded with great enthusiasm. Local officials were determined to wipe out all forms of social differentiation in terms of class and gender restrictions, seating order, ritual functions, and the food distribution that the *đình* reproduced. It is not without reason that the communal houses of La Vân, Tân Diêm and Đông Vân villages have never been rebuilt, in contrast to the Whale Spirit Temple that was enlarged with the tacit agreement of local cadres. Villagers reported that they managed to rebuild the Whale Temple during the time of anti-religious campaigns. After they enlarged the site, local authorities wanted to take over the building in order to make a granary out of it, but they met with strong opposition from Gia and other fishermen. One of the retired fishermen noted that the officials gave in to the village

because they were more tolerant of local beliefs and cults than they were towards institutional religions like Buddhism or Cào Đài. Nevertheless, my sense is that the more egalitarian character of the *vạn* was not without meaning for local authorities who felt justified to allow fishermen to keep their temple.

In Thạch By the last vestiges of the *đình* were wiped out when the general secondary school was built on its foundation. The old world of symbolic hierarchy and village status epitomized in the *đình* was gone forever, abolished and simplified with the state administration. Although fishermen tried to recreate the balance of *yin* and *yang* by moving the Whale Temple close to Tứ Phước pagoda, the traditional asymmetry had been disrupted and was in urgent need of a new rearrangement. First, the old order and the hierarchical relation between the *đình*, Buddhist pagoda and the Whale Temple fell apart, along with the last walls of the *đình*. Second, when the Whale Temple was moved from the cliff, the divinities coupled as *ông* [Mr.] and *bà* [Mrs.] were separated. In consequence, the cliff was stripped of its masculine aspect and male ritual activity and left with the weakening Goddess Thiên Y A Na. This situation created a spiritual vacuum that called for a creative reconfiguration of the cosmological landscape.

As the story of Quan Âm shows, the solution came unexpectedly with the threat of violent action against the Buddhist deity. Sa Huỳnh people did not hesitate over what to do with the troubling figure of Quan Âm and they knew precisely where she belonged. Villagers were aware that according to Buddhist doctrine Quan Âm was a man who took a female form. She was believed to not only protect fishermen in storms, but also to answer women's prayers. Women considered Quan Âm as the great fertility goddess and granter of sons (see Yü 2001). The androgynous Quan Âm perfectly filled the void left by the Whale Spirit and, in the absence of a strong female deity, grew in popularity. In consequence, the locals began to call the cliff an "area of four ladies" [*chỗ bốn bà*]. This place has become a symbol of their local vision of religiosity and represents the religious landscape of Sa Huỳnh.

In the early 1980s, the narratives about the changing nature of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na and her transformation from fierce deity to a benevolent spirit started to circulate among villagers. People believed that, inspired by the compassionate and merciful nature of Quan Âm, the Goddess Thiên Y A Na became less violent. Especially women, who for a long time remained outside of her worship and generosity, thought that she regarded them more favorably. In the early 1990s, the goddess completely relinquished her power to punish and cause suffering, and became as compassionate as Buddha. At that time women dared to

approach the goddess and started to make regular offerings in her temple every month during the new and full moon. Simultaneously, there were reports that due to her Buddhist "self-cultivation" [*đi tu*], the goddess had lost her supremacy and sacredness [*linh thiêng*] as well as her potential to control the sea and finally left the temple, having reached "nirvana."[82] Villagers were saying that in the late 1990s they resumed their worship in temples, but they believed that the "Goddess has been already gone" [*không có nữa*]. The temple guardian described her absence in the following words:

> For many years she did not come back. In the past, from time to time, she returned on a conical palm hat (*nón*) [which served as a boat]. At that time, the sea became full [*biển no*]. When the Lady [*Bà*] was leaving there was no season [*biển đói*]; no one saw her coming back in the last fifteen years.

In the end, the story of the Quan Âm statue raises the question of how the harmony of *yin* and *yang* can be maintained if the previous cosmic balance of the cliff has been dominated by the *yin* aspect through both feminine spirits and a higher level of female activity. I do not have a single answer and I do not believe that such an answer exists. The villagers' cosmology is not a fixed system of beliefs, but rather, as the few stories quoted in this chapter show, a product of a particular historical time and place. Fragments of the cosmological landscape are never rigid or predetermined and, as I learned, nor is the gender of gods entirely defined. The local worldview is continuously modified, negotiated and reinterpreted in daily practice. Even though the Sa Huỳnh people considered Quan Âm as a female deity, they were also aware of her old symbolic form as a man. Therefore, the best answer for this puzzle is found in the people's actions. By placing her statue on the cliff, men were confident that it would not threaten the hegemony of the *yang* order. But women have their own commentary rendered in the witty words: "Even the Goddesses have to acknowledge the higher position of women and follow the progress of modern society!" This calls for a separate analysis of women's interpretations of gender and religious practice which comes in Chapter 8.

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[82] I heard similar narratives of transformation, from a ferocious to benevolent spirit, in the mountain and forest area of Trà Xuân town (see Chapter 2). A tiger divinity, popularly called Bạch Hổ [White Tiger], was a protector and guardian of the local Goddess Thiên Y A Na and of the entire community in that region. Trà Xuân people believed that Bạch Hổ, who obeyed the Goddess and refrained himself from eating human flesh, went through Buddhist "self-cultivation" [*đi tu*] and became gentle and merciful.

6.6   Conclusion

This chapter aimed to show that villagers' carve out their own religious space from the state in a less confrontational manner than theories of resistance assume. I have introduced a few narratives describing events that happened in different times. However, combined they offer a better understanding of the dynamics of religious life and strategies villagers use to cope with the state "simplification" and restrictive cultural policies. The local accounts of de-sanctification of the village pagoda and its gradual decline, and the story of the defense of the Quan Âm statue show that the villagers were not passive recipients of the state's secular vision, but through accommodation, manipulation and "indiscipline" tried to accomplished their goals. In turn, the story about the destruction of the *đình* in Thạch By and the successful relocation of the Whale Temple offered a more nuanced picture of tensions present within the community and of important changes taking place in the local religious and cosmological landscapes. However, this picture would be incomplete without looking more closely at the confrontation of the local official Lợi and the monk Giái Đức who both represented different kinds of secular and religious authority in Sa Huỳnh. As we have seen, they had rather contradictory views about what constitutes "proper" religion. For Lợi, the move of the Quan Âm statue to the cliff illustrated a new usage of sacred space which, in accordance with the state's concerns, was properly developed as a place of scenic beauty. The statue was also an example of a beautiful combination of Vietnamese traditional beliefs with Buddhism. However, for the Buddhist monk Giái Đức, religious practices of villagers and their insistence on leaving the statue on the cliff was a deviation from his version of Buddhist orthodoxy.

The narratives I offered in this chapter inhabit a common local world but fill it with different interpretations. We have seen that diverse views exist simultaneously and do not exclude each other, but indicate tensions. They carve out a common space in which those who represent them are mutually dependent. In this territory of interdependency the interpretations nurture each other. In order to rescue the statue, people needed an appropriate frame for their defense: they could not find a better one than the state rhetoric about beautification of the landscape. Local leaders who through the official directives were encouraged to preserve and develop the religious spaces into places of historical, cultural or aesthetic interest and who did not want to destroy the Buddhist statue themselves, latched on to this discourse which gave them the impression of a properly fulfilled task. In order to get the support of villagers for his renovation of the pagoda, the monk had to accept that Quan Âm would remain on the cliff, but he negotiated that her replica would be erected in the pagoda yard.

Taking into account all these dimensions, I sought to go beyond a simplistic dichotomy of resistance and domination. By showing the complexity of ways through which villagers shift their identities in the everyday action of improvisation, simulation and negotiation with those who represent a sanctioned authority, I suggested that the relation between state agents and villagers cannot be characterized exclusively in terms of resistance, but involves other important aspects such as mutual accommodation and collusion (Mbembe 1992a; Chau 2006).

Last but not least, it is necessary to note that when a new "totalizing order" of the religious domain was established by the state (Anagnost 1994: 222), the dramatic shifts in the religious landscape caused an impressive change in villagers' cosmology. Through integrating official rhetoric, religious beliefs and local perceptions of the world in day-to-day experience, fishermen successfully reassembled the remaining pieces of their religious landscape and by adding new ones, constructed new symbolic spaces. In consequence, a newly "enchanted" landscape was created through a bricolage of old and new spirits, sites and practices. This new cosmological landscape became equally powerful and potent in the eyes of the local community because it made sense in the villagers' worldview, even though that landscape did not represent the state or more institutionalized versions of religion.

The next chapter takes the analysis of contestations over religious landscape between state agents and villagers a step further by looking at how the local community appropriates and capitalizes on national dominant narratives in order to reproduce and relocate its locality in a desirable way. I shall argue that the confrontation between state agents and villagers is restricted to specific fields of negotiation and contestations, defined by both the state and local initiatives. In this confrontation, not everything "reworked" by villagers' narratives fits into the state's cultural agenda. Thus, Chapter 7 seeks to answer why some narratives were successful while others failed to win the provincial authorities' support.

Reworking Religious Landscape through Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa Commemoration

Figure 7. Hoàng Sa Memorial founded by Quảng Ngãi Province in 2007, Lý Sơn Island

In May 2007, I had a conversation with a member of one of the founding lineages of Lý Sơn Island who accused a prominent and well-known Hanoi historian of secretly selling historical documents about the Paracel and Spratly Islands to the Chinese "enemy." These documents were part of his family annals [gia phả] *that he had taken to Hanoi for translation into modern Vietnamese. He believed that only a portion of them had been returned and declared that if not for this loss, today his lineage could present valuable evidence supporting Vietnam's claims to the Paracels* [Hoàng Sa] *and Spratlys* [Trường Sa]. *In 2008, the Vietnamese Communist Party was confronted with strikingly similar accusations, lodged by Vietnamese nationalists inside and outside the country, of selling out Vietnam's territory to China and hence of failing to defend national sovereignty. Many Vietnamese in the country and abroad interpreted a diplomatic note sent by the former Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng to the Chinese premier Zhou En Lai on September 14, 1958, as ceding the Paracels and Spratlys to China.*[83]

In August 2007 I finished my ethnographic field research and returned to Germany to begin writing my dissertation. The villagers from Lý Sơn Island phoned me several times. I was astonished to hear their thanks for my help in elevating Âm Linh Tự Temple [Temple of the Dead] to the rank of "national heritage." Although I protested and tried to explain that I had not played a part in this process, they have their own understanding of the matter. They came to the conclusion that the presence of a foreign researcher on the island added legitimacy to provincial authorities' endeavors to obtain a "National Certificate of Designation of Historical and Cultural Relic" issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism.

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[83] See the document "Analyzing the Diplomatic Note of Pham Van Dong," http://hoangsa.org/forum/showthread.php?t=2658&pagenumber=, accessed on 7 September 2010.
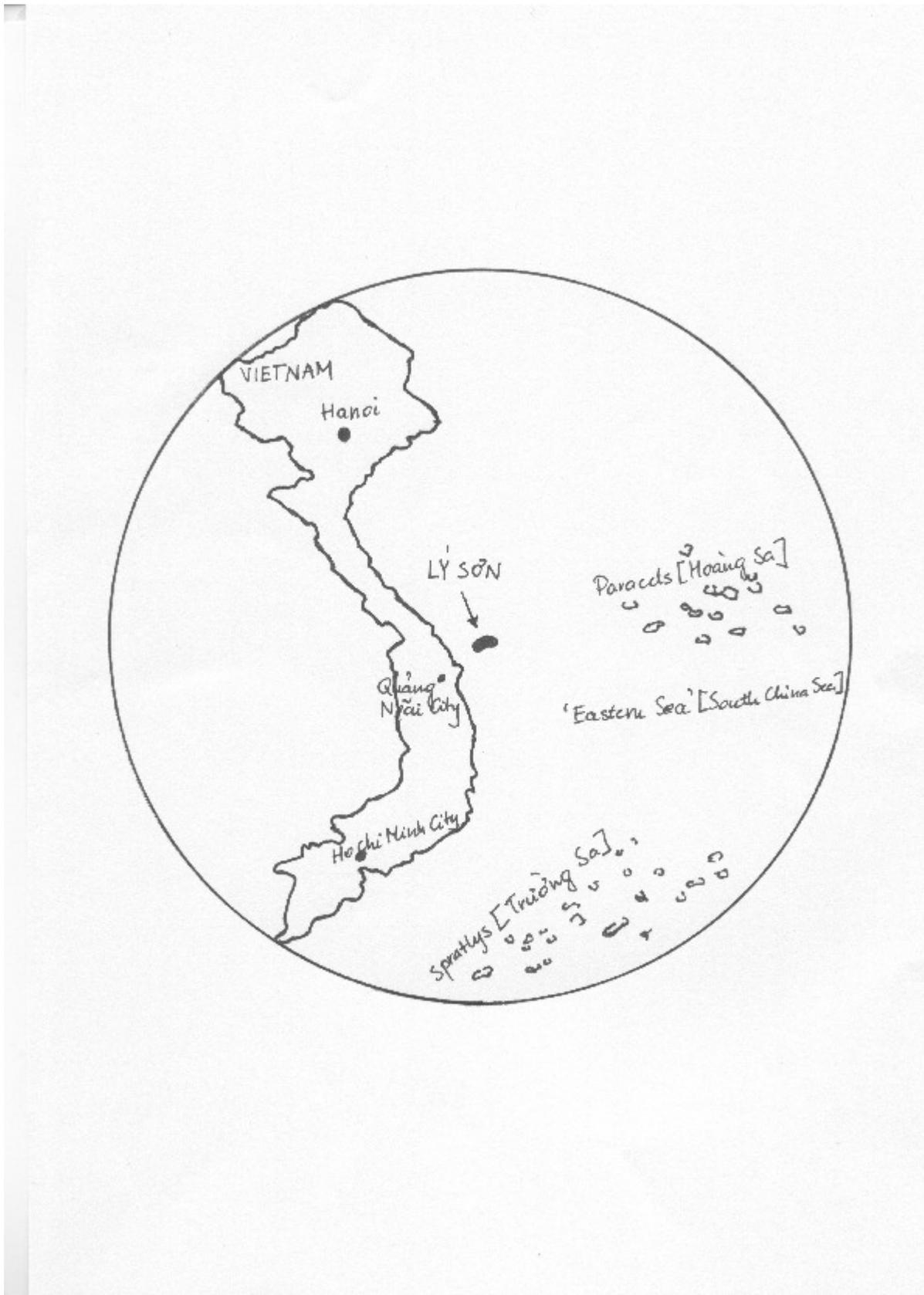
Map. 5 Imaginary map of Vietnam's land and the sea with Lý Sơn in the middle.

7.1　Introduction

This short vignette serves to illustrate how inhabitants of Lý Sơn Island, 30 km off Quảng Ngãi Province in central Vietnam, attempt to project their island as an imagined center of a revised map of the nation's territory in the context of the conflict between China and Vietnam over the Paracels and Spratlys, with repercussions at local, national and international levels. The state's appropriation of Lý Sơn's legacy encouraged villagers on the island to rework some of their local narratives in such a way that they simultaneously support the state claims and their individual, lineage, and communal interests. I tried to visualize this process by drawing the "imaginary" map above on which the Lý Sơn community is placed in the middle of Vietnam's land and the sea, including the Parcel and Spratly Archipelagos. In this way, I focus on the dual processes of appropriation and reworking of national narratives by the island community and its endeavor to create, (re)invent and contest the space by inscribing itself in the center of Vietnam's history and geography. This process cannot be fully grasped without an analysis of the corresponding process of selection of some narratives of the past by the state, which appropriates, modifies and sanctions their specific public meanings (Trouillot 1995).

In his essay on Caribbean history, Michel Trouillot argues that "culture-history" is projected against the background of state power. The state itself is part of the stakes and simultaneously an actor competing for aims which it tries to define (1992: 29). Following Trouillot, I shall argue that "[t]he requisite gap between state and nation creates a field where both homogeneity and heterogeneity are simultaneously created and destroyed" (ibid.). More precisely in Vietnam, the state not only appoints gods and heroes, assigns sacred spaces, and grants certificates in order to nationalize and institutionalize them but also sees religious traditions as one of many possible ways towards national unity (see Chapter 5). Consequently, in this process, the religious landscape takes on a new dimension in which political allegations come to the fore and provoke contestations that may occur in that landscape. As I show, those in specific regions have their own agendas and interpretations of history, which favor local identities over all-embracing state visions (O'Connor 2003: 271). They often adopt conflicting strategies to achieve their goals and defend their interest. I argue my case via an analysis of the Lý Sơn appropriation of state discourse on culture.

In Chapter 6, referring entirely to Sa Huỳnh community, I discussed contestations within and around the religious landscape that occurred in the past. I justified my exclusion of

Lý Sơn by saying that we could learn more about the dynamics of this process by looking at Sa Huỳnh because the First and Second Indochina Wars as well as the anti-superstition campaigns had much more dramatic effects on the mainland than on the island. Conversely, in this chapter, I chose to base my analysis exclusively on Lý Sơn. I reverse my previous argument, through which I substantiated my focus on Sa Huỳnh instead of Lý Sơn, by saying that the process of how a local community appropriates and capitalizes on national narratives in order to reproduce and relocate its locality in a very particular way is more visible in Lý Sơn for two reasons. The first is because of the island's border location and the second, because of the fact that most of the island's religious structures survived the two Indochina Wars, which barely touched the island. This gave both the provincial authorities and the local community a clear stake in recovering the local commemoration of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa sailors and applying for national recognition of this ceremony.

In the first part of this chapter, by honing in on the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa memorials, I demonstrate how contestations over national commemorations intermingle with international and local memories. I shall argue that in Vietnam commemorations constitute powerful projections of representations of the past and have the capacity to shape both local and national memories. In the second part I introduce the competition between various lineages and involvement of provincial authorities in the Hoàng Sa project. This provides background for a more in-depth analysis of strategies undertaken by various lineages to include the figures of sailors—Phạm Hữu Nhật and Võ Văn Khiết—into the provincial pantheon of Hoàng Sa's heroes. Particularly, I focus on the female ancestor of Phạm's kin group—a "potential ghost roaming through the village" —and their attempt to present her as a local heroine. Finally, I analyze why the Phạm lineage's narratives failed to win the provincial authorities and the village's support.

7.2   Islanders as guardians of the Paracels and Spratlys

A more detailed analysis of contestation over the religious landscape has to start by introducing the political context of the official commemorative project of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa, which is grounded in the territorial dispute over the South China Sea. Although the South China Sea is considered one of the busiest sea lanes, and free maritime traffic is vital to the economies of East and Southeast Asia, this sea is claimed by a number of surrounding countries by virtue of the presence of many uninhabited or sparsely inhabited islands and islets. Due to overlapping claims of sovereignty over the islands and their

territorial waters, the Paracels and Spratlys are a bone of contention between China and Vietnam. In addition, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei all claim partial sovereignty there as well; but China is militarily the dominant force and Vietnam its main challenger. The maritime borders between China, Vietnam, and other countries have never been fixed, and, by law, all Vietnamese official maps include the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

Although the small atoll of Lý Sơn lies near the coast—present-day Quảng Ngãi Province—and about 400 km west of the Paracel Islands, in the 18th-century historical documents the atoll's proximity to the Paracels was often noted. The historian Lê Quý Đôn estimated the distance to the Paracels as roughly one day's sailing from Lý Sơn (Lê Quý Đôn 1972 [1776]: 203). In Chapters 2 and 4, I suggested the reason for this discursive connection between Lý Sơn and the Paracels as grounded in the fact that the Paracels historically constituted the fishing grounds of Lý Sơn fishermen, in contrast to mainland fishermen who preferred to stay close to the coastline. Moreover, through the 18th and the 19th centuries specific fishing communities continued to carry out naval activities in the vicinity of the Paracels and Spratlys (see Wheeler 2006). This connection was formalized as the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa flotilla—18th century naval forces from southern Vietnam—and consisted of fishermen recruited from Lý Sơn Island, according to Lê Quý Đôn (1972 [1776]: 210; cf. Hãn Nguyên 1975; Lãng Hồ 1975; Nguyễn Nhã 1975; Trần Thế Đức and Nguyễn Văn Hường 1975; Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2001; 2002c).

In the early 1990s, the Vietnamese state turned its attention towards Lý Sơn Island as a valuable source of information about the soldiers of the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa flotillas. Many of the Hoàng Sa soldiers died at sea and their bodies were never returned to their relatives, giving rise to special ritual and memorial practices on Lý Sơn. Some of their names, however, were preserved in place-names; small islets in the Paracel archipelago bear the names of Captain Phạm Quang Ảnh and Phạm Hữu Nhật, who stood out from others because of their skills and expertise (Sơn Hồng Đức 1975). In 1994 and in 1995, a group of scholars from the Faculty of History of Hanoi National University visited Lý Sơn several times and inquired about the history of the island and the Hoàng Sa navy. In the context of a large-scale project for the preservation of cultural and national "heritage," these scholars visited a number of families, collecting various documents and family records and recording oral histories. The results of the investigations were published by Nguyễn Quang Ngọc and Vũ Văn Quân (1998), who wrote about the role and activities of the Hoàng Sa navy in an article entitled "Sources on the Origin, Tasks and Activities of the Paracel Army" [*Tư liệu về nguồn gốc, chức năng và*

họat động của đội Hoàng Sa]. At the beginning of the publication, they praise the feudal monarchs for their deep awareness of the significance of the Eastern Sea [the South China Sea] and their efforts to protect and extend their possession over the whole region of the archipelagos. The Hoàng Sa navy, which operated in the Paracel and Spratly regions, became an example of Vietnamese control and thus served to legitimate claims on these islands.

Therefore, it is no surprise that, on 3 August 2001, the Vietnamese Prime Minister issued a directive establishing and reconstructing a zone with historical sites [*khu di tích lịch sử*] related to the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa. The purpose was to preserve all places with historical significance for the heritage of the forefathers and for Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos (Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2001). Facing competition from several states, including China, for control over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, the Vietnamese Party-State chose to frame their claims of sovereignty over the archipelagoes not in economic terms but with reference to the historical trajectory of the "nation" and to the emotional ties of the Vietnamese people to their soil (rather than the sea). In early October of the same year, representatives of the National Border Defense Committee and of the Ministry of Culture and Information visited the Lý Sơn District in order to "explore the current situation of all places of historical value" connected with flotillas of the two archipelagos (2001: 31). In the days that followed, a conference was organized in close collaboration with local authorities, including members of the Quảng Ngãi People's Committee, local researchers, and scholars from Hanoi National University. Although the anniversary celebration of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa soldiers was included in commemorative projects, the state preferred to maintain a low profile for these ceremonies, as the whole issue of Paracel and Spratly was highly politicized. Indeed, at the time of my fieldwork in 2007, the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa ceremonies on Lý Sơn still had a low profile, and Lý Sơn Island itself hardly ever appeared on official maps, which did include the Paracels and Spratlys, in spite of the efforts by Quảng Ngãi provincial authorities to present the island not only as a historical treasure trove but also as a potential tourist destination. Although local commemorative traditions attracted the attention of regional media, including Đà Nẵng television which produced several documentary films about the individual lineages' religious observances, I could hardly find any information about Lý Sơn on the internet.

However, with the heating up of the South China Sea dispute, the situation changed dramatically in 2009 as the island became the topic of many internet debates regarding the unexpected "rediscovery" of a cultural and historical legacy "preserved for centuries" by

islanders.[84] Widely publicized in the context of the Paracels and Spratlys dispute, Lý Sơn became a symbol of an imagined long-standing consciousness of protecting the "ancestral lands" in the South China Sea, provoking sentiments of a new-found patriotism in the media, especially among students and intellectuals who staged several peace rallies to demonstrate their national devotion.

Paradoxically, the state commemorative project as well as the national and international attention on the Paracels and Spratlys dispute opened up a new space of possibilities and creativity for both provincial authorities and the marginalized community of Lý Sơn fishermen who began to manifest themselves through the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa project. What drew my attention during my fieldwork was that the Vietnamese state had to face not only international but also local contestations, since the local officials and islanders introduced their own accounts of this emotionally charged issue. The head of the Quảng Ngãi Journalist's Association, along with local historians, archaeologists, and authorities, became officially and personally engaged in the process of recovering historical materials. They then encouraged their kin and fellow villagers to collect all existing written documents that might have historical value and contribute to the reconstruction of patriotic traditions on the island. In spite of the official attempt to keep the campaign of "protecting ancestral lands" in the South China Sea—"East Sea" in Vietnamese—manageable, the project inscribed itself into a wider context of international affairs. Confronted with a large-scale campaign and the tremendous amount of effort that had been put into the task, many lineages did not remain indifferent towards the official initiatives; however, the outpouring of genealogies and documents referring to the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos was not always congruent with official expectations. I will return to this point in the next section of this chapter when I take a closer look at efforts of one of the founding lineages to reaffirm the meritorious service of their female ancestor. Let me now turn to the role of commemorations in the state's cultural project.

7.3   Commemoration and ancestor worship

Commemorations, due to their capacity to shape national memory, powerfully represent the past in modern Vietnam. Claims of continuity with the past, which distinguish commemoration from other ritual forms, place it in a special position among official symbolic

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[84] See http://vietwill.org/index.php/articles-mainmenu-237/historical-documents-mainmenu-227.html, accessed on 7 September 2010.

images (Connerton 1999). Kertzer (1988) argues that contemporary political leaders are eager to use religious rituals and symbols to legitimize their power and engage people in institutionalized and emotional forms of action. In Vietnam, the commemoration of death anniversaries have become a potent tool for politicians and historians to create the past, write narratives about national and revolutionary martyrs, and teach "proper" Vietnamese religious tradition. However, the state deliberately does not allow the majority of local commemorations to turn into national-level events (see Malarney 2007). Instead, the state keeps the number relatively small, while at the same time playing its role as patron of national/local tradition under an umbrella of national progress. The state controls and influences commemorations in various ways: through articles in academic journals, through provincial conferences, by mapping out commemorative locations and by designing the events themselves (Ho Tai 1995; 2001; Malarney 2001; Pelley 2002: 164). This process involves the selection and reshaping of some narratives of the past, while silencing others.

In her inspiring essay, Hue Tam Ho Tai (1995) states that the Vietnamese state exercises complete control over the location, planning, and budgeting of commemorative projects. National monuments result not from confrontations between the visions of ordinary citizens and those of the state but from multivocality originating within the state itself. By contrast, I argue that such confrontations between the state's and the people's views occur at the local level where commemorations of the past are contested. The local narratives can become open to negotiation, as they are products of multivocality initiated by various groups of Vietnamese: local officials, villagers, descendants, and other individuals. As Kwon (2006; 2009) has demonstrated in his study of commemoration in Vietnam, the bereavement of families of civilians killed in military operations has not been acknowledged in national remembrance ceremonies, but it has produced different patterns in the domestic cult of ancestors. The perfection of the killing machinery of modern warfare, the destruction of bodies and the infeasibility of proper burial create all sorts of ghosts who have to be reconciled with the living through family commemorative rites. National history and heroism only have meaning for the people when they are integrated with local history and the genealogical heritage of the community (Kwon 2006: 117).

The Hoàng Sa-Trường Sa commemorative project is inscribed in the Vietnamese discourse on culture and religion. This discourse, initiated by the state, concerns ancestor worship, which is one of those religious practices that has received state recognition as "a national religious tradition" (see Chapter 5). According to the definition by Đặng Nghiêm

Vạn (1998: 246), ancestor worship is "the veneration of those passed away who deserve credit for the generation and nurture of their descendants (…) or who have achieved merit in service to their commune or country." Ancestor worship, he observes, is a long-standing religious tradition of the Vietnamese people, which is deeply rooted in their consciousness, since it represents national custom and is "imbued with a sense of duty" (ibid. 247). Kwon (2006: 104) notes that "the traditional religious institution became the technology of national integration. Imagining the nation-state became a matter of thinking about dead war heroes within the familiar system of ancestor worship." In this light, the traditional cult of ancestor worship has recurred as a "hero-centered political culture," since the state's focus is on the exemplary service of the ancestors, rather than a peaceful afterlife (ibid.). Nevertheless, Vietnamese people take a more egalitarian approach to the dead: the spirits of all ancestors regardless of their merit or contribution, even the ghosts of strangers, all deserve acknowledgement. Therefore, those who are not recognized by the state have not necessarily been forgotten; rather, local officials, communities, and individuals often speak on their behalf. These groups engage in contestations over memory as they attempt to integrate their own narratives into dominant official histories and, thus, to turn their kin or fellow villagers—the "unknown dead," the "wandering souls"—into heroic and meritorious members of their locality. I will elaborate upon this statement in the next section of the chapter by showing how on Lý Sơn Island both the categories of ancestors and ghosts are included in the process of recovering the memory of soldiers of the Hoàng Sa navy.

7.4   Local contestations over memory, meanings and community space

7.4.1   *The competition between lineages*

The prestige associated with historical records of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa resulted in a "commemorative fever" in various lineages in Lý Sơn who began to compete with each other in demonstrating the meritorious and patriotic services of their ancestors and obtaining the official recognition known as "Certificate of Designation of Historical and Cultural Relic" (cf. Ho Tai 2001: 1). Such a certificate provides not only state recognition enabling people to worship their divinities in any way they wish, but it might also bring public funding for restoration and promotion of a particular site as a tourist attraction (see Chapter 5). In Lý Sơn some of the founding lineages employed scholars to write letters to the Provincial Office of

Culture, Sport and Tourism in support of claims regarding the cultural and historical value of their legacy.

One of the most revealing competitions took place between two lineages, Võ and Phạm. Both lineages trace their origin to the first families of migrants who today are venerated in the village communal house as "pioneers" or as "those who first broke the land" (see Chapter 4). The two lineages, both from An Vĩnh village, were proud that their family annals [*gia phả*], which had been preserved, handed down for centuries and re-edited in the process, were taken to Hanoi by scholars and sent to the Institute of Sino-Vietnamese Studies for translation. The originals, containing descriptions of local events, names, and information about the life of respected ancestors, were later returned to the owners after copies were made for the Institute's library. Whereas the Võ lineage had the support of their kin—a provincial official devoted to cultural studies—the Phạm established good connections with well-known historians and local authorities through the lineage's representative, the fifty-eight-year-old Anh (in 2007).

The growing attention of intellectuals and officials helped the Võ lineage to restore their sacred places. In 1997, An Vĩnh villagers put all their efforts into collecting money and rebuilding the temple that the ancestor of the Võ lineage had originally built for the village. Villagers installed altars there devoted to worshipping the founder of the temple, the tutelary spirit, the spirit of the soil, the spirit of *Bạch Mã* [White Horse], and to the Hoàng Sa officer Võ Văn Khiết, just to name a few (see *Map 4 [3]*; p. 99). To obtain the "Certification of Designation of a Historical and Cultural Relic" one has to prove the artistic and historical value of a place or the merit of the ancestor worshipped (Endres 2001: 88). Võ Văn Khiết seemed a perfect fit for all official requirements, and the Võ lineage had all necessary documents to prove Võ Văn Khiết's meritorious service to the village as well as to the country. In the Võ family record, dated 1803, we can read that due to Võ Văn Khiết's virtues he was appointed head of the *đình* by the villagers of An Vĩnh (in Nguyễn Quang Ngọc and Vũ Văn Quân 1998). He was described as a straightforward, honest, diligent, and knowledgeable person. The lineage, together with villagers and with the help of their kin and other local authorities from Quảng Ngãi, prepared the necessary petition. In 2001, the temple was listed in the official report of the Provincial Office of Culture among other monuments for the commemoration of the Hoàng Sa flotilla. The document lists Võ Văn Khiết's temple as a historical site of the Paracels (UBND Tỉnh Quảng Ngãi and Sở văn hoá Thông Tin 2001).

At the same time, the Phạm lineage began their efforts to reaffirm the meritorious service of their female ancestor Lady Roi and her historical value. Although they had not been backed by the villagers, as was the Võ kin-group, in 2003 the Phạm lineage received official permission and support from local authorities of the district People's Committee to apply for recognition of Lady Roi's temple as a historical site (see *Map 4 [20]*; p. 99). A year later while collecting materials for the Quảng Ngãi Museum, the members of the lineage unexpectedly came across additional documents preserved in their ancestral house. The newly discovered credentials included a genealogy [*phổ hệ*], the family record, a charter [*sắc phong*], and altar tablets that not only shed new light on Lady Roi herself, but also on one of the lineage's ancestors, captain of the Hoàng Sa flotilla Phạm Hữu Nhật, after whom one of the islets of the Paracel archipelago is named. With the help of the head of the Quảng Ngãi Journalist's Association, archaeologists from the local museum, historians, and authorities from the province and district, celebrations were held in March 2005 for the unveiling of a commemorative plaque in honor of Phạm Hữu Nhật, who was then officially recognized as a respected ancestor of the Phạm lineage and a soldier of the Hoàng Sa navy. However, the struggle for the certificate was not yet concluded. The lineage continued to look for the support of well-known historians and journalists and even of Đà Nẵng television. The lineage, with such unquestioning supporters, hoped for quick success.

Whereas there was no contestation concerning the heroism of Phạm Hữu Nhật, the attempt by the Phạm lineage to recognize their second ancestor, Lady Roi, met with strong opposition from the members of the Võ lineage, who felt that the Phạm wanted to elevate their lineage over others through the deification and official recognition of their female ancestor. By acknowledging Võ Văn Khiết as a collective ancestor of the whole village, Võ lineage members stressed their self-effacement, which contrasted, they believed, with the more individualistic aspirations of the Phạm lineage, which sought only its own glory. They stressed that Võ Văn Khiết's temple was handed over to the village a long time ago and it was communal rather than lineage property. However, it would be difficult to deny that the official recognition of Võ Văn Khiết contributed to strengthening the Võ lineage status within the local community.

Thus, power struggles between the lineages represent another dimension to the process of recovering local memories. Both the Phạm and the Võ lineages first sought local and genealogical continuity as they wanted to point out that their family members as well as the Lý Sơn people, though spatially distanced from the mainland, had always contributed to the

defence of the nation. National continuity becomes meaningful for them only when incorporated with their lineages' concerns.

The Chinese comparative example shows that in the post-socialist volatile environment, rural Chinese communities began to rebuild their identity around clan, lineage or religious affiliation (Hillman 2004). Susanne Brandtstädter (2003) explains that where a state is unable to create trust, and state institutions failed in reproducing the moral world of a community, new forms of individual and collective morality appear. Investment of resources in gifts, kinship rituals, ancestral halls, and cultural inventiveness connected with the temple reconstruction became an intrinsic part of the process of the restoration of community pride and identity, and above all, of prestige and "kinship relatedness" (Brandtstädter 2003: 435; Hillman 2004). Referring to Northern Vietnam, Hy Van Luong (2003: 216) observes a similar phenomenon when he reports that by the end of the 1990s Vietnamese people actively had established formal organizations to strengthen their own social networks and to fill the vacuum left by the Communist state, which in the post-socialist era partially withdrew from social domains such as health care, education and welfare. Many of those organizations, such as patrilineages and the male-exclusive same-age associations, have been reinvented just recently.[85] My own data are in accord with this statement. Siu (1989), Brandtstädter (2004), and Hillman (2004) rightly point out in the case of China that the ritual revitalization represents the recycling of cultural fragments in a rural society rather than the resurgence of traditional practices. At the same time, however, it is intrinsically connected with kinship conflicts, rural politics and state-village relations as well as with strategies of status maintenance and prestige building. In this process, village rituals are reconstructed by diverse groups of actors and mean different things to different people (see Siu 1989), as I argue in the case of Lý Sơn.

With reference to Vietnam, although many recent ethnographic studies highlight the re-emergence of village "collective identity" through the revivification of village rituals, they

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[85] In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn I came across not only lineage associations but also new organizations such as the Association of Elders [Hội người cao tuổi] known in pre-revolutionary time as the Association of Longevity [Hội bảo thọ]; the Association of Vietnam War Veterans [Hội cựu chiến bình]; and the Committee of Grave-visiting Rites [Ban lễ Thanh Minh], just to mention a few of them. The head of the Association of Elders in Sa Huỳnh stated that these organizations had been formed in the late 1990s and their main purpose was to organize financial and moral assistance for the members' families in case of their death or sickness. Luong (2003: 216) explains that "[i]n its selective emphasis on tradition as an integral part of Vietnamese identity in an age of globalization, the Vietnamese state also became more tolerant of the proliferation or nonpolitical *reinvention* of traditional organizational forms" (emphasis added).

reject the romantic image of the village as a homogenous, co-operative and autonomous entity (e.g., Luong 1992; Kleinen 1999a; Truong Huyen Chi 2001; 2004; DiGregorio 2007). The "collective identity" and "collective response" to the state's changing political, economic and cultural policies result not only from tensions and interfaces between the villagers and the local state but also from debates and contestations between villagers themselves (Truong Huyen Chi 2004: 25). Following the relaxation in cultural policy and the revival of traditional religious practices in Vietnam, it became common for lineage representatives to compete over ritual space, to invent or reinterpret life stories of spirits, to hire scholars to help prepare petitions and/or to ensure right connections with staff of the Ministry of Culture which might smooth the application process for state recognition (Truong Huyen Chi 2001, 2004; see also Endres 2001; DiGregorio 2007; Ho Tai Hue Tam and Lê Hồng Lý 2008). Most of the lineages seek to formulate their efforts of recovery of rituals and religious sites as reconstitution of community space, but it would be misleading to ignore individual interests that lie behind such endeavors.

Truong Huyen Chi (2004: 24) points out that without an in-depth understanding of the particular historical process of a local setting and the relationship between lineages, one could hardly comprehend the complexity of the "deep play" between different groups. Analogically, I argue that by the way Lý Sơn people use their family records and make their argument we can learn how they judge the validity of local histories and how they try to resolve their own lineage's interests (see DiGregorio 2007). As Laura Bohannan (1952) showed in the case of Northern Nigeria, genealogies not only validate present relationships, but they are often modeled on the forms of actual ones. In contrast to African genealogies, which exist mostly in oral versions, Vietnamese family annals are written records; but even in this "rigid form" they remain fluid and change substance in response to current situations. As the example of Lý Sơn community well illustrates, for villagers, obtaining the certificate became not only a source of communal pride but also served as an occasion to display the "meritorious past" of individual lineages and gain financial support for renovation of their temples that could serve in the future as tourist attractions.

7.4.2 *Provincial authorities and their incentives*

Truong Huyen Chi (2004: 130) argues that "local agents of the state act upon its citizens, whose personal and group experiences in a specific historical, local context serve to colour their lenses." Thus, the relationship and interaction between local government and its people

is "an on-going process embedded in the specific historical power structure and ideological frameworks in each locale" (2004: 130). From this perspective we can see how different "clusters of local people unite in collective action that leads to structural changes" meaningful to them (ibid.). In the context of Lý Sơn, parallel to the competition between various lineages, provincial authorities saw a chance to promote their own province and elevate themselves to higher state positions by catering to Hanoi's "official interest" in patriotic traditions on the island. For instance, it is not a coincidence that the former head of the Quảng Ngãi Journalists' Association, and the most active person in the Hoàng Sa project, was given a promotion at least twice over the last few years, finally reaching a top position in provincial administration. He sought to present Lý Sơn as a crucial source of historical documentation supporting Vietnam's claims over sovereignty. As a result, Quảng Ngãi authorities have invested thirteen billion VNĐ (about 500,000 Euros) since 2007 to build the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa memorial on Lý Sơn Island, a project that includes a museum, a restored communal house and a monument dedicated to the Hoàng Sa flotilla.[86] Furthermore, the Provincial Cultural Office decided to "recover" local traditions connected with the Hoàng Sa soldiers and even turned to the Ministry of Culture with the request to give the commemoration ceremonies the status of "national festival." The Quảng Ngãi provincial officials became directly engaged in helping the Võ and Phạm lineages restore their temple, and provided funds for organizing traditional ceremonies related to Hoàng Sa soldiers (see Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2002c). In the same year, the authorities took over all responsibility for preparing the Hoàng Sa Tribute Rituals [Lễ khao lề thế lính Hoàng Sa] from the Lý Sơn villagers who complained that they were deprived of the opportunity to shape the ceremony according to their local views.[87]

On the other hand, the Quảng Ngãi provincial authorities did not linger over local demonstrations of national devotion and, additionally, fueled the flames of a new-found patriotism among islanders by appealing to their consciousness of protecting the ancestral lands of the South China Sea. During the preparatory work for the Hoàng Sa Tribute Ritual Ceremony in April 2010 there were banners stretched across the streets of the provincial capital which announced: "Preserving sovereignty of all island of the South China Sea." The banners were intended as a reference to the Paracel Islands but could also be understood as a

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[86] See Viet Nam Net Bridge. (2009). Islander Honour the Sacrifice of Ancient Sailors Lost at Sea http://english.vietnamnet.vn/reports/2009/04/842823, accessed 20 April 2009; Viet Nam Net Bridge. (2009a). Royal Ordinance on Hoang Sa Proposed for National Recognition. http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/2009/05/846025, accessed 24 June 2009; VietNamNet 1 May 2010, http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/201001/Paracel-and-Spratly-flotilla-preservation-underway-887929/, access on 7 September 2010.
[87] Personal communication from Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm, May 2010.

reference to Lý Sơn itself, since China, according to Vietnam's view, claims all islands of the South China Sea.[88]

In his study of religious revival in Shaanbei, Chau (2006) observes that in the post-socialist context the Chinese local state has increased its power and autonomy noticeably vis-à-vis the central state. Although such a statement might be correct for China, I am not sure it is true for Vietnam. In the past, provinces were often very distant from Hanoi and had a larger space in which they contested, modified or even ignored central government policies (see Chapter 6). However, with new means of communication such as the internet, cell phones, better roads, and off-road vehicles, the Vietnamese central state is gaining a stronger grip on local government. Therefore, even if the local state's interest is vested in the locale, and the local state might behave differently from the central state as Chau argues, I do not think that the local state agents in Vietnam could ignore the central government's directives (cf. 2006: 213).

Yet, at the same time I agree that as in China, in Vietnam local agents take on not only the role of patron of village rituals and practices but also facilitate the re-emergence of specific places as important cultural and historical sites, guaranteeing that these sites would not be perceived by the central government as spreading superstitious cults (see Chau 2006: 213). In light of this argument, it becomes apparent that villagers interact not with the local state per se but rather with individual state agents who are "relatively autonomous from each other" (2006: 213). Using the metaphor of a tree trunk as the state, Chau shows how the local village elite reach and interact with local state agents. He draws attention to the *guanxi* [reciprocal social relations based on gift, giving and patronage, in Vietnamese called *quan hệ*] and calls them "rhizomatic networks" capable of subverting the "mono-organizational" state (ibid: 238). The "guanxi-pulling" relations are like rhizomes of a tree that grow inside and alongside the channels between local state agencies and civic organizations. In this sense, it is up to communities and individuals to work out the "channeling zone" through which they can pay "upward"—their tributes and respect to the local state and capture—and "downward"— official recognition and legitimacy for their ritual spaces (ibid.). This process Chau vividly describes, has been observed by many anthropologists working on Vietnam who argue that local communities are prone to establish good connections with authorities and engage

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[88] Personal communication from Andrew Hardy, April 2010. China claims over 80 percent of the South China Sea ; see for example Michael Richardson "Territorial Claims in South China: LNG deal with KL shows Beijing may be easing off," *Strait Times*, 22 March 2010 http://www.iseas.edu.sg/viewpoint/mr22mar10.pdf , access on 26 August 2010. See also Carlyle A. Thayer "The United States and Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Security Challenges*, vol. 6, no.2. pp. 69-84 (2010).

scholars in order to back their legacy (see DiGregorio 2007; Endres 2001, Ho Tai and Le Hong Ly 2008). As I showed, in Lý Sơn the competing lineages tried to establish their network of social relationships through kinsmen, who happened to be in the local government or were well-known historians or journalists.

In the vignette at the beginning of this chapter I said that Lý Sơn villagers ascribed to me the role of a person who contributed to their success when they obtained national recognition for their village temple. Apparently, I was seen as someone who had access to provincial and even central authorities. However, I was also seen as someone who might constrain or even jeopardize their hard efforts to be granted the state certificate. When I asked An Vĩnh villagers if I could see a spirit possession organized in Âm Linh Tự Temple they debated for weeks about my request, called me from time to time, and informed me about the "progress" of negotiations between them and village elders. In the end, I learned that elders decided not to show me "superstitious" practices. They explained that if the information about "superstitions" taking place in the village temple assigned as "national heritage" reached Hanoi authorities, their petition would be rejected. My presence on the island was useful in promoting the "unique spiritual local culture" but it also appeared to Lý Sơn people that the "alleged benefit" must be carefully calculated. Mbembe (1992a: 5) aptly says that faced with "plurality of legitimizing rubrics, institutional forms, rules, arenas, and principles of combination" people have to mobilize not just a single identity, but several fluid identities which require constant revision in order to achieve "maximum instrumentality and efficacy" when there is a need. Let me now illustrate this point through Anh, the representative of the Phạm lineage, and his effort to mobilize the village and local state support in order to include its female ancestor in the Hoàng Sa commemorations.

7.5   Ghosts of Lý Sơn

In Vietnam, as among the Chinese (see Wolf 1974), ancestors of one kin group can be dangerous to members of other kin groups who may view them simply as "ghosts." Other potentially dangerous ghosts who may threaten not only non-kinsmen but their own family members as well, include those whose lives were interrupted unexpectedly and brutally. They cause a particularly serious problem if their death occurred in an unfamiliar place, out of "the domain of domestic security" and at a distance from the ancestral altar (Kwon 2009: 89). To calm such spirits, Vietnamese people usually build a small shrine, altar or erect a gravestone in secluded areas like the Forbidden Hill in Sa Huỳnh where the grave of Bà Lao is located.

Additionally, the seacoast in the southern part of Central Vietnam is dotted with elevated platforms called *nghĩa trủng* or *nghĩa tự*, which are graveyards for those who also died anonymously, away from their homes but who had merit with the village or the country. Because they "did good" [*làm việc nghĩa*] people fulfill their duties towards them as to their ancestors (Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2006). The soldiers of the Hoàng Sa navy who never returned to their natal villages and whose bodies presumably sank into the deep water of the South China Sea, could be included in this category.

As Lý Sơn people stated, for fear of dying away from home, the Hoàng Sa soldiers going to sea prepared a straw mat, rattan rope, bamboo poles and a small wooden tablet noting their name, age, native village, and designation of their unit. When a man died, his comrades wrapped his body in the mat, attached it to the poles and then lowered it from the boat into the waters in the hope that some of the living would find the beached corpse and give it a proper burial. Most of the time, however, the bodies of soldiers never returned to their kin. The Lý Sơn people, who did not want to leave their loved ones unburied, prepared fitting mannequins and fake graves in order to console the "wandering souls" of those who died tragic deaths (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc and Vũ Văn Quán 1998: 14; Phan Đinh Độ n.d.). According to local accounts, a "village ritual master" or "master of the Dharma" [*thầy pháp*] molded effigies out of clay which were supposed to substitute for the bodies of the Hoàng Sa sailors.[89]

The burial mounds of the Hoàng Sa sailors are still preserved on the island and compose an integral part of the community's remembrance, together with the Âm Linh Tự Temple located in An Vĩnh village (Đoàn Ngọc Khôi 2004). In line with surviving oral traditions and family annals, every second month of the lunar year villagers organized the Hoàng Sa Tribute Rituals (*lễ khao lề thế lính Hoàng Sa*) carried out in the Âm Linh Tự temple. In the past, the ceremony was dedicated to both the living and the dead soldiers. The elders and families of the Hoàng Sa sailors who were assigned by imperial authorities to replace those who died during naval operations offered a leaving feast just before their embarkation. In the framework of the ceremony, a master of the Dharma built a miniature ship with images of sailors, placed offerings on its deck and launched the ship into the sea in hopes that the sailors would return safely (Nguyễn Đăng Vũ 2002c: 56-57).

Finally, a potentially dangerous category of ghosts includes the spirits of virgin girls who died a violent and untimely death. They are thought to be pervaded by memories,

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[89] For the "master of the Dharma" see Chapter 3.

unfulfilled desires, and unrequited lust (Taylor 2004: 201), which make them want to remain among the living. They pose a problem in terms of ancestor worship since they have no descendants to venerate them. If forgotten, they can turn into angry ghosts and harm the living. It is believed that they are especially envious of motherhood and therefore can cause the death of children in their patrilineage or even in the whole village. In turn, worshipped with care, they may also earn reputations for responsiveness and efficacy. Without heeding whether the wishes and requests of the living are good or bad, these spirits grant all of them in return for the satisfaction of their needs (ibid.). Thus, the closest relatives of the dead usually set a separate altar outside the house or even build a small shrine where they commemorate and honor these women by burning incense and offering food in order to achieve peaceful coexistence.

The female ancestor of the Phạm lineage was not the only young women in Lý Sơn who died accidentally. There was another lineage that, like the Phạm, stressed its direct relationship with the founders of An Vĩnh and had an ambition to elevate its female ancestor to the position of village goddess. However, only the Phạm lineage was able to back their statements with a written genealogy. As I already said, in Lý Sơn, the Phạm lineage tried to obtain recognition not only for its ancestor Phạm Hữu Nhật who died violently—the soldier of the Hoàng Sa flotilla whom the Vietnamese state ultimately acknowledged—but also for its female ancestor Lady Roi. I found that the individual Phạm family members had different versions of her story. One of them especially riveted my attention: the version that Anh, the representative of the Phạm Lineage Association, told, based on "recently discovered" annals. Originally written in Chinese characters, the annals date back to the 17th century. The transcribed document, dated 1900, was translated into vernacular Vietnamese by a local specialist in Sino-Vietnamese language [*Hán Nôm*] only in 2004, the same year the document was authorized by an official of the Lý Sơn People's Committee. A lacquered box containing the sacred annals was displayed on an ancestor altar of the lineage temple, protected from unauthorized persons. However, Anh prepared several paper copies of a new modernized version that he displayed whenever someone showed an interest.[90] According to these annals, which Anh unexpectedly discovered in the Phạm's ancestor halls in 2004, Lady Roi was a second-generation descendant of the first migrants and founders of the village who settled on the island in the early 17th century. In those times the coastal regions of Vietnam, including

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[90] *Gia Phả - Hộ Phạm Văn*. [*Family annals - Hộ Phạm Văn*] kept by the Phạm Văn lineage, An Vĩnh commune, Lý Sơn District, Quảng Ngãi Province.

Lý Sơn Island, were allegedly being harassed by "Chinese" pirates who plundered the villages, raped the women and killed the villagers. Lady Roi, only sixteen years old at the time, was a victim of these invasions.

Anh emphasized supernatural events in his story by saying that Lady Roi died on the 15th day of the fifth lunar month of 1645. The moon on the night of the 15th day of lunar months is always a full moon [*rằm*] and on that day Buddhist adherents visit pagodas, burn incense on the Buddha's altar, make offerings for hungry ghosts and refrain from eating meat. Emily Ahern (1975: 206) observed that in Chinese culture, on the 1st and 15th day of each month, every household performed a modest ceremony for ghosts. Especially women took responsibility for worshiping spirits that might cause sickness and other misfortunes if they were not propitiated (1975: 206). In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, I often witnessed this kind of ceremony performed by women in the front of their houses. However, in his story, Anh kept silent about his female ancestor's problematic nature as a ghost and, instead, referred to those aspects of Buddhist tradition which presented Lady Roi as a filial daughter and a symbol of purity and self-sacrifice rather than as a potentially harmful spirit.

According to Chinese and Vietnamese tradition, filial piety is a primary female virtue (see Yü 2001: 466). For example, Quân Âm Goddess represents the Buddhist ideal of filial piety and self-sacrifice motivated by a pure compassion for all beings (2001: 312-347). In popular stories, she often takes on the appearance of a faithful daughter and offers her body in order to rescue or cure her parents. Anh adapted this motive in his story:

> She [Lady Roi] came to the shore as she was looking for her father whom she had tried to warn of the approaching enemy. Surrounded by Chinese pirates she chose death to maintain her virginity and threw herself into the sea.

Anh said that after her death Lady Roi appeared in dreams as sitting in the lotus position similar to Bodhisattva Quân Âm and informed the village about her tragic death by suicide. Quan Âm is believed to save women from sexual attacks and in the case of Lady Roi the suicide served as an escape (cf. Lhamo 2003: 170). In this way, Anh wanted to emphasize that in a critical moment, like Quân Âm, who is considered a "veritable heroine," his female ancestor sacrificed herself for her parent and did not give up long-standing values, the most important components to filial piety such as care, obedience, and moral vigilance (cf. Lhamo 2003: 170).

In his study on popular religion, Taylor (2004: 252) notes that many tales about female spirits in Vietnam describe them as loyal daughters and as virgins who commit suicide when raped, resist marriage when obliged to marry a stranger and remain faithful to their parents, husband (if they had one) or country even after death. Margery Wolf (1975: 112), who studied women and suicide in China, notes that suicide was highly honored by the upper-class Chinese. She gives an example of a woman who took her life because a thief had taken refuge under her sleeping couch. She was awarded a posthumous tablet for "the nobility of her mind" (ibid.). In the context of Vietnam, Taylor (2004: 209) points out that the undefined nature of such women allowed them to be venerated as "spiritual protectors of the sovereign or bearers of the 'national essence.'" In scholarly discourse on culture these female spirits are seen to maintain and represent the core values of the Vietnamese nation, including patriotism and heroism (2004: 252). As mentioned in Vietnamese popular tales, their encounter with an enemy or corrupt state officials usually led them to a heroic death.

Thus, next to traditional morality which glorifies virginity and honor, patriotism and heroism were other important elements of Anh's narratives. He demonstrated that by choosing death Lady Roi not only displayed the enduring virtues of a Vietnamese woman, such as chastity and purity, but she also became an "indomitable heroine" [*anh hùng bất khuất*] having "consciousness of protecting a dear island" [*ý thức bảo vệ hòn đảo yêu quý*]. In his narrative, Anh eloquently combined the supernatural and real and used notions about violent death to show how his female ancestor, the young virgin girl, proved herself an efficacious and responsive spirit during the Vietnam War when her grave served as a hiding place for stolen weapons. In this sense, she gave her protection to the communist guerrillas.

Praise of female heroism is not exceptional in Vietnam. The national heroines—the Hai Bà Trung sisters, who fought against the Chinese—were also introduced as defenders of the "sacred land" of Vietnam in postcolonial narratives. Their bravery and "indomitable spirit" passing from one generation to the next provide, according to official interpretation, an inspiration for Vietnamese women to revolt against the enemy (Pelley 2002: 181). Taylor (2004: 252) notes that the Second Indochina War brought a new image of women as "longhaired guerilas" [*du tích tóc dài*] according to which schoolgirls were seen as patriotic revolutionaries, mothers were considered heroes [*mẹ anh hùng*] because they sacrificed their sons for the revolution and wives were described as virtuous because they stayed faithful to their husbands who had fallen in action. Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004: 52) reports that praising Southern women's revolutionary ability and their contribution to the national struggle, Hồ Chí

Minh rewarded them with the "eight golden words": *anh hùng* [heroic], *bất khuất* [indomitable], *trung hậu* [loyal], *đảm đang* [resourceful]. Anh's narratives inevitably drew on these evocative images of a Vietnamese woman: active and courageous at the front line. In this light we can see the religious landscape as not only politicized, but in its gendered dimensions. However, it is the state that ultimately determines which local heroes suit the best national narratives. I will develop this point in the next sections of this chapter.

7.5.1 Local contestations of the Phạm's female ancestor

Between 2002 and 2006, a number of articles about Lady Roi, the Hoàng Sa soldier, Phạm Hữu Nhật, and about the lineage itself appeared in local newspapers and magazines. Moreover, Đà Nẵng television produced several short films about the Phạm lineage's family rituals. A large campaign promoting the Phạm ancestors in the local press and TV would not have been possible without Anh's diplomatic skills, eloquence, and good connections. Although he was neither head of his lineage nor in charge of the fulfillment of ritual obligations in the ancestral hall, he took on the role of lineage spokesman. His revolutionary past helped him win the support of local officials and well-known public figures, such as the late historian Trần Quốc Vượng among others.

Anh told me that among the members of his lineage there were both those who sacrificed their lives in the two recent Indochina Wars and in the remote past. He had collected all the available materials about his ancestors including the annals, newspaper cuttings, photographs, letters and petitions of famous professors and local authorities of the district and of the province who supported his effort to achieve government recognition. Additionally, the bulky collection titled *The dossier of historical sites of the Phạm lineage* [*Hồ sơ di tích lịch sử - họ Phạm Văn*] included entries of those who have visited him in recent years.[91] Anh also asked me to make an entry in his visitors' book. As a keepsake of my visit, a photo was taken and added to his document collection. Unintentionally, I was seen as a foreign researcher who noticed the "meritorious past" of his family. In his detailed dossier, a copy of which was later given to me, I read:

> Generations of the Phạm lineage and of the people of Lý Sơn are all the more
> pervaded by the significance of history; history is a witness of the era, a candle wick

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[91] *Hồ sơ di tích lịch sử - họ Phạm Văn* [*The dossier of historical sites of the Phạm Văn lineage*]. (2005). Tôc họ Phạm Văn. Vĩnh Commune, Lý Sơn district, Quảng Ngãi Province.

of the truth. The vital power of remembrance enlightens people's lives with the memory and awareness of the past.

In the letters and applications for government recognition of Lady Roi's temple as a historical site submitted by the lineage to the local authorities and to the chairman of Vietnam's Association of Historians in Hanoi, she is, above all, cited as a "virtuous" example [*có đạo đức*], "showing filial piety" [*có hiếu*] and a "symbol of unifying patriotism" [*biểu tượng của thương yêu nước đoàn kết*], "having merit with the nation" [*có công với nước*]. One of Anh's main motivations was to show that members of his family cultivated a "national character" and patriotic traditions for generations. The other aim was to demonstrate the historical and communal value of the temple, where his female ancestor was worshipped. He referred to local solidarity by indicating Lady Roi's "merit with her hamlet" when she "spiritually supported" her fellows during the boat festival competition, which was recreated on the island by the Quảng Ngãi Office of Culture in 2004. Anh maintained that, over time, the temple developed into the public space of the village rather than of the lineage since Lady Roi was respected by the entire community. According to his story, the place was converted from a small shrine into a proper temple by the members of the Phạm lineage and some of the villagers in 1897. He believed that the temple, with an age of more than a hundred years, deserved the rank of historical heritage site. Anh, with the assistance of local authorities, turned for help to a well-known historian, Trần Quốc Vượng, who expressed his support by writing petitions and even taking part in the celebration of the 359th anniversary of the death of Lady Roi in 2004.

However, by 2007, local officials and scholars' interest in Lady Roi had faded. Although there was no contestation concerning Phạm Hữu Nhật, they gradually withdrew their support for Lady Roi as a local heroine and her temple as a commemorative site when hesitations and uncertainty appeared regarding Anh's documentation. From the night of the 15th to the 16th day of the fifth lunar month in 2007, I was invited to take part in the anniversary celebration of her death [*giỗ bà*], and I found it to be much simpler and more modest than the celebration three years previously that had been described to me. There were no guests from the province and I was warmly welcomed as a foreign researcher by the Phạm kin-group. As I talked with the family members, I discovered that they have different, sometimes contrary, versions of her story. Whereas some of them claimed she died during her

encounter with Chinese pirates, others argued that she simply drowned in the sea while collecting algae.

Anh's efforts and the great interest in his family on the part of local state agents, intellectuals, journalists, and even television in previous years were seen differently by the villagers. Some of them felt disappointed, such as those belonging to the other founding lineage that has its own claims through an ancestress who was a contemporary of the Lady Roi. They thought that I could authenticate their claims for governmental recognition and asked if I could intercede for them with the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Quảng Ngãi. Others, like the Võ lineage and their kin, one of whom was working as an official in Quảng Ngãi, were skeptical about the accounts of the Phạm lineage. When I asked why they were so suspicious, they gave an enigmatic reply that there appeared to be strong doubts about the accuracy and authenticity of the Phạm's family annals with respect to Lady Roi and that even provincial authorities had to revise their knowledge on that matter. They also expressed their concern over consequences of potential acknowledgement of the Phạm's ancestress as a divine heroine. They believed that it would embolden the descendents of other lineages to claim a right to the same status for their female ancestor.

The villagers I talked to considered Lady Roi as a Phạm female ancestor rather than a local heroine and denied that they went to her shrine and prayed. They also questioned that Lady Roi lived at the beginning of the 17th century, even if there was no doubt among them that she had indeed existed. They claimed that their very old grandparents remembered her from the time they were children. One member of the Võ lineage doubted whether Chinese pirates operated along the South China Sea coast in 1645, the year of the supposed death of Lady Roi. To confirm his doubts, he took me to the head of the Võ lineage who showed me their family annals in which the first mention of pirates on the island was dated 1789—144 years later than the Phạm documents suggested.[92] The document was translated from Sino-Vietnamese to Vietnamese and authorized by the Institute of Hán-Nôm in Hanoi. The Võ members gave me the annals and pointed out the paragraph where I read:

> Until the sixth day of the tenth month of the Kỷ Dậu year (1789), the year when
> fifteen vessels of Chinese pirates plundered this quarter, the *cụ* [old man] kept all

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[92] According to Murray (1987), piracy emerged in the South China Sea only in the late 18th century. Most of Cantonese-speaking fishermen, who over time intermingled with the Vietnamese, operated as pirates along the border of Kwantung and Fukien Provinces around Hainan Island and in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 1773, the Tây Sơn Rebellion established its rule in Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định Provinces and recruited Chinese pirates, who supported the Vietnamese rebels (see also Kleinen and Osseweijer 2010). It is very likely that those pirates had reached the island of Lý Sơn in 1789 as the Võ lineage argued.

copies of acts. Although all copies of acts were soaked and ragged, the *cụ* even so brought and stored them … [93]

They refuted Anh's version about Lady Roi's reputed death at the hands of the Chinese, claiming instead her accidental death at sea when she was collecting algae. In their eyes, rather than a heroine, she was just a ghostly spirit of a young and childless girl, who might pose a threat to the luck of her descendent if she was not worshiped. Moreover, they believed that their own forms of proof constitute the only valid history which could challenge Anh's narratives and annals.

7.5.2 *A local heroine or ghostly spirit?*

The question arises as to why Anh's narratives failed and did not win the village's support in contrast to that of the Võ lineage. Before I try to answer, let me first refer to the article by Charles Keyes (2002) in which he analyzes what is in many respects a similar story. Keyes reports that in March 1996, thousands of local people of Khorat in Northeastern Thailand gathered around a monument honoring of the memory of Thao Suranari. They wanted to publicly express their outrage against an "insult" to her memory. This hostile reaction from local people, officials, and even military officers was provoked by the publication of a book by a teacher at a local University. The author shows in her book that the national cult of Thao Suranari arose due to a political agenda aimed at making the people of north eastern Thailand see themselves as Thai rather than Lao. What is interesting about this story, to which Keyes directs our attention, is that the Thai author explained in her book how, over the years, the additional meaning of patriotism, regional loyalty, and gender equality were generated within the political framework that dimmed the original story found in archival documents. She called for remembering Thao Suranari as a spirit rather than a national heroine. However, such a postulate was unacceptable for those who wanted to "recall the past only in a service of national unity" (Keyes 2002: 128).

The narrative of Lady Roi seems to be a reverse version of the Thai story. As I showed, by constructing the story about her responsiveness, the Phạm lineage hoped to turn her ghostly spirit into a respected divinity and a local heroine for the entire community of Lý Sơn and even beyond. Lady Roi, who tried to warn her father about the Chinese and, in a critical moment, chose a heroic death, can be interpreted as a metaphor of Vietnam as a victim that

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[93] *Gia Phả - Hộ Võ Văn.*[Family annals - *Hộ Võ Văn*] kept by the Võ Văn lineage, An Vĩnh Commune, Lý Sơn District, Quảng Ngãi Province.

always has to defend its sovereignty and independence. In his story, Anh used the Chinese plot, which was analogous to the contemporary tensions between China and Vietnam and the Vietnamese struggle to prove their claims over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. The Chinese pirates symbolize China's greedy desires for Vietnamese ancestral land. When Anh described his female ancestor as an indomitable heroine having a "consciousness of protecting the dear island," he was referring to the centuries-old tradition of resisting foreign invaders. In this way, he and his lineage also sought to construct and emphasize their own moral and patriotic identity among others.

Therefore, the question about why the Phạm patrilineage failed in its attempt to elevate its female ancestor to the position of heroine should be followed by the next question: can women in Vietnam "stand for" the patrilineage, community, and nation? The Vietnamese ancient history brings a few isolated examples of women, like the Hai Bà Trưng sisters or Bà Triệu, who became national heroines, but their heroism refers to the distant past when Vietnam was not yet "Confucianized" and did not yet conform to the Chinese moral and social organizational model.[94] On the other hand, later, when Vietnam adopted Confucian ethics, popular legends recorded many examples of women who broke rigid Confucian rules and gained autonomous and high positions in society. Recent ethnographic accounts report that many female spirits became increasingly popular among people exactly due to their undefined nature as young, unmarried and as women who died violently (e.g., Dror 2002; Taylor 2004; Endres 2008). However, what really matters here is that most of them were accepted by the state as "goddesses" representing Vietnamese identity rather than "national heroines."

Nguyên Van Ky (2002) notes that during the Second Indochina War hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese women sacrificed their youth and responded to the revolutionary call to fight against Americans. Many of them died and had no time to "savor the taste of love falling into oblivion of history." In turn, those "female warriors" who survived lost the chance for marriage and found themselves "in such a state of moral and material abandonment that they often have had to form a community within the community (village) to cope with the general indifference" (2002: 87). While the sacrifice and heroism of these women were never officially acknowledged, the Vietnamese state recognized the sacrifice of mothers, whose children were martyrs in the Second Indochina War, by giving them an honorary title "Vietnamese Heroic Mothers" [*Mẹ Anh Hùng Việt Nam*]. In this way the state emphasizes the

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[94] For more information about the Hai Bà Trưng sisters or Triệu Thi Trinh see Taylor (1983).

important role of Vietnamese women as mothers and their highest sacrifice for the country—the idealistic militaristic understanding of womanhood glorified by the contemporary Vietnamese state (see chapter 8). As we can see, the state also determines which female heroines would suit the best national narratives.

Despite Anh's efforts, Lady Roi's experience did not lie within the Paracel and Spratly commemorations' ambit and did not fit into the dominant narratives of national heritage. Ultimately, she "did not chase away the Chinese," she was not accepted by provincial authorities and villagers as a local heroine because "she did not do anything," "she just died." She behaved according to gender expectations and the Confucian ideology, which was "normal" rather than "extraordinary" behavior. By suicide she resisted rape and saved the honor of her lineage, but it was not enough to consider her act a "heroic and meritorious death" for the sake of the collectivity. Thus, Lady Roi's death was seen by villagers rather as a sacrifice for the lineage than for village or nation.

In contrast to the "problematic" sexuality of women that—from the viewpoint of Confucian ethics—if not carefully controlled and guided might bring shame for a family and a whole lineage, men conform more easily to the cultural ideal of the "meritorious dead," and can thus become the embodied model for celebrating the nation. Anh's ultimate failure in his campaign to seek recognition for Bà Roi shows that only male ancestors of the Võ and Phạm lineages were accepted, and acceptable. In Vietnam's neo-Confucian kinship model, only men can be full-fledged members of the patrilineage—girls were expected to leave their paternal patrilineage and marry into their husband's patrilineage while remaining marginal at best—and hence only male figures can embody not only the lineage interests but potentially also the broader interests of the community—this, in the eyes of those who wished to recenter marginal Lý Sơn Island in Vietnam's imagined geo-body. By integrating the familiar, gendered system of ancestor worship with reference to the sacrificed Hoàng Sa soldiers into the national narrative, Lý Sơn villagers as well provincial authorities sought to restore the version of "collective identity" of the community that better fitted into the frame of "national heritage."

7.6   Conclusion

In the end, the question is not whether Anh's narratives about Lady Roi are truthful but what his narratives say about the past as well as about the present, and how the past is remembered, preserved and reconstructed in the present. As we have seen, Lý Sơn people do not remain

indifferent towards official politics and international dimensions of controversial disputes and they have strong opinions about them. Moreover, the relation between the official notions of the government and the people's views is complex but does not imply a strict separation of the two domains. They are closely interconnected: the people respond to the state political ideology, act on their own behalf and influence other people and events which, at the same time, help them to understand and reconstruct their own memory.

As I argue, the state notions do not simply clash with the people's view, but rather provoke reconstruction of their memory in more desirable terms. The process of constructing the present and the past is not about "what happened" but about how "it may be understood" (Toren 1988: 696). Local officials often play a crucial role in the course of "historical production" as they are members of the village and lineages. Moreover, despite their attempts to follow official ideological directives, villagers have personal preferences and prejudices that affect the process of recovering local memorials. Villagers reframe, rethink and reshape national narratives according to their own culturally constituted desires. Recovering credentials of various lineages suggests that villagers too have begun to play a more active role, insofar as they are responding to state narratives. They do not just react to the state cultural policy but have their own project in mind. Yet, the examples of the Võ and Phạm lineages show that remaking the past is not a peaceful process strengthening local or national unity, but a process in which conflicts and antagonism come to the fore, as various groups and individuals confront one another with variable memories, understandings, and interpretations of history. However, such confrontation is restricted to specific fields of negotiations, defined by both the state and local initiatives, while other parts of ancient and contemporary history are passed over in silence.

In Chapter 1, following Ingold (2000) I drew attention to the "temporal" character of the landscape by arguing that landscape is not only a space but also has a time dimension through its multilateral engagement with the past, the present and the future and through its recreation in ritual and local narratives (cf. Bender 1993; Hirsh 1995). In this chapter, I took this argument further and showed that the religious landscape is not only historically and politically but also *gender-constructed*. In Lý Sơn, the multifaceted interaction between modern cultural policies of the state and traditional customs generated a creative array of encounters with the ghosts of those who died as Hoàng Sa soldiers or just as young, childless women, such as Lady Roi. By integrating the familiar system of ancestor worship with reference to the sacrificed Hoàng Sa soldiers into the national narrative (cf. Kwon 2006), Lý

Sơn islanders attempted to relocate their marginal island to the center of Vietnam's land-sea map. At the same time, they sought to rework their narratives in such a way that it helped to back their lineage claims. Anh adapted his narratives about the "heroine" Lady Roi to official versions and gave them their own meaning. He emphasized the continuity with the past, which plays such an important role in the state discourse. But the continuity, he stressed, refers to his lineage, his village, and his island. In the terms of blood relation, he shows that the "revolutionary spirit" dates back to the origins of his family and has been maintained over generations. His ancestors came to Vietnam's defense whenever the country called them. Moreover, the service to the fatherland was not only a male matter: exceptional courage also characterized the women of Anh's family. However, as we have seen, in contrast to his male ancestor Phạm Hữu Nhật who was acknowledged by the state as a "hero of the Hoàng Sa," Anh's female ancestor Lady Roi did not gain this honorable status. According to neo-Confucian ideology she was just a ghostly spirit whose experience did not serve to broaden the official agenda of "national and cultural heritage."

Provincial officials' earlier support and later reservation regarding the inclusion of Lady Roi and her temple into the commemorative project of the Hoàng Sa navy shows that the central state, which faces international and local negotiations, tries to control and shape the commemorations as well as keep them small. These commemorations underline the connection of the modern state with the glorious rulers, with the history of "resistance," and with the struggle over Vietnam's sovereignty and autonomy rather than their continuity with the lineage, village, or the island. Similarly, the state makes a selection of those narratives of heroism and chooses those figures whose celebration suits the dominant history best. The state, aware of the social power of commemorative rituals, did not allow female spirits to become a part of national anniversaries. On the other hand, local state agents have an influence on the state project. In the case of the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa anniversaries, following both the official political line and their own preferences, they deliberately select oral histories, issue articles, hold conferences, and assign spaces that, taken together, recover and reconstruct the remote past in a desirable way (see Endres 2002; Truong Huyen Chi 2004; Chau 2006; DiGregorio 2007). As I demonstrated, narratives of women's heroism are relegated to the specific fields that would not gain public recognition. The state commemorations are supposed to collectively venerate those whose bodies were lost in the South China Sea, whose names sank into oblivion while their bravery and heroism are still worth remembering. However, as we have seen, for those who live in the present this is not

enough. They want the evoked ghostly spirits to become the flesh and blood of their kin—both male and female—and have their names carved into stone forever. This calls for a separate analysis of how in real life women deal with male exclusive claims to the religious landscape. The answer comes in the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Even the Goddess Has To Follow the Progress of Modern Society": Women's Religious Practices

Figure 8. Women on the way to Thiên Y A Na Goddess temple, Sa Huỳnh, 2006

One incident that happened during the local ceremony for the Goddess Thiên Y A Na confused me for a long time. Before going into the field as an ethnographer, I had prepared myself with extensive reading on ritual intensification and the growing role of religion in rural areas of Vietnam and China. But what I witnessed on the Forbidden Hill in Sa Huỳnh contradicted all my dry knowledge on religious revival and by no means resembled what, in my naivety, I expected to find in my field setting.

In my field notes I kept silent on the most embarrassing part of the local rite, not really knowing how to interpret the whole event. In my notes I recorded the date of the 31ˢᵗ of December according to the lunar calendar and the Chicken Ceremony [lễ cúng gà] performed by six men in the Thiên Y A Na temple in Sa Huỳnh. I noted that although the men were accompanied by one woman, the forty-two-year-old Hảo, it was largely a male affair. Some of the men performing the ritual were summoned by the head of the vạn just before the ceremony started. They had a limited acquaintance with the ritual procedures which was a source of worry for the head of the vạn, who could not carry out the ritual due to a recent funeral in his family. According to local beliefs, death—next to female menstruation—is one of the most polluting events disrupting human relations with gods.

The whole ceremony took place before the Lunar New Year with the intention to thank the Goddess for the passing year and to ensure "good weather and wind" for the year to come. Although she was believed to have left the temple and lost her power, fishermen still held the main ceremony according to the old tradition. Men sometimes called her the "Goddess of the Past," referring to her previous powerful status.

In my field notes, I scrupulously listed ritual offerings prepared by women: sticky rice [xôi gạo], *boiled chicken* [gà luộc], *plain rice gruel* [cháo], *bananas* [chuối], *sweets* [kẹo], *dry pancake* [bánh tráng], *sugar* [đường], *rice liquor* [rượu], *betel* [trầu], *cigarettes* [thuốc lá], *incense* [hương], *and paper gold* [vàng mã]. *The last note in my field notes, "no flower"* [không có hoa], *referred to the disappointment of the head of the vạn who complained that the women forgot about this important item. He expressed his worry that the Goddess would not be willing to listen to their praying without flowers. Having no other choice, the old caretaker of the temple left an empty vase on her altar.*

Finally, in my field notes I noted "flu chicken" [gà cúm] which was a coded reference to the most confusing incident, which at that time I did not know how to interpret. Soon after the men started to arrange the offerings on the altar, they found that something was wrong with one of the chickens prepared by the women. Instead of fresh shiny yellow, the skin color

was matte and blue. The men examined the chicken carefully and reached the conclusion that, apparently, the chicken was spoilt. It probably was sick before it was even killed and cooked. They looked at each other with astonished expressions on their faces, and after a short consideration and hesitation put the chicken on the altar and started the ceremony. When the ceremony was finished, Hảo took the offerings from the altar, put them on the plates and distributed them among the men. However, the suspicious chicken was put aside.

I was sitting in the boat on the way back through the channel when the old caretaker with other men took the spoilt chicken out of the plastic bag and threw it with disgust into the water. They did not want to comment on it, but told me that the chicken was not fresh and it was better not to eat the meat. It seemed that the men did not attach great significance to the event, but for me it was the first time I had ever seen Vietnamese people throw away offerings, which generally were believed to be sacred after the worship. At that time, I thought that the ceremony was a parody. In my head I played with Vietnamese words, "cúng gà [literally, worship with chicken], gà cúm [flu chicken]… cúng gà gà cúm … equals cúng gà cúm [the ceremony for the flu chicken]…" but I did not dare say it out loud.

The "flu chicken" episode came out of the blue and I did not know how to link it either with the villagers' stories about their alleged fear of the Goddess' punishment, or with the concern of the head of the vạn *who was so careful not to offend the deity with his "polluting" condition, even restraining himself from performing the ritual. Neither could I make any sense of how the "flu chicken" fitted into ethnographic accounts of growing ritual expenditures during the religious revival in Vietnam. How could women be so careless and choose a sick chicken to offer the Goddess? Were they not afraid of her punishment? These thoughts raced through my mind, as I sat in the boat.*

8.1   Gendering religious practice in Central Vietnam

This chapter is intended as an in-depth analysis of women's religious practices that are played out against a backdrop of male exclusive claims to the religious landscape in the littoral society. I offer some ethnographic stories from female perspectives and present religious activities as seen by women. Male hegemony in the littoral society is not a monolithic category but rather it is contested by women who challenge gender conventions and work out their own way through heavy discourses on traditional morality and "local productions" of femininity and masculinity (Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004: 6). Until now, women appeared in the individual chapters briefly and incidentally as petty traders and wives of men who played important political roles in the local community. If a woman occupied a central position in my analysis this was only due to her ambiguous status either as a goddess or a ghost. In the male perspective, such women were confined to the orthodox Confucian ethic and depicted as "virgins" and "virtuous," "loyal" and "obedient" daughters and wives. In the previous chapter, I showed that although Phạm's female ancestor, Lady Roi, proved to have all the desirable female virtues and conduct required by Confucian ideology, ultimately that was not enough to earn her recognition as a local heroine. She *just* behaved accordingly to gendered expectations. Her death by suicide saved her lineage's honor but did not equate "heroic collectivity."

This chapter aims to deconstruct the conventional imaginary which portrays a woman as an "example of virtue" but refuses her any agency and power to decide her future (cf. Ortner 1995, 2001, 2006). Instead of virtuous daughters, I offer alternative narratives of women of "flesh and blood" engaged in confrontation with local standards of sexuality and gendered ritual roles. By presenting women as important actors in the local arena of village affairs, I want to give them the last word in my analysis of multi-faceted contestations over the religious landscape. At the same time, I cannot escape the fact that some of the female experiences were part of my own experience. Thus, writing about women and analyzing their perspectives, I am also forced to write about my own experience.

Exploring vernacular expressions of religion through political, historical, and economic aspects of male activities, I might give the impression that I fell into the trap of accepting the public ritual hegemony of men and their dominant role in the religious landscape of the littoral society. Indeed, for the duration of my entire fieldwork in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, men were those who guided me through the local landscape of village affairs, who had an interest in me as a foreigner and with whom I spent many hours discussing local

events, politics and religious matters. Women simply assumed that it was the men's job—as those who held the knowledge of the place—to familiarize me with the local landscape.

Women did not consider themselves inferior, though in contrast to Northern Vietnam they remain socially and "religiously disadvantaged" *vis à vis* men who hold important political positions and perform community-level rituals (cf. Kirsch 1985: 304). As we could observe in the previous chapters, men in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn monopolized the most prestigious religious roles—including ecclesiastical positions—in village temples, carried out ancestral and communal house rites and reserved for themselves the role of defining religious orthodoxy. While male descendents of the lineages were acknowledged, Lady Roi was not recognized as a heroine. Women neither claimed the rights to these posts nor showed that they felt excluded or disrespected. However, it would be wrong to think that they sat by quietly and remained silent and obedient. From their marginal position, women added their witty and sharp commentaries on male authority. These commentaries in a subtle way disrupted male narratives and grabbed my attention because they transgressed the limitations on the women imposed by the men.

Although in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn male ritual practices represented the "most articulate, codified and commendable aspects" of local religious life, should we assume that men are more religious than women and thus deny women's religious agency (Kendall 1985: 30; see Ortner 1995, 2001, 2006)? According to my observation, women actively entered—though to a limited extent—the public religious domain with their own interpretations of conventionally accepted religious beliefs (cf. Kendall 1985: 24-25). However, there were important limitations which I wish to point out. Lý Sơn Island with its impressive legacy of village temples, including the village communal house, with a "lenient" cadre and a historically "mild" anti-superstition campaign, preserved a much stronger gender division of ritual roles than mainland villages of Sa Huỳnh. Lý Sơn men continued to play a role in defining communal house orthodoxy although women significantly contributed to the reconstruction of the ritual economy. Nevertheless, I have never encountered a Lý Sơn woman crossing the doorstep of communal village temples, while in Sa Huỳnh the no-female taboo was broken by women who took advantage of male notions about spiritual impotency of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na and entered her temple to make simple Buddhist offerings and burn incense. That is why in this chapter I focus on Sa Huỳnh. Religious activities of women in Sa Huỳnh shed an interesting light on the ongoing process of redefinition of gender ritual

roles in the littoral society and give us a more complex picture of various dynamics of ritual life in post-Socialist Vietnam.

The event described in the vignette above gives us a sense of women's varied possibilities for influencing men's affairs, possibilities that men could hardly predict or comprehend (cf. Tsing 1993: 205). In the process of defining local orthodoxy through subtle indiscipline and refusal of male domination, women seek to give voice to their visions of religious practice (cf. Mbembe 1992a; Tsing 1993; Malarney 2002: 207; DiGregorio 2007). However, I do not see women's transgressions in terms of overt resistance to male-dominated religious ideology and practice because women did not usurp the space of the men's ritual performance. By examining various strategies women adopted to challenge local conventions, I argue that rather than resist, women inserted their religious practices and notions into the male-dominated religious domain. As Tsing (1993) showed in her ethnography of Meratus, women rework the structure of the dominant male discourses, reconfigure conventional local knowledge of the world, humans and gods and destabilize those who remained in the centers (Tsing 1993).

In the following analysis I explore from two different perspectives the question of how women refuse male domination, escape from difficult social situations and resolve the mental and emotional consequences of conflicts they face in everyday life. First, I will look at the pre-revolutionary division in ritual roles in order to provide a historical and political background for the subsequent analysis, which deals with a post-revolutionary redefinition of women's status. The second perspective focuses on Sa Huỳnh women's interpretation of gender and religious practices and their subtle strategies to cope with their marginal status and daily concerns. As the vignette indicated, the linked "asymmetries" of social status, gender and spiritual hierarchy are not monolithic categories, but in everyday practice, they intersect and shape each other (cf. Tsing 1993; Kirsch 1985).

8.2   Pre-revolutionary gender divisions in ritual life

In the case of the Thai society, Kirsch (1985) argues that there was a notable sexual division of labor: men performed political-bureaucratic roles while women specialized in economic-entrepreneurial activities which did not have a positive Buddhist valence. In the light of Buddhist ideology, women were seen as much more attached to the world than men, not only due to their gender roles as "lovers" and "mothers," but also to their contact with money (see

also Keyes 1984) [95] Like in Thailand, in Vietnam women focused on economic-entrepreneurial activities that not only sustained their households' budget but often enabled men to concentrate on studying in pursuit of political-bureaucratic careers (Luong 1998, 2003). Luong (2003) notes that Vietnamese women historically played a fundamental role in the Vietnamese economy and in generating substantial household incomes through commerce, handicraft production and agriculture. The remark by an astonished 17th century Chinese traveler to Hanoi that "even wives of high-ranking mandarins were not concerned about losing face [through their trading activities]" well illustrates that trade was a domain of women (in Luong 2003: 202).

Following Malarney (2002), it is correct to say that the position of women in the Vietnamese family is similar to families in Southeast Asia since women always have been engaged in production and responsible for the household finances. I would add, however, that gender roles are much the same as those in East Asia. Despite women's major roles in economic-entrepreneurial activities and contributions to a family budget, Vietnamese public life, kinship and household systems were strongly male-oriented (Luong 2003: 202). Women's lives were controlled by the Confucian ideology that guided women in terms of "housework," "appearance," "speech" and "conduct" (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 50). The orthodox Confucian texts acted as "practical tools to assist parents in teaching daughters appropriate feminine behaviour" and instructed women about desirable female virtues and conduct (ibid.). A woman's duty was to ensure the happiness and well-being of her family through her self-sacrifice and self-cultivation as a filial daughter and well-mannered wife.

As in China or Korea, Vietnamese women left their kinship setting and entered their husbands' patrilineage as strangers. They could secure their position in a family by giving birth to a son who extended the husband's patrilineage and by raising healthy children who would take care of them in their old age. Women were largely denied access to Confucian education, to official positions in the national mandarinate or in local village administration, not to mention that they were forbidden from entering the village communal house—đình—and excluded from local tutelary deity worship (Luong 2003: 202-203; see also Malarney 2002; DiGregorio 2001, 2007). Female religious activities were mainly restricted to local Buddhist pagodas and spirit-medium cults. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that to

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[95] Although, in contrast to Theravada Buddhism, in Vietnam Buddhism allowed women to enter monkhood, it nevertheless reproduced male hierarchy and contributed to views that saw women and men diametrically opposed (see DiGregorio 2001: 193).

ensure the safe birth and long life of sons women often turned to the world of spirits in order to seek spiritual assistance (see Kendall 1985: 35).

8.3 Socialist redefinition of women's status and the Party-State's attempt to institutionalize gender equality

8.3.1 *Redefinition of traditional feminine qualities*

In Vietnam, the attack of the Party-State on the village religious domain—in which male-oriented kinship played a major role—was followed by undermining patrilineages through collectivization of land, granting equal inheritance rights to both sons and daughters, replacement of ancestor worship with national commemorations and giving women access to education (Luong 2003). Especially, the Confucian traditional ethics which strictly confined women to the domestic sphere had to be reformulated during the war years. Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004: 52) reports that in its effort to mobilize masses to serve the cause of national liberation, the Party-State reformulated the values of Vietnamese femininity and encouraged women to break away from the strict Confucian family ideology. The Party initiated a number of movements like "moral Education of the New Woman" in order to educate young women to become the "new socialist woman" (2004: 52). As a result of the Party's appeal for women's active participation in both production and revolution, the traditional Confucian values did not mesh with the image of the "new socialist woman" that the Party promoted in the time of revolutionary zeal (ibid.). Ngo Thi Ngan Binh notes that in the context of war, a "woman with masculine behaviour—loud-spoken, straightforward, self-assertive, competent in fighting, and fearless of risk—was acceptable and even praiseworthy" (ibid.).

However, in the post-war period, and particularly in the period of *Đổi Mới*, emphasis on female military participation became irrelevant since women were encouraged to contribute to the national economy and development. Paradoxically, in its implementation of the new cultural policy, the Party-State returned to a more traditional Confucian formula. In consequence, the previous socialist rhetoric glorifying female military participation and women's revolutionary abilities have been gradually replaced with traditional feminine qualities such as loyalty, gentleness, elegance, tactfulness and resourcefulness that respond more adequately to a new image of a "proper contemporary Vietnamese woman" (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 53).

8.3.2 *Redefinition of ritual gender roles*

Despite the Party-State's self-glorification as a propagator and patron of gender equality, the Vietnamese revolution did not change the fact that women bore the main responsibility for their families' well-being. Women still sought solace in the spirit world and engaged in religious practices like the Mother Goddess cult or Buddhist worship in order to eliminate misfortunes and deal with crises of everyday life (Malarney 2002: 82). Malarney (2002: 102) points out that women preserved religious ideas and practices in spite of the socialist transformation. Many of them rejected the Party's cultural reforms and held Buddhist rites or spirit possessions under the veil of secrecy. As a matter of fact, in contrast to men who were more integrated into the Party, women remained outside of the political power structure, which allowed them to practice religion without serious repercussions. On one hand, women's strong attachment to religion earned them negative labels such as "superstitious," "traditional" and even "backward." On the other hand, as Malarney stressed, in the present day women are considered to be more specialists than men in the ancestor cult, which supports Nguyễn Tuấn Anh's (2010) thesis on significant changes in kinship relations.

Nguyễn Tuấn Anh's (2010: 39) recent research in rural settings of Northern Vietnam shows a noteworthy shift in gender roles: since the *Đổi Mới* period women crossed the gender divide and were allowed to sit in patrilineage councils or even to become members of the patrilineage, formerly an exclusive male-only institution. More importantly, Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (2010: 225) points out that the change in women's position took place in relation to the changes in kinship relationships. As I have already noted above, in the pre-socialist period, married women formally were not full members of any patrilineage, hence, their position in kinship structure was marginal. In the socialist transformation period women gained the same rights to education and to participation in the collective system of agriculture and industry as men, while the material and ideological foundations of male-oriented kinship were undermined (cf. Luong 2003: 204). In the *Đổi Mới* period, with the resurgence of the kinship system, women gained more economic opportunities that enabled them to become patrilineage members "in their own right" (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010: 225).

Nevertheless, it would be too optimistic to conclude that the Party-State attempt to make women equal to men eradicated gender inequality, as the male-oriented kinship model remains powerful in shaping gender relations. In fact, complete equality between men and women "may hold rhetorically, but less completely in practice" (Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004: 8, see also Luong 2003). Let me illustrate this with a short example. During my visit to

all districts of Quảng Ngãi Province I noted only one case when a woman held one of the highest positions in the local administration, namely as chairperson of a district [*chủ tịch huyện*]. It is worth mentioning that it was a frontier district in the mountainous area and the woman was of Hrê ethnic background, which might suggest that male dominance in and women's exclusion from politics is largely an ethnic Kinh affair. This exception, however, proves the rule that women in Vietnam remain marginal to men and usually do not hold important political positions in local official administrations heavily dominated by men (Malarney 2002).

8.4 Women and the religious landscape in the littoral society

In the two previous sections I charted changes in women's social status within family and Vietnamese society at large brought about by the socialist transformation and the postsocialist reforms. Pointing out a significant shift in gender-constructed relationships such as the patrilineage system, I referred to Malarney (2002), Luong (2003) and Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (2010). However, all these authors drew heavily upon findings in Vietnamese communities of Northern Vietnam. Therefore, I hope that my analysis of Sa Huỳnh women's religious practices will cast some light on gender relations in Central Vietnam and women's role in contestations over the religious landscape as well as complement previous studies on this topic.

The pre-revolutionary situation of women in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn was much the same as in other parts of Vietnam. In the land-based villages women were excluded from worship in the *đình*. A similar ritual prohibition was maintained in the sea-oriented fishing communities—*vạn chày*. In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn not only were the communal houses or the Whale Spirit temples typically confined to men, but also the Thiên Y A Na temples. Spirit possession for Thiên Y A Na, called *lên đồng*, was an exclusively male affair involving the village master of the Dharma who, through secret formulas, captured and forced a selected spirit to "ride" a suitable person during a séance. This village master was not possessed by the spirits but played the role of mediator between divinity and the spirit medium whose body [*xác*; literally meaning "corpse"] served as a vessel for supernatural beings.

The fact that spirit possession for Thiên Y A Na in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn was a male affair stood in sharp contrast with the colorful and cheerful types of possession rituals performed in the majority of cases by women in other parts of Central Vietnam. As I noted in Chapter 3, the cult of the Goddesses Thiên Y A Na—popular all over Central Vietnam—for

the most part spread in the imperial period among upper-class women in Huế who acted as spirit mediums for this goddess (Nguyễn Hữu Thông 2001; Salemink 2007; 2008a). Nguyễn Hữu Thông (2001) explains the great popularity of the cult of the Goddesses Thiên Y A Na among these women by the fact that this group in a traditional Vietnamese society experienced particular difficulties in bearing pressures from her husband's family. Therefore, he sees possession as women's compensation for social deprivation and a way out of the impasse between social expectations of them as women and their personal aspirations, preferences and interest as individuals (Nguyễn Hữu Thông 2001).[96]

To my knowledge, in Sa Huỳnh, the spirit possession cult for Thiên Y A Na was disrupted in the 1960s when the Forbidden Hill was appropriated by the American forces and completely abandoned after 1975 during the anti-superstition campaign launched by the Communist government (see Chapter 6, see also *Map 2 [9]*; p. 90). Apparently, the provincial authorities were aware of existence of this practice in the past. One of the editors of a cultural magazine of the Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Quảng Ngãi City told me that the caretaker of Thiên Y A Na's temple in Sa Huỳnh was a very skilful spirit medium, but under strong pressure by local authorities and in fear of being accused of superstition (and of being sent to the re-education camp), he had already given up the practice by the 1970s and refused the editor's recent request to organize a séance. This is congruent with my own experience in Sa Huỳnh. I have never come across this type of possession performed in the Thiên Y A Na temple. Villagers claimed that it was not practiced anymore, which might be true taking into account the newly powerless status of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na in Sa Huỳnh.

Sa Huỳnh villagers reported that by 1975 the Thiên Y A Na temple had been reserved exclusively for men. When the Goddess still held power, she had a reputation of being fierce and violent to such an extent that even men did not have the courage to approach her alone. This had to be done with the assistance of the temple's caretaker or ritual master. Women were believed to be particularly ostracized by the Goddess Thiên Y A Na and banished from entering her temple due to their "uncleanness" associated with menstruation and female sexuality.

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[96] For spirit possession see, for example, Lewis (1966, 2003), Kendall (1985, 1996, 2009), Van de Port (2005); for Vietnam see Durand (1959), Cadière (1955-1957), Nguyen Thi Hien (2002), Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (2006), Endres (2007, 2011), Salemink (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010), Norton (2009) and Pham Quynh Phuong (2009).

While in Northern Vietnam the beliefs surrounding female "pollution" are not binding anymore, in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn these beliefs still remain strong and sustain male ritual hegemony. Especially in Lý Sơn, menstruating and pregnant women are not allowed to approach temples or have contact with the village gods. Consequently, men are the ones who performed the act of worship. The presence of menstruating women is believed to disrupt the rituals to such an extent that mediums might not be possessed and divinities could give misleading information or even cause harm.[97] A similar taboo on women's participation in village rituals existed in China. According to Ahern (1975: 196), pollution beliefs were intimately connected with the Chinese kinship system. Death, birth and menstruation were seen as pollution because they transgressed the bodily boundaries (cf. Douglas 1966: 122). Ahern (1975) declares that women were perceived as particularly "unclean" because they have a boundary position in families. Given that the kinship system focused on male lines of descendents, women were depicted on the boundaries breaking in as strangers. In this sense, they were perceived as polluting and disrupting the relationship between gods and humans (1975: 204).

Although I was the only woman on the island who was allowed to enter the village temples, take part in rituals, sit on the mat and join communal feasts, each time I was asked by elders whether I was "clean" [*sạch sẽ*]. Men warned me that I should leave the temple if I was not. Understandably, they were troubled by the incertitude of whether I, as a woman and hence potentially polluting, spoke the truth about my bodily status at the time of the ritual.

In Lý Sơn, I was also fortunate to see the male rituals of spirit possession taking place in the Thiên Y A Na temple in An Hải village (*Map 3 [8]*; p. 98). The performance I saw was quite different from the style I know from Northern Vietnam or Huế.[98] In Lý Sơn, spirit possession for Thiên Y A Na was devoid of aesthetic elements like music, dance or sophisticated costumes and it was a secret business that involved only a few insiders. I was surprised to discover that the ritual senior of the Thiên Y A Na temple and, at the same time, a descendent of one of the founding lineages served as the spirit medium. During a séance held in the temple, he sat in front of the Thiên Y A Na altar and was covered with a red scarf. When the séance started the village Master of the Dharma used magical formulas to capture

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[97] For comparative cases, see Wolf (1975), Ahern (1975), Kendall (1985), Yü (2001), and Lhamo (2003).

[98] Salemink (2008a: 262) notes that in Northern Vietnam the spirit-medium cult, known also as *lên đồng*, has a more individualistic character since it includes one spirit medium and his or her audience. In contrast to northern *lên đồng* the ritual of spirit mediumship in Central Vietnam—called *hầu vui*—has a collective character with no sharp distinction between the spirit medium and the audience.

the divinity and made the senior possessed, which was announced by his repeated convulsions. I was instructed that I could ask any question regarding my dissertation, prospects of getting a job, earning money or travel abroad but I should not ask about "love matters" [*vấn đề tình yêu*]. Already astonished by the list of "proper" questions and the unexpected warning, I asked what was wrong with "love matters." The men very seriously answered that the goddess might get angry for wasting her time on such trivial problems (sic!). Later, from women, I learned about the "serious questions" which did not stir up the goddess' anger. Women revealed to me that in most cases men organized spirit possession in the local village temples when they wanted to inquire about the lucky number of a lottery draw, the winner of the boat race between hamlets, business ventures carried out abroad or to ask the Goddess Thiên Y A Na to "spiritually" ensure fishermen's security while using explosive materials during fishing. Apparently, "love matters" were not on their priority list.

In the context of China, Chün-fang Yü (2001) noted that the presence of a goddess or feminine symbols in a religion does not translate into respect for a real woman in that culture. The feminine goddesses like Mazu [in Vietnamese Thiên Hậu], Guan Yin [Quan Âm] or princess Miao-shan [comparable with the Vietnamese princess Liễu Hạnh][99] are understood as "postmenopausal women," free from the "messiness of childbirth and the problems of sexual desire" (2001: 481). Although they still retain all that is attractive about femininity, they are devoid of "anything negative which true womanhood entails" (ibid.). Yü (2001: 468) argues that the goddesses like Guan Yin or Miao-shan were seen as "'both a virgin and a mother,'" a condition that no real woman can attain." Hence, the Lý Sơn men's reluctance to approach the Goddess Thiên Y A Na with a question about love might be interpreted that in man's perception, the goddess was completely devoid of stigma associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, death, and childbirth and, hence, sexuality (Yü 2001; see also Sangren 1983). I assume that asking about love would equate the goddess with the earthly female "uncleanliness" and sexual desires, from which she was believed to be entirely free. It would also contest the idealized pure nature of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na who was assumed to have even achieved Buddhahood, as happened in the case of Thiên Y A Na in Sa Huỳnh (see chapter 6).

The fact that men in Lý Sơn and Sa Huỳnh performed the spirit possession cult for Thiên Y A Na does not mean that women could not be spirit mediums. They did so, however, in the domestic domain and in contrast to the male spirit possession, women did not have the

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[99] For more details see Dror (2002a).

power to expel the ghosts from people's body. Women could heal only certain diseases, read cards, tell futures and make amulets in the privacy of their houses. Many such female spirit mediums were engaged in some sort of economic-entrepreneurial activities. For example, in Quảng Ngãi City I interviewed a man whose mother in the late 1930s moved from Nam Định (Northern Vietnam) to Quảng Ngãi, opened a bakery and introduced a northern style of spirit possession with dancing, music and elaborate and expensive dresses ordered directly from Hanoi. Quảng Ngãi turned out to be an excellent choice; the new bakery was profitable enough to build a house and make a good living. The woman was convinced that her bakery trade flourished thanks only to her ties with the "other world." In Sa Huỳnh, I met another woman who was working as a driver for American forces during the Second Indochina War. She also acted as a spirit medium and held séances in the privacy of her house.

During the anti-superstition campaign in the late 1970s these women were forced to abandon their calling as spirit mediums and were threatened with being sent to a re-education camp. Relatives of the woman from Quảng Ngãi recalled that after the state began its anti-superstition campaign, the family burned all her ritual dresses for fear of being accused of spreading "out-dated customs." The woman's son clearly remembered that his father forbade her to do trance possession, but he still saw his mother in front of the mirror, dancing and speaking with spirits. In contrast to the men, such as the old caretaker in Sa Huỳnh who was under pressure from the Party, these women resumed their activities as soon as the anti-superstition campaign relaxed its grip.

8.4.1 *Women's interpretation of the spirit world and cosmological continuity*

Men in the littoral society often explained that most of the gods [*thần*] had been humans and turned into deities only after their death. Some of these deities during their earthly existence acted as village chief or mandarin or performed other important social duties. If they were upright and honest in their service to people they would enjoy the merit they had collected through their good acts. A village which had a predestined affinity [*duyên*] with such a god would be blessed with prosperity and peace. However, anyone who offended the divinity would be sure to meet a strict punishment. Not every god was munificent; a number of them could be harmful as well. Such gods claimed that it is the people's duty to please them, so villagers commonly had to satisfy them with lavish offerings.

Men and women in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn believed that gods did not stay forever on this earth. After some time helping—or causing disruption to—humans they disappeared

unexpectedly, passed to another supreme and invisible world [*siêu lên cõi tầng cao hơn, lên cõi vô hình cao hơn nữa*] or were downgraded to hell [*bị đọa xuống địa ngục*]. Men considered that the temple, cave, stone or tree left by such a spirit ceased to be sacred and powerful [*không còn linh nữa*]. They stated that at first villagers were usually not aware of the god's travel to the other realm because some of their wishes still could be fulfilled by a soul of the dead person [*âm hồn*] who followed and helped the deity or who just simply pretended to be a god in order to nibble some of his offerings. However, their power was very limited and sooner or later villagers had to recognize that the sacredness of the place was gone [*hết linh thiêng*], like in the case of Thiên Y A Na temple on the Forbidden Hill in Sa Huỳnh. In chapter 6, I stated that in the early 1980s, Sa Huỳnh fishermen were convinced that the Goddess Thiên Y A Na lost her power and left the temple. As I indicated, this change in the local perception took place in the context of the socialist restructuring of the village political and religious sphere. The *đình*, epitomizing the male hegemony, was destroyed long ago and the only remaining temples were those devoted to the dead and the Whale Spirit. The seasonal rituals in those temples were still held by men in a way similar to the celebration of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na, which I briefly described in the vignette.

However, women in Sa Huỳnh had their own explanation and interpreted the goddess' transformation as a natural consequence of Buddhist self-cultivation in which she turned from a fierce deity to a benevolent spirit. Women, who for a long time remained outside of her worship and blessing, projected Buddhist beliefs of compassion and mercy—usually associated with the bodhisattva Quan Âm—onto the Goddess Thiên Y A Na, and in the early 1990s began to visit her temple and make regular offerings every month during the new and full moon. Usually they combined the trip to the Thiên Y A Na temple on the Forbidden Hill with a visit to Từ Phước pagoda in Thạch By village. While they were not very concerned about the men's rituals and offerings, as the vignette above illustrated, they never failed to prepare themselves well. Each time, they loaded a light round bamboo basket that served as a boat with supplies like flowers, fruits, incense and fresh water and then, with the help of the old caretaker of the Thiên Y A Na temple, they crossed the channel. Women did not consider that it was proper to offer Thiên Y A Na any pork or chicken meat—so called "salty offerings"—since they believed that the goddess abstains from "non-Buddhist" practices in her self-cultivation.

In contrast to men for whom the Goddess Thiên Y A Na symbolized her previous function associated with securing the fishermen's passage into the sea—and, hence the past—

women perceived the goddess as a "modern spirit" suitable to address their female concerns. Among women who visited the Thiên Y A Na temple were working middle-aged fish traders, nurses, housewives and women who were in their retirement age and had more time to devote to religious activities. All these women made offerings to the goddess on behalf of their families but they also had their private incentives. Some of the women believed that the goddess supported their fish trade and thanks to her blessing they were able to make a good living. Some women had been left by husbands and through the goddess they wanted to secure their well-being. Older women who engaged in the Thiên Y A Na cult prayed for health and peace for their families. One of them had lost an adult son in a motorbike accident while her husband, who was also a victim of a similar accident, survived but was paralyzed. This woman wanted to prevent such tragedy in the future.[100]

Women were aware of the official Party policy of equality between men and women and often used it to justify their religious practices in the Thiên Y A Na temple. They considered the prohibition on women's participation in village rituals as "feudal" and "out-dated." They were aware of the former "misogyny" felt by the goddess and of the no-female" taboo in her temple but, as one of the women commented, not only the men but also the "Goddess has to accept the reality and follow the progress of modern society!" [*Bà phải chấp nhận thức tề và theo tiến bộ xã hội hiện đại*!]. Such a statement sends us back to the problem of how modern Sa Huỳnh women resolved tensions intimately connected with their gender and femininity. In the next section, I tell of a few women whose stories give a more in-depth picture of conflicts Sa Huỳnh women face in their everyday lives and strategies they employ to deal with some of them.

8.4.2 *Negotiating female identity and the quest for divine protection*

Despite the governmental policy aiming to abolish most of the discriminating rules, Sa Huỳnh women were still expected to follow traditional principles according to which a woman gained her status only after marriage and bearing a son. I noted several cases when women were left by their husband because they gave birth only to girls. Some of the husbands never divorced their wives, but started a family with another woman in order to have a son. In most

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[100] Unfortunately, one week before I finished my fieldwork in Sa Huỳnh I learned that her second son was killed in a motorbike accident. When I visited her I could see that the death of her second child was a terrible blow to her and I am not sure how she dealt with this disaster. Motorbike accidents, mainly among men, happened so often in Sa Huỳnh that this became a real social problem. It was common to meet families who had lost two or three sons in this way. These tragedies badly affected women who not only lost their husbands and sons but also were left on their own to earn a living.

of these cases the "two wives" accepted such an arrangement. They stayed in separate houses and the husband moved between the two families. Men saw nothing wrong in having a second wife and claimed that the situation required them to look for such a solution. Moreover, villagers were quite open about such polygamous relations.[101]

Unmarried women—often called *ế chồng*—were described as "difficult," "selfish" or even "abnormal" (see e.g., Bélanger 2004: 96). As Danièle Bélanger explains, the Vietnamese term *ế* refers to "something that does not sell, or something in little demand" or "a shop deserted by customers. *Chồng* means husband and therefore *ế chồng* means 'being on the shelf' or simply being unable to find a husband." (2004: 114ff.). Thus, in public opinion women gained social recognition upon becoming wives and mothers, while those who remained single and childless defied norms and expectations of femininity as seen from the angle of the Confucian ideology (ibid: 96). In Sa Huỳnh, children were considered to be their parents' guarantee that in old age and after death they would not be left alone. In the situation when parents could not count on the state pension, having a child gave at least some kind of security and hope that the adult child would provide material support (see also Phinney 2005).

Hảo, who appeared at the beginning of this chapter in the vignette, was a single mother whom I met during my visit to the Thiên Y A Na temple. She worked all day as a fish trader in the district market. She was proud of her new three-storied house that she had just built. She showed me her small altar for the Goddess Quan Âm and then said that thanks to Quan Âm and especially Thiên Y A Na, her trade was going well and she had been able through many years to save money and build her new house. Hảo introduced me to her two sisters and a female friend. Her younger unmarried sister, a thirty-six-year-old woman (in 2007), was in advanced pregnancy when I met her. During our intimate discussion, Hảo's sister revealed to me her decision, inspired by the desire for a child, to get pregnant. She told the father, a man she met by chance, her purpose and promised him that he would not bear any responsibility for the child.[102] I asked her whether she was stigmatized by villagers because she chose the option of bearing a child outside of wedlock. She explained to me that if she was a young girl she would be seen by her neighbors as an immoral person and as one who did not know how to keep [*giữ*] her virginity. However, at the age of thirty-six she was

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[101] Since the late 1950s, polygamy has been officially forbidden and illegal in Vietnam. However, there has been a long tradition of second or "minor" wives [*làm lẽ, vợ lẽ*], which to some extent still survives. Bélanger (2004 114-115ff) notes that the term "polygamy" in Vietnam has a different meaning than in other parts of the world and there it denotes that the first wife has a superior status while subsequent wives are inferior and have fewer privileges. She documented that in present times, taking a second wife is a strategy for some men to have a son.

[102] I came across quite a few cases in Sa Huỳnh where men did not bear any financial responsibility for their children after divorce.

considered past her prime already and she had lost her chance to marry. In Sa Huỳnh, people believed that in the late twenties the body of a woman changes, and if she is still unmarried and childless at that time, she would become more silent, capricious and difficult, not to mention the fact that her "charm is gone" [*hết duyên*]. Hảo's sister talked about herself as "ugly" and "old" and apparently saw her unmarried status as her own "failure" but, at the same time, she sought to be recognized as a mother. She said that her situation was understandable to the villagers who knew that having a child was the only way to gain a bit of security in her old age. She told me: "without a child there is no one who will feed me" [*không có con không có ai nuôi mình*].

Bélanger (2004) observed that being childless in Vietnam may be more problematic than being single. As she notes, in Vietnam "[f]ertility stands as a fundamental marker of femininity; women who have children are thought to be more beautiful, complete, and feminine than childless women" (2004: 108). Due to a shortage of men after the Vietnam War, women who could not marry were encouraged to give birth to a biological child outside of marriage. Bélanger (ibid.) writes that biological motherhood was seen as "natural and necessary to all women, regardless of their marital status" (see also Phinney 2005). Her own surveys among local leaders and community members in two rural settings revealed that participants agreed that the best strategy for older single women to have someone to take care of them in old age was to have a biological child, even outside of wedlock and against the traditional image of a "proper" Vietnamese woman (2004: 108).

It is hard to judge whether all single women in Sa Huỳnh desired to have a child like Hảo's sister did, but for those women whom I met it was indeed important. Another unmarried middle-aged woman also shared with me her desire to have a child. The woman told me about the dream she had a few years ago which still was very significant for her. In her dream she saw the Goddess Thiên Y A Na appearing over a tree. The goddess took her to the Father of Heaven who held in his hands a small child. She looked down and saw crowds of people begging for this child but the goddess pointed her out as the mother. Apparently, marriage and motherhood still had a deep meaning for this woman, since she looked at her own life through the lens of family. The goddess was for her a symbol of encompassing motherhood that corresponded to the needs of women, especially those who failed to fulfill their responsibility of having a family. Referring to me as a foreigner, the woman stated that life in Sa Huỳnh must be much simpler than in my country. In the village "the peak of

happiness is to marry, have children and earn money," she stated. She said that a free relation with a man was not an option for her since she believed that it was not accepted in Sa Huỳnh.

Perhaps the woman was correct that, officially, short-term relationships were not accepted, even though I knew that in practice they existed. Indeed, in the village, a young unmarried woman having an intimate relationship with a man without a prospect of marrying him would be criticized. Nevertheless, through men's jokes and teasing, older women were encouraged to have sexual relationships. Especially since, in the male perception, there was no point in these women keeping their virginity since they had passed the age considered appropriate for marriage.[103] Villagers were also more tolerant towards widows. Publicly, it was expected that widows show traditional virtues and faithfulness to a late husband by avoiding karaoke gatherings, taking care of their children and their husband's parents. However, villagers turned a blind eye to their possible "love relations" unless the women were too open about them. In turn, women abandoned by their husbands were in much worse situation, because having an intimate relationship with a man would cast suspicion on her "proper behavior" and might suggest that she gave her husband a reason to leave her.

Hảo married early and already at the age of twenty-two, even though she gave a birth to a boy, she was abandoned by her husband. She told me that when she was still young there was a man in the village for whom she felt affection, but because she was afraid of what her neighbors would say, she decided not to have an intimate relationship with him and kept her distance. She admitted that if she had not been afraid of gossip, now she would probably be a married woman.

Still, a childless status caused much worry for married women who feared abandonment by husbands. Hương, a woman of thirty-one, is an example. I become acquainted with her when I visited her simple restaurant where she sold cheap bowls of beef noodles. I ordered my meal and took a table next to a young woman whom I had met during my last visit in the Thiên Y A Na temple. The woman poked me in the ribs, smiled and reminded me that the next day would be a full moon and proposed that we go together to burn incense on the altar of the goddess. I agreed and we made an appointment to meet at the fishing harbor early the next morning. In the meantime, Hương brought a bowl of steaming soup and joined us at the table. I asked her whether she was also planning to visit the temple

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[103] For a tradition of teasing women in the Vietnamese folk culture and sexual harassment in Vietnam, see Khuat Thu Hong (2004).

but she shook her head in denial. She was busy with her small business, and had to prepare fresh noodles to sell to passing travelers until the late evening hours.

Hương asked me how old I was and upon hearing my answer smiled with contentment and said that we were the same age. She said that she was too old to find a husband. Knowing local Sa Huỳnh customs, I knew that at her age it would be extremely difficult to meet the requirements for finding a husband: a marriage to a thirty-year-old woman was considered too risky. There was always a danger that she would be too old to give birth to a child. I tried to console her, saying that she perhaps still had a chance to find a husband, adding that I was also unmarried. The woman looked at me carefully and burst out laughing, probably knowing that I was trying to be nice. She said that fortunately she had been married already for ten years. Then she said that it was probably easier for a foreign woman to find a husband, even later in life, but a local woman had the chance only once when she was young.

Despite Hương's joke, her real worry was about her childless status. She praised her husband for being faithful to her when he could easily find a younger woman and have children with her. Hương tried to be a good wife and daughter-in-law by looking after her husband's parents, who shared with them their modest house. Her husband did not have a stable job; he drove the cows to the pasture every morning where he stayed until late afternoon. He usually spent his evenings in male company, drinking and discussing village matters while Hương took a short break from work to shop.

After years trying to have a child, Hương and her husband decided to look for medical help in a hospital in Ho Chi Minh City. They took a very long trip by train and waited for several days for an appointment with a gynecologist. However, the doctor could not find any reason for her infertility. Apparently, the fact that the two "fertile" persons cannot have children together because there is no match or the possibility that the infertility was the husband's, was not even considered. Having run out of money they were forced to return to Sa Huỳnh. Hương then turned to local religious specialists, desperate by the time she came across a village healer, Gia (he appeared in Chapter 6 in the context of the Quan Âm statue defense). She started visiting him regularly twice a month.

When I met Hương in her restaurant, she told me that at the new and full moon she usually closed her business early in order to do the washing-up and to prepare everything for the next day. After her chores were done, she went to Gia's house. On one such day I accompanied her. Although it was about ten o'clock in the evening, two rooms were packed with people. Gia was sitting behind a big table right in front of the family ancestral altar

surrounded by fishermen who came to ask him to prepare protective amulets and charms against misfortune at sea. They brought fruits, which were piled up on the table as offerings to the ghost who foretold and healed through Gia. During the séance the fruit was transformed into *lộc*, a kind of gift from the spirit.[104] People believed that their consumption would bring them blessings and could even cure sickness.

In the next room I saw about ten women between 20 and 40 years of age sitting on the wooden bench waiting for a consultation. Hương introduced me and we joined the women on the bench. Soon I learned that all of them hoped that Gia could treat their infertility. Two of them had become pregnant thanks to Gia's magic, but still asked for new amulets for fear that they could lose their child. We waited around an hour until the healer called Hương. He scrawled mysterious signs with red ink on a sheet of paper and ordered her to burn the charm and to drink its ashes with water. In the meantime, Gia looked at me and proudly emphasized that his scribble originated from the other world and was dictated by the *ngài* ["Excellency," the term used to refer to deities and persons with high status] who possessed him (see Chapter 6). Hương thanked the healer and we left his house.

On the way back I asked her what she thought about the effectiveness of Gia's magical methods. Hương answered that she hoped that a terrible burden would be taken from her, but if she did not get pregnant before the Lunar New Year [Tết Nguyên Đán] she and her husband had decided to adopt a baby. Hương took responsibility for her alleged infertility and tried to cope with this feeling with the help of all means available to her. Although she did not really know what to think about Gia's methods, in the regular consultation with the village healer she found consolation and relief in her attempt to change her childless status, and her actions showed her husband and his parents that she was taking some measures to influence her "fate."

This section presented women in a wider social context. As I showed, village expectations that define local standards of femininity and to which women are compelled to conform might provoke conflicts and frustrations. On the other hand, women did not remain passive recipients of their "fate," but took initiative to face such challenges and went beyond local conventions. At the same time, we can see that family and motherhood still is an important point of reference in their lives and women are ready to use any means to fulfill their roles as mothers. Religion plays an important role in this process since it allows them to articulate their specific needs and negotiate their conditions with gods. Moreover, religion

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[104] For a good discussion on *lộc* see Soucy (1999).

offers them ways of transforming the divine power into protection and turning it to their own purpose (Ortner 1997). In the next part I analyze in greater detail spirit possession as one strategy women might adopt in a critical situation.

8.5 Authentication as a gendered process: Spirit possession as a female strategy

8.5.1 *Súng's construction of religious authenticity and authority*

Súng is one of the persons in Sa Huỳnh with whom the various spirits established contact. She did not look for it to happen; it just did. Three days before the New Lunar Year in 2007, the people in Sa Huỳnh saw Súng spreading water in a magic spell [known as *xin phép*; literally "ask for permission"] around the yard of her restaurant. Then her neighbors, to their surprise, witnessed a mass of cars parking in front of the usually deserted restaurant. Guests heading from north to south or vice versa on the main road stopped in greater numbers than ever before and chose Súng's restaurant from among dozens of others. Súng's restaurant was one of the many that mushroomed in the late 1990s. Located next to each other, they fiercely compete to attract passing travelers with fresh seafood and with the offer of rooms for staying overnight. However, at that time even the well known and popular roadhouse owned by my landlady could not attract such crowds of people.

The New Lunar Year's Eve was a special night for Súng because she discovered her new abilities. When the clock struck midnight she started to hear voices reaching her from the other world and then she saw many divinities [*thần*], who entered her body simultaneously. She called this particular state *nhập vào* [literally "being entered"], which means in this context "entering or lending one's body to the spirit." She recognised one of them: the Buddha Mother [Bà Phật Mẫu].

The Buddha Mother continued to appear every afternoon between 1:00 and 5:00 pm. After some time she introduced her younger sister, several other goddesses including Thiên Ya Na, and even fairies [*tiên*]. In turn, the newly introduced divinities sent their servants to to solve particular problems for people who turned to her for help. Rumors about Súng's abilities circulated not only between the Sa Huỳnh people but also in neighboring villages. People came from all over the area to Súng's house to get help from the Buddha Mother. The goddess was very precise; she never appeared before lunch and always left Súng by dinner time, and this gave Súng some space for preparing meals for passing guests. People who were

unfamiliar with the timetable of the goddess arrived in the morning and, having already spent the money for the journey, had to wait for hours until she appeared.

In July 2007 Súng's daughter came home for the summer holidays. She could not recognize her mother during her encounters with the Buddha Mother. During possession Súng's voice changed significantly, her eyes blurred and she seemed to be a stranger to her daughter. Indeed, Súng spoke with authority and power. During this time, visitors, whom she called "heads of family" [*gia chủ*], had to be careful with their queries. Sometimes, they were scolded for addressing inappropriate matters, such as a lucky combination for the lottery.

Súng's possession caused confusion among some of her neighbors, especially among men for whom her self-cultivation and teaching confronted their male perspective. Gia was a recognized and respectful healer in the village who was followed by a group of men, such as rich shipowners, who visited him regularly. Hence, Súng's practices of healing and expelling ghosts—usually reserved for a man—challenged the established male authority and destabilized their monopoly over sacred power. Men in the village called her practices "superstitious," [*mê tín dị đoan*] though each of them had his own understanding of the term. A man living in the immediate vicinity of Súng's house associated superstition with lack of education. He was sure that only education would give Súng strength to abandon her profession as a spirit medium. Another neighbor emphasized a slightly different aspect. He interpreted superstition not in the terms of "backwardness," "ignorance" or a "painful legacy" of the feudal era as the Party-State suggested, but in terms of authenticity. He tried to get a clear answer from me about whether I believed in her supernatural abilities. He could not accept my reply that as a scholar I was more interested in learning about people's practices than verifying their legitimacy. It is noteworthy that none of these men contested Gia's authenticity.

Mattijs van de Port (2011: 75) describes "authenticity" as "the 'cultural production of the real': the rhetorical, performative and aesthetic practices through which people seek to upgrade the reality caliber of the stories-they-live-by." He points out that "the cultural production of the real tends to bring irrefutable facts ('incontestable') into play, which have powerful reality effect" (2011: 75). In chapter 7, I showed that family records turned out to be insufficient to authenticate a "meritorious death" of a female member of the Phạm lineage. By emphasizing supernatural events in its story, the lineage tried to "produce" evidence for its female ancestor, Lady Roi, which could authenticate her as a local heroine. However, provincial authorities were more willing to accept male ancestors of Lý Sơn lineages as

potential heroes of the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa flotilla than their female kin, because men better fitted into national narratives about the "meritorious and heroic dead." Male ancestors covered not only the interest of their lineage but also the broader interest of those who sought to reconstruct Lý Sơn's history and prestige. To put my argument in a nutshell, women were not credible since their conduct and sexuality was tied and limited to their own lineage.

In the previous chapter, I said that religious landscape was gender constructed. Let me take this point further by returning to the case of Súng. In Sa Huỳnh, whatever men did was seen as valid in contrast to women who were perceived as superstitious and inauthentic. In order to authenticate herself as a spirit medium vis-à-vis men's religious practices, through the creative appropriation of belief and practice in her daily survival Súng sought ways to challenge, contest and negotiate the male ritual hegemony. Birgit Meyer's (2006) analysis of the adoption of mass media and its connection with modes of representation by Pentecostal pastors shows that it is used as mediation between this and the "other world" to present religious vision practices as authentic and credible. She observes that "belief is no longer opposed to visual and become rooted in the visible" (2006: 433). Although Súng did not go so far as to use, for example, a camera or a mobile phone to pass on the message for the Divine—as happens in the case of the Pentecostal Church—she adopted other means, often employed by male religious specialists, which authenticated her supernatural power-knowledge and her relation with spirits. She worked out the forms and practices of self-cultivation, such as a "divine writings," a sort of mediation between her and the divine, which not only validates her person in front of men, but was visible for her clients.

Women were more understanding towards Súng than men. Some of them took Súng's possession seriously and stated that Súng was under the power of the spirit world [*coi âm*], just like Gia. They believed that the spirits with whom Súng established her relation were coming from Huế since, according to them, during possessions she spoke in the voice of Huế. Súng, however, denied that she had any contacts with ghosts from the ancient capital of Vietnam. Instead, she claimed, she had been chosen by the higher world of Buddha and bodhisattvas [*coi thiên*], who were showing their mercy by reducing suffering on the earth. In the case of Thailand, Irvine Walter (1984) observes a similar phenomenon that some "modern" spirit mediums claimed their high status by emphasizing their Buddhist qualities. They maintained they were possessed by Guan Yin or other most respectful figures of the Buddhist pantheon and at the same time, established links with the low-ranking spirits.

Ahern (1975: 206-207) stated that where "low-ranking" supernatural spirits were concerned, women in Chinese culture were free to play a predominant role in their cult. Women could worship or even be possessed by souls of the dead or the "little low goddesses" who were believed to bring sons or to cure a sickly child. The close association of the latter with childbirth made them less "clean" than other spirits. However, in the context of Vietnam, I do not think that we could talk about such a rigid dichotomy. Many authors argue that "heavy spiritual roots" [căn cơ] are a precondition of one's possession (e.g., Trần Thị Ngọc Diệp 1974; Nguyen Thi Hien 2002; Norton 2009). Súng also believed that her spiritual roots were heavier than other people's though not as heavy as the roots of those who were possessed by a ghost like Gia was. In her view, the ghost who began curing people's sickness usually selected a person with a very difficult fate in order to improve its spirit and to be promoted to the Buddha's heaven. Such a person could be a woman or a man. When the ghost collects enough merit it moves to the other world. However, to find a suitable person who can facilitate its metamorphosis is not an easy task. As she explained, some of these persons should have at least a sequence of seven or eight lives stretching over a long time. In this way Súng emphasized a crucial difference between her and Gia. Súng claimed that she was selected by the Buddha Mother who, in contrast to ghosts, did not need to improve her *karma*. As being Buddha herself, the Buddha Mother turned to Súng because of her compassion for suffering and misery. Súng's possession, hence, served a broader agenda than Gia's possession did because it aimed to help humankind by fulfilling the will of the Buddha.

Súng was possessed by the Buddha Mother who was considered to be the main divinity of the Cao Đài religion. According to Súng, the goddess was born from the union of Mother of Earth [Địa Mẫu] and Father of the Heavens [Ông Trời].[105] She embodied only positive aspects of womanhood like motherhood and granted all wishes which were addressed to her with a "pure heart." We already came across the concept of "sincere heart" in reference to "religious beliefs" in Chapter 5. In my analysis of "religious belief" I referred to Nguyen Thi Hien (2002) and her argument that in the context of spirit possession cult a "sincere heart" means the deep belief in spirits and their supernatural power. In Vietnam, a "sincere heart" is often considered a factor determining a spirit's preference. When Súng's husband said to me that his wife was chosen by the Buddha Mother only because of her heart, he, in fact, was

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[105] The Buddha Mother might be identified with the Chinese high-status goddess Eternal Mother, who is conceived by Chinese people as "procuring in time of creation, in status, and in authority all the other deities of both Buddhist and Taoist pantheons" (Sangren 1983: 10). Sangren points out that Eternal Mother is a virgin unstained by the pollution of childbirth who lacks earthly incarnation since she precedes all other deities (1983: 14).

speaking about her fervent and sincere belief in the Buddha Mother's manifestation and compassion. The "sincere heart" also formed the basis for Súng's relation with her clients. She stressed that the medicines she prepared following the instructions of the Buddha Mother could only work when one had a strong faith.

Súng considered the Buddha Mother to be "sweet" [*ngọt ngạo*] and "compassionate" [*từ bi*] and as being the nearest to the Buddha's heaven. She was responsive to all who acknowledged her without any discrimination. This, however, caused some problems when it came to curing. Some diseases were caused by malicious ghosts and their proper treatment required the Buddha Mother to be violent. This she ultimately resolved by using the power of other goddesses. Therefore, sometimes the Buddha Mother sent her younger sister named Divine Mother of the Mountains [Sơn Thánh Mẫu] who, in contrast to the Buddha Mother, was violent and fierce [*hung*], had little pity for ghosts and dealt harshly with them. She mercilessly expelled the evil ghost causing the sickness from the body and cured the person. Depending on the patient's problems, Divine Mother of the Mountains occasionally used lower-ranking spirits to cure sick men. If the sick persons were children, then other "little goddesses" arrived to help.

8.5.2 *Transforming crisis into accomplishment*

In the previous paragraphs I provided the reader with Súng's interpretation of her possession, her new identity as a spirit medium and her strategy to authenticate her person. In this section, I develop my analysis further and say a few words about the complex and difficult situation in which Súng found herself before engaging in religious practices. Súng was a married woman in her early forties. Her husband had been a teacher in a primary school, but he gave up his profession when they opened the restaurant. When I conducted my research in 2006 and 2007 their two youngest boys were still at home, while the oldest daughter had just entered university. According to Súng—and confirmed by other Sa Huỳnh people—her restaurant had earned no profit since 1992, the year they opened the business. A few years before, she had been forced to sell her neighbor, the rich owner of the successful roadhouse, a piece of her land adjacent to the Sa Huỳnh beach. Today this neighbor has constructed a hotel just behind Súng's house. However, Súng still ran up debts and started to suffer from depression.

The situation became even more difficult when the oldest daughter insisted on going to study in Ho Chi Minh City. Súng described her daughter as particularly ambitious and determined, and no one could dissuade her from studying. She went to Ho Chi Minh City with

her teacher from grade school, a thirty-year-old unmarried woman who decided to complete her education and earn a Master's degree. They rented a small room with a kitchen and lived together. In 2006, Súng's daughter passed an examination and started to study banking. She received three million VND (about 100 EUR) from her mother to pay for the first semester, but it was not enough and she asked Súng for more money. Súng had to go into debt again. The situation began to be critical before the New Lunar Year when her daughter asked again for an additional four million VND (137 EUR) to pay for the second semester, rent and other living expenses. Súng only managed to save up 1.5 million VND (50 EUR), which she sent to her daughter. The girl returned home to celebrate the New Lunar Year with her family and cried that she would have to give up her studies if her parents would not pay for her schooling. Súng felt like she was in a dead-end situation: her debts were growing by the day and she was on the verge of bankruptcy, while her daughter continued demanding money.

A number of authors argue that many spirit mediums, before adopting their new role, encounter difficult social situations and look for a solution to resolve the mental and emotional consequences of the problems they face in the present social, political and economic situation (Walter 1984; Kendall 1996, 2009; Kitiarsa 1999; Salemink 2008b, 2010, 2010a; Endres 2011). In the case of Thailand, Walter (1984) observes that the traditional dominance of Thai women in most forms of small trade is inextricably linked to the commercialization of the spirit possession cult. The recent reinvigoration and intensification of the economy in Vietnam led Taylor (2004: 88) to a similar conclusion when he argued that various petty traders carry out transactions with spirits in the same way they do in everyday life: they negotiate a loan, seek advance contributions, and make a promise to repay their debts. Such cultivation mirrors their business with clients, creditors and debtors. In turn, Weller (1994, 1998) stresses that traditional values seem to be drained from life whenever market relations begin to dominate social relations. Individuals' growing independence and autonomy deepen anxiety since each individual is in charge of his/her own future. This anxiety is more related to securing a profit in a constantly changing socio-economic context than it is about losing orientation in life (see Chapter 5). This, inevitably, might create tensions that need to be solved and controlled. Salemink (2010a: 11) observes that in Vietnam, the spiritual security sought via spirit mediums not only compensates for the insecurity related to the volatile market but, above all, creates the "social capital necessary for investing confidently in new (or old) enterprises, thus enhancing economic security of the traders, their dependents, business partners and clients."

Súng's financial problems found unexpected relief from the Buddha Mother, who came down from heaven and appeared in Súng's body. The goddess calmed her down, saying that she knew about Súng's problems and her worries about her daughter, who studied at the expense of her family's health. She said that the ten years in which Súng and her husband had lived in want had come to an end. Súng was offered *lộc* [Buddha's blessing], which she should share with other people. Overcome by sadness due to the people's suffering, she had come back to the Earth [*Bà ở trên về đây*] and for the next twenty years would use Súng's body to cure those who were sick.

Súng explained to me that those who ran their own business usually faced serious financial problems before the spirit possessed them. Súng's husband believed that those who were possessed by a ghost [*tà nhập vào*] or a divine spirit [*thần nhập vào*] could not escape their fate. Being caught by the spirit, one had to serve [*bắt phải làm*] or he or she would become mad. On the other hand, from the moment the person was appropriated by a spirit and became its servant, a substantial upturn in business could be observed. After the New Lunar Year's incident, Súng's restaurant was inundated for several days with customers who spent enough money to pay for the daughter's semester. On the eighth day of the first lunar month, the girl left Sa Huỳnh to continue her studies in Ho Chi Minh City. Since the appearance of the Buddha Mother on the New Lunar Year Eve, Súng observed a significant improvement in her business. Travelers stopped and ordered meals at Súng's restaurant almost every day. Súng began to pay her debts off in installments of 50 thousand VND (1, 70 EUR), and a small sum of money was still left for day-to-day life. She was also able to regularly send her daughter 1.2 million VND (40 EUR) to cover her daily expenses. Some villagers in Sa Huỳnh took the improvement of Súng's material situation as a sign that she was really possessed.

Súng said that the Buddha Mother did not let her charge people for her services. However, she was allowed to accept whatever money the people offered. On one day, when I was waiting with other women for the appearance of the Buddha Mother, one of them asked me how much she should pay to Súng. The people did not expect that the spiritual consultation was made for free, since for them it was completely natural that they should give at least small change to Súng. As in a typical transaction when two sides exchange items of certain value, Súng's service was rewarded with money. Súng and her husband had never refused such tokens of gratitude and always claimed that the money they earned was spent on buying ingredients and preparing medicaments.

Súng's customers included people coming from a neighboring commune and Bình Định Province rather than her own co-villagers who were not sure how to react to her new role. As in Gia's case, fishermen asked for protective amulets during fishing; housewives inquired about the fate of their children, health, and prospects of earning money; traders looked for guarantees and luck in their business; and sick persons asked for medicines. However, as Súng stated, her most important task was healing. She stopped eating meat and devoted herself to Cao Đài and Buddhist studies. In the evenings she read books, made notes and practiced "spiritual writing." The Buddha Mother taught Súng to write signs which originated from the "other world." Súng scrawled them with red felt-tip pens on a white sheet of paper, put a thread in the middle in colors symbolizing consecutive levels of heaven and folded them into an envelope. Such charms were always prepared individually for each person. Súng's husband became her assistant during the possessions. In case one could not understand Súng, he interpreted her words. Over time Súng trained herself in preparation of medicaments, her amulets and charms became more colorful and her handwriting became more professional. The surface of the table she used for preparing amulets gradually grew to be covered by new felt-tip pens and threads in all sorts of colors. Her husband prepared them for every séance, cut paper into pieces for making charms and amulets, gave blessed water to patients and produced medicaments. All charms and amulets had their own expiry date [*hết lộc, hết hàng sự đụng*] and the patients who wanted to extend validity were advised by Súng and her husband to return for new ones.

In the case of Thailand, Walter (1984) argues that "modern" spirits are inclined to emphasize that not only are they possessed by Buddhas or bodhisattvas, but they also help people to reduce their sufferings, improve their *karma* and help them to make merit that would allow them to enter Buddha's heaven after their death. The possessed persons might even change their diet and become vegetarian. Some spirit mediums even go so far as denying their own menstruation and their capacity to be sexually active with men. When such abstention happens, the marital roles are reversed and the male becomes the subordinate ritual officiant and servant to the spirit of his wife (1984: 320). Soon after the spirit medium resolves her original problem affecting her mental condition, she might become "an avenue for competition and possible material success as part of the process" (ibid: 322). The spirit medium becomes skilled in using ideology convincingly and establishes herself as a respected authority who might even attract powerful and wealthy clients (ibid: 316).

Salemink (2008a) observes that in Vietnam during spirit possession gender and sexual boundaries are constructed and transgressed in ritual. Women might adopt behavior that is normally associated and reserved for men. I am not sure whether Súng really identified herself with masculine roles but, certainly, she could not be possessed as a "real woman." The Buddha Mother ceased to possess her during menstruation. Thus, Sung had to work out her own strategy to validate her person, above all as, a "real" spirit medium. During Súng's spirit séances, the roles of a husband and wife were reversed and Súng adopted an authoritative role of a "master" while her husband was her ritual officiant and servant. Súng considered herself an adept of Buddhist divinity and tried also to conform to Buddhist prescriptions by becoming vegetarian. This role required her to transform her body into a pure vessel [*xác*] that could be "ridden" by the Buddhist deity. That is why it was completely natural for Súng's husband to answer "the *xác* [of his wife] went to the market to trade" [*xác bà đi làm ăn buôn bán*] when I asked one day where she had gone.

In describing Súng's possession I sought to demonstrate how through the everyday encounter with a deity in the privacy of her home Súng not only solved her economic problems, but also provided an explanation for the failure of her business. On the verge of a breakdown, she found enough strength and creativity to establish herself not so much as a successful owner of the restaurant, but rather as a respected and knowledgeable spirit medium. In this context, I argue that authentication of ritual identity is a gendered process. Súng's quest for authenticity and her ultimate success became possible by constructing and transgressing symbolic boundaries and incorporating practices like preparing medicines, perfecting her "spiritual writing" and devising a convincing ideology of her spirit possession—means previously reserved in Sa Huỳnh exclusively for men. Moving beyond ordinary limitations, Súng employed the powerful means to transgress her gender role and sexuality, authenticate and constitute herself as a gifted spirit medium who might even challenge the men's control of "sacred" values, power, authority and authenticity in the village.

8.6   Conclusion

Finally, let me propose another way to interpret the story introduced in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. As I illustrated, the Goddess Thiên Y A Na in Sa Huỳnh was the deity of the past, associated with men's religiosity, who ceased to represent any threat toward the local community, especially to women. Thus, the spoilt chicken might be seen as

reflecting the dramatic change in the cosmological landscape: the goddess' decline and her powerless status caused by her travel to the Buddhist Heaven. In this sense, the chicken sacrifice becomes the symbolic representation of power relations between men and women. In this relationship men were those who had been losing not only the protection and interest of the goddess, but also their religious dominance.

Women's narratives of Thiên Y A Na's transformation from a fierce to a benevolent spirit and their notions that the goddess served individual rather than communal needs opened up a new space for another interpretation. Thus, in this chapter I read the story of paradoxes and contestations which exist in the ritual domain by looking at women who—located outside of male authority—demonstrated their agency by challenging prevailing ideas and inserting their own interpretations into the framework of dominant local discourses. Relegated to the domestic domain, women turned their zone of ritual exclusion and marginality into a space of creativity and agency. In this space, they sought alternative meanings for themselves other than the domesticity prescribed by the neo-Confucian tradition. Instead of openly resisting men's dominance, they stretched, through various kinds of feminine performance, the boundaries of dominant ideas about what constitutes religious authenticity and authority and created a religious context that involved them as women. In this light, the religious landscape appears to be constructed, shaped and reshaped not only at the intersection of the state and community, but also of gendered interpretations and performances. In a nutshell, the "authentication" of their ritual identity is a *gendered* practice involving power relations as women construct and validate their new ritual identity and cross boundaries of "this-other world" and their own gender.

CHAPTER NINE

Conclusion: Religious Landscape as an Arena of Contestations and Ongoing Negotiations

9.1 Looking from a distance

In the Introduction I placed the photo of the coastal township Sa Huỳnh taken from the top of the hill from which I enjoyed a wide panorama of the villages located on the narrow strip of land between fertile rice fields, sand dunes, the beach and the sea. However, instead of looking down at the landscape I invited the reader to "step in" and imagine herself as someone living *in* and *moving through* it. Following Ingold (2000), I argued that taking a "dwelling perspective" would allow us to see the landscape not as a static physical texture but as a "living process," historically, socially and culturally constituted and interactively negotiated.

However, the dwelling perspective raises problems of its own. In the "landscape of our dwelling" (Ingold 2000: 202) we tend to focus on the details and risk missing the whole picture. Thus, in this concluding chapter, I propose to "depart" from the dwelling perspective, "return" to the top of the hill and—*with* the *experience* of the place—look at the landscape again. Standing where we are now and scanning the landscape *from a distance* we are able to put the complete picture, and perceive all of its elements, in a broader perspective.

9.2 The main research question and its operationalization

In this thesis my primary aim was to explore the multi-faceted contestation over Vietnam's religious landscape taking place against a backdrop of changes in the ecology, the economy and politics. Since the introduction of the *Đổi Mới* Reforms in 1989, Vietnam has gradually withdrawn from a socialist modernity and opened its borders to the international community. As a consequence of a much more liberalized environment, traditional religious practice experienced an unparalleled revival. At the same time, integration with global capitalism

posed a massive threat of "inundation" by foreign culture, prompting the state to attempt to create an alternative vision of modernity in which national identification was the primary marker (Salemink 2008a).

Based on Scott's (1998) argument, **my main hypothesis** was that the modern Vietnamese state is inclined to "simplify" society in order to arrange its complex and diverse vernacular classifications and hence make landscapes and people legible and controllable. Along this line, in my thesis I highlighted the process in which the Party-State interpreted religious revival in terms of "cultural" and "national heritage." As a result, aiming to create a more standardized and institutionalized version of the religious landscape, the state was challenged by alternative forms of religiosity introduced by individuals and various groups of people within local communities. These groups and individuals—divided by age, gender and class—often adopted conflicting understanding and strategies to achieve their goals *vis-à-vis* the state, which took the shape of central, provincial, and local officials, scholars and journalists. Therefore, I argued that people in the local communities do not remain indifferent towards official politics and that the process of constructing their religious landscape must be more than just a mechanical reaction of the community, or simply its adaptation to the state cultural project. This adopted stance led me to **my main research question**: *How do people in Vietnam's littoral society create and (re)invent their landscape as a recognizable social and religious space against the backdrop of "state simplification" projects and restrictive state cultural policies?*

In contrast to the relatively prosperous North and South, considered by many anthropologists to be the most representative regions in the studies of religious revival, I chose the poor and underdeveloped South Central Coast in order to answer this question. My choice of this location was dictated by the fact that the South was subjected to socialism only ten years before the *Đổi Mới* Reforms were launched. Before 1975, this region, which today is a part of Central Vietnam, had belonged to the South and thus, formally, had been a U.S. ally. We could agree that the South Central Coast does not represent an "ordinary," but rather an extreme and unsettled situation. Taking into account the specific historical trajectories of the South Central Coast and its slower rate of socio-economic transformation compared to that of the North and the South, I argued that the religious, economic, political and ecological interactions and the processes that led to them could be better visible in just such a situation. As I explained in Chapter 2, such a constellation of cultural factors present in other regions of Vietnam was particularly visible in the two selected settings of Sa Huỳnh (the mainland coast)

and Lý Sơn (the island)—considered a "sensitive border zone"—where the state struggled to tighten its grip and increase its presence through military posts, border guards or checkpoints. Moreover, the spatial marginality of these two communities was a growing concern of the central and provincial authorities who tried to incorporate them through various development programs such as promotion of tourism or the development of a sea-based economic sector, and cultural initiatives that included recovering traditional festivals and anniversaries. Each site shed light on the other and significantly enriched my knowledge about important changes that happened in the littoral society. By looking at the two, I was able to develop a more complex picture of their people's lives and religious institutions and, hence, to answer my main research question.

Furthermore, I formulate my analysis around three analytical concepts—*littoral society, religious landscape, changing and changeable cosmological landscape*—that are closely interconnected. In order to answer my research question, I structured my thesis around three axes: (1) cross-denominational, (2) spatial and (3) temporal. The first axis looked at how various beliefs and religious practices were interconnected and mutually influencing, overlapping and conflicting; the second axis charted how ritual, spiritual, religious and cosmological ecology linked up with and gave meaning to various places; the third axis traced how changes in the political, economic, and social domains generated changes in the religious and cosmological landscape. By linking and weaving them together with my three analytical concepts, I examined how categories like nation, state, politics, economy, history, religion and environment intersect with each other in everyday life. Such an operationalization helped me to formulate my answer to the question of how people in Central Vietnam's littoral society deal with the state and its "simplification" project and how they make their landscape meaningful. Therefore, let me recapitulate the main findings of this thesis in the form of a summary and conclusion.

9.3   Summary and conclusion

Through the analysis provided in Chapter 2 and continued in Chapters 3 and 4, I wove together the physical and cultural worlds that made up the territory of the people I studied. I drew a complex picture of religious practices and the local communities of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn from the perspective of human-environment relations, since people in the littoral society constructed their religious landscape and cosmology through the everyday use of land and sea.

Such an approach constituted a springboard for further analysis of the category of "religion" in the Vietnamese context and of how the state deals with vernacular classifications of religion, which formed the contents of Chapter 5. Sketching a detailed analysis of the state's strategies to standardize, normalize, control and appropriate the religious landscape, I arrested our attention on the reverse process, namely how people in the littoral society deal with the state. I introduced a tentative picture of the relationship of *state-village* and people's strategies to respond to the official cultural policy. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 show that the religious landscape of the littoral society was not a unified system of beliefs that did not allow for change, but it formed a dynamic and flexible domain, which was transformed through negotiations and contestations between the state and villagers, albeit within the boundaries erected by the state. One of the key findings was that people's agency moved beyond "resistance" and accommodation and involved also appropriation, manipulation, improvisation and indiscipline, which simultaneously reaffirmed and strengthened the state's legitimacy, but also helped the local community to reach its goals. Another observation was that the process of contestation over the religious landscape did not just involved state agents and villagers but also other players situated in different social, political and religious niches and representing diverse visions of religious spaces and practices. By demonstrating that those players took the identities of scholars, journalists, lineage representatives, monks, ritual specialists, farmers, fishermen, men and women, I went beyond a simplistic interpretation in terms of dichotomy, and stressed complexity and interactions within and across the relationship between state and villagers. Let me now focus on the main themes which built consecutive steps through the chapters of this thesis and provided complex answers to the main research question.

9.3.1 Landscape as a "living process"

The first important finding of this study was that the landscape is a "chronicle of life and dwelling" (Ingold 2000: 189) and, thus, a "historical process of interaction between people and the environment in which both are shaped" (Allerton 2009: 236). In Chapter 3, by introducing historical, economic and environmental factors shaping the local landscape of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn I showed the continuity of Kinh [Việt] people in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn with the Cham culture and their seafaring legacy. I drew attention to the effort of the Vietnamese migrants, who settled in Central Vietnam in the 17th century, to turn their new environment into a space which would be accessible and manipulable through religion and ritual. In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, this was done by the pacification of Cham gods, the

construction of temples on the foundation of the Cham religious sites, the appropriation of spirits of the previous owners of the land and, in consequence, led to an interesting mélange of Việt and Cham cultures, still visible today in local beliefs. By emphasizing complexity and multi-faceted trajectories, which played their part in the formation of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn communities, I provided the basis for a more in-depth understanding of local religious practices.

Another important finding was that activities related to religion and enacted in the landscape, which I glossed as *a religious landscape*, could not be regarded as a "locality," closed in by an administrative frame. In Chapter 3, I showed that Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn repeatedly changed their borders and names and thus, whatever "village" is a unit at the present time is a product of historical contingency. It was natural for Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn villagers to expand their religious landscape beyond the administrative boundaries. In consequence, the flexible way villagers dealt with their surroundings and the cultural hybridity and ambiguity of their gods led me to emphasize the cosmological continuity and interdependence that existed within the larger territory. I underlined the phenomenon that the cosmological terrain of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn went beyond the boundaries delineated by modern cartography and changed depending on historical, political, and economic factors. I called this "terrain" a *changing and changeable cosmological landscape*.

Instead of reducing the Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn landscape only to factors related to religion, I illustrated how the socio-religious organization of the littoral society was connected with and shaped by the natural environment and politics. In Chapter 4 I showed that people in the littoral society have two main livelihoods—farming and fishing—within their communities. This distinction became the basis for constructing, maintaining and transgressing a social and ritual dichotomy between *land* and *sea* activities in Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn. Through religious ceremonies and the erection of separate temples, farmers marked spiritual and hierarchical boundaries between the land-based village [*làng*] and the fishing community [*vạn*]. However, such distinctiveness between the sea and the land activities, preserved in the social and religious organization of Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, did not exclude the possibility that these two types were in constant states of flux. Thus, stressing the role of the sea without separating it from the land and people, I argued that the Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn seashore was an open and flexible space where beliefs, ideas, and goods constantly circulated and where the land-sea oriented style of life was exercised. Following Pearson (1985), Li (2006) and Wheeler (2006) I glossed Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn seashore as a *littoral society*.

Furthermore, in Chapter 4 I argued that the socio-religious structure of the littoral society was not only dynamic but also underwent a continuous process of change along with the ever-changing ecological, political and social conditions of its environment. The state-initiated process of restructuring the religious domain and abolishing the hierarchical system of the communal house—formerly the religious and political center of the village—led to the enhancement of the social position of fishermen *vis-à-vis* farmers. Fishermen were the group in the littoral society which took advantage of the state "simplification" projects and explored the situation with an eye to how they could establish themselves as full-fledged members of the village. Especially in the last decade, due to increasing demands for marine crops in domestic and international markets, fishermen significantly improved their material situation and started to play a more important role in the village ritual domain to which they had no previous access. Renovation of temples and sponsoring of village agricultural rituals became one way fishermen displayed ritual "potency" and thus their growing status in their littoral community. Moreover, as in the past when the feast in the land-based communal temple served to increase status differences within the village, today the fishermen use the same means in order to earn prestige and status relations as well as social recognition. By resisting the exclusive ritual control traditionally exercised by the seniors of the land-based village, fishermen partly turned the tables on the old hierarchy.

9.3.2 *State and village as an arena of multiple identities, diverging interests and changes over time*

Chapter 5 discussed how the state deals with the plurality of the religious landscape in Vietnam and makes it legible. I showed that in Vietnamese official discourse the past has been criticized as economically and technologically backward in contrast to the future that appeared glowing, predictable and achievable, but required a heroic effort from the entire population. Party ideologists singled out religion as the cause of the hardship and backwardness of the life of the masses, saying that people wasted time and money that could be better spent on education or national agricultural production. The Party-State was convinced that systematic selection of "proper" aspects of Vietnamese tradition would put an end to "superstitious" religious practices. As a result, the socialist state arrogated to itself the role of leader, educator and vanguard of the "undeveloped" population. I argued that along with the socio-economic liberalization and a religious revival, an important shift in the official perception took place. "Popular beliefs" previously associated with "backwardness" and

"feudalism" have become crucial instruments for preserving a tradition-oriented national identity against the global capitalist version of "modernity" that Vietnam has started to adopt. Another important finding of this thesis was that by labeling local religious practices and spaces as "cultural" and "national heritage" the state appropriates them for constructing suitable narratives of the Vietnamese nation-state. In accordance with Salemink (forthcoming) I pointed out that such a process involves not only selection, appropriation and changing meaning, but also controlling and disciplining the people who were emotionally engaged in reclaiming their sacred spaces.

By introducing a few idiosyncratic stories of contestation of the religious landscape, in Chapter 6 I sketched the anti-religious measures taken in the rural community shortly after the liberation of 1975 as well as the villagers' response to the state's changing cultural and political projects. I demonstrated that villagers were not passive recipients of state actions, but acted on behalf of their gods and sacred spaces while at the same time making conscious compromises. On the other hand, local state agents who were supposed to carry out the state policies were not entirely free from some sort of attachment to religious practices themselves, and were reluctant to engage in a violent anti-superstition campaign. In addition, I found that contestations over the religious landscape did not simply take place between state agents and villagers but also involved religious authorities, such as the Buddhist clergy who often had contradictory views about what constituted "proper" or "pure" religion.

In Chapter 7, I illustrated the complexity of national-, provincial- and local-level contestations over the religious landscape. I argued that the local community and state are not monolithic, but rather heterogeneous entities entangled in complex relations in which they forge themselves within and across international, national and local interests. By conducting government-sponsored projects to collect various documents related to the nineteenth century Paracel and Spratly navy and to preserve all temples and records related to Paracel and Spratly sailors' activities, provincial state agents placed Lý Sơn Island's history within the framework of the dominant narrative of the Vietnamese nation-state. I described the reaction of the local community and showed that the state's appropriation of Lý Sơn's legacy encouraged islanders to rework local narratives in such a way that they simultaneously supported state claims, communal interests, and their individual and lineage aspirations. I focused on the dual process of appropriation and reworking of national narratives by the island community, which opened up a new space of possibilities for the marginalized

community of Lý Sơn fishermen who began to manifest themselves through the state commemorative project devoted to the Paracel and Spratly sailors.

9.3.3 *Religious landscape as gender-constructed*

In Chapter 7 I pointed out that the central and provincial authorities were reluctant to accept female figures into the category of "meritorious dead" because these figures' experiences did not lie within the Paracel and Spratly commemoration's ambit and did not fit into the dominant narratives of national heritage. In Vietnam's neo-Confucian kinship model, only men could be full-fledged members of the patrilineage and hence embody not only the lineage interests but also, potentially, the broader interests of the community. Thus, another crucial finding of this thesis was that the religious landscape is gendered, since the state determined which local heroes would suit national narratives and would be inscribed into the religious landscape. Yet, those who looked to their past for both male and female figures that fitted into national notions of "meritorious dead" were left "in the position of trying to respond in a situation where they had little control over how the game was played" (Cummings 2006: 56).

Building on these insights, in Chapter 8 I provided an analysis of how in real life women deal with men's exclusive claims to the religious landscape. I pointed out that besides fishermen, women composed another group that suffered from discrimination in the village religious space but also took advantage of the state's cultural policy. The attack of the Party-State on the village religious domain, in which male-oriented kinship played a major role, undermined the position of patrilineages through the collectivization of land, the granting of equal inheritance rights to both sons and daughters (at least in theory), the partial replacement of ancestor worship with national commemorations, and women's access to education. Such a turnaround in the traditional village order gave women the opportunity to strengthen their social status within the family and within Vietnamese society at large (Luong 2003). In this final chapter, I presented women as important actors in the local arena of village affairs and contestations over religious landscape. In Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn, men monopolized the most prestigious religious roles, including ecclesiastical positions in village temples; they carried out ancestral and communal house rites and reserved for themselves the role of defining religious orthodoxy. Female co-villagers did not openly resist men's dominance, but through various kinds of transgressive performance, they created a context that not only involved them as women, but also constructed their own religious authenticity and authority. Thus, I argued that this "authentication" of their religious identity is a *gendered* practice involving power

relations, as women constructed and validated their new ritual identity and crossed the boundaries between "this world" and the "other world" from their own gender position. This conclusion complemented earlier discussions about the ongoing process of redefinition of gender ritual roles in the Vietnamese society and various dynamics of ritual life in post-Socialist Vietnam (cf. Malarney 2002; Luong 2003; Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004; Phinney 2005; Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010).

9.3.4 *Answer to the main research question: State and villagers as "mutual producer" in the process of creating and (re)inventing religious landscape*

One of the major conclusions of this thesis, in accordance with Malarney (1996, 2002, 2007), Endres (2001, 2002, 2007), Truong Huyen Chi (2001, 2004), Taylor (2001, 2003, 2004, 2007) and Salemink (2007, 2008a, 2009a) is that the interaction within and across the relationship between state and villagers is not rigid, but flexible and dialogical and goes beyond a binary opposition of "the oppressed" and "the dominant." Villagers were not "downtrodden peoples trying in vain to voice" their local narratives (Cummings 2006: 56) but, as I showed, their voices and endeavors impacted contestations over the religious landscape by inserting their localized claims into the national narratives. Thus, people in the littoral society created and (re)invented their landscape as a recognizable and religious space by articulating themselves discursively and ritually against the backdrop of constant change. If local communities enter into complex national debates and constitute—even if only temporarily—a kind of social and political force, my research showed that this required the acceptance of some sort of authority emanating from the "center." Yet, the activities of state agents are only meaningful for communities where they are combined with local views. Thus, my concluding finding is that the state and Vietnamese society are mutual producers of negotiated and contested practices and narratives of the recent revival of religion. However, the confrontation between state agents and villagers is restricted to specific fields of negotiations and contestations, defined both by the central state and local initiatives. Those parts of local and national history which do not substantiate dominant national narratives are passed over in silence.

9.4   Relevance of theoretical debates in the context of empirical findings

In the light of broader theoretical debates carried out by Scott (1985); Giddens (1985); Mbembe (1992; 1992a); Ortner (1995, 1997, 2001, 2006); Tsing (1993, 1999); and Li (1999,

2000, 2010), my thesis showed that in the domain of everyday practices that escape the direct control of the state, the actions of people in local communities do not necessarily lead to resistance and accommodation but rather to a tactic of insubordination and continuous bargaining and invention, a tactic that Mbembe (1992, 1992a) calls "indiscipline" in contrast with the Foucaultian concept of "discipline." I argued that the relationship between state and local community transcends the standard dichotomy of resistance and domination and is more complex than such dualistic visions predict. Such a conceptualization of relations between "dominant" and "dominated" enabled me to grant more agency to the latter and opened up new space for rethinking what their position is *vis-à-vis* the state.

My focus on the "marginal" zone of the central Vietnamese coast—which is a border zone of modern Vietnam and located close to a disputed area of the South China Sea—showed that the Vietnamese central state is not growing weaker, but using modern technology and communication to strengthen its presence and tightly control territories located on the margins of its influence. The spatial and often economic marginality of the coastal communities was a growing concern of the state, which tried to incorporate them through various development and cultural programs. In this process local communities did not cut themselves off from the state, but explored the ways in which their *local identity* could be tied to the state and its cultural projects.

This is consistent with earlier researchers (Tsing 1993; Keane 1997; Li 2000, 2010; Horstmann and Wadley 2006) who demonstrated that *marginality* might be a starting point for innovation. My research showed that local communities tend to construct their marginality in terms of "unique spiritual traditions" in order to gain status and prestige connected with participating in and being associated with the state cultural initiatives. Seen from this perspective, marginality is always relational and the linked "asymmetries" between individuals and the group—such as state and community, mainland and island, farmers and fishermen, and men and women—are not firm, clear-cut categories, but intersect with each other in daily activities and change over time. Thus, my work highlighted that marginality is not only a relative and contested issue, but also exists as the construct of particular discourses and particular processes in which some individuals, groups and locations appear as "marginal." As I showed, a good example of such a process is the Party-State's attempt to create more institutionalized and standardized versions of religion. In this process, the religious landscape turned out to be a creative space filled with spirited dialogues, negotiations and contestations, a space in which different individuals and groups exercised their agency beyond resistance

and accommodation and sought to accomplish their own "culturally constituted projects" (Ortner 1995; 2006).

By looking at the religious landscape as a dynamic space of contestations between state and village, I tried to resolve how to conceptualize the category of "religion" in the Vietnamese context. My research highlighted that the religious domain in Vietnam is not a unified and stable system of beliefs in Geertz's sense; neither is it consistent with Western monotheistic ideas of "religion." In Vietnam diverse forms of religious expressions and beliefs co-exist, interact and overlap but do not represent a universal and everlasting authority. Moreover, participation in those religious practices leaves room for individual interpretations and innovations manifested in the worship of many gods and spirits. Following Asad (1993), DuBois (2009) and Mandair (2009) who showed that "religion" is historically constituted and its concept derived from a Christian background, I argued that the concept of "religion" in Vietnam was formed under Western intellectual influence, which Vietnam experienced through the French colonial power. As my research explicitly showed, the contemporary Vietnamese Party-State accepted a modern definition of "religion" understood in Comaroff's words (1994: 301) as "living survival of an archaic order" and according to that understanding sought to institutionalize and standardize policies toward plurality of the religious landscape in Vietnam.

This study also provides a contribution to the existing literature on postsocialism, underlying a quite different relationship between the state and religion in Vietnam than that existing in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (e.g., Froese 2004; Hann et al. 2006; Pelkmans 2009; Broz 2009; Vaté 2009). As I underlined, Vietnamese religious traditions lack exclusive membership and devotion and an institutional place in society in the sense that a Christian Church would. Thus, it would be wrong to translate the contemporary religious revival in Vietnam in terms of a *return* to pre-communist relation between church and state, as it is often envisaged in so-called postsocialist studies.

In Vietnam the relationship between religion and state has always been much different from the relationship of the Orthodox or Catholic Church with political centers, for the simple reason that there is no separation between one "Church" and the "state." In focusing on religious revival in the postsocialist context, I found that attempts of the modern Vietnamese state to validate those religious practices which remain in line with its objectives and to mark those which bear a "superstitious" character, is a *continuity* from the precolonial monarchy. Like the imperial court, the modern socialist state seeks to increase its legitimacy through the

careful selection and canonization of those historic figures who demonstrated moral and patriotic values and fit into the nation-state narratives. Consequently, my study clearly showed that instead of representing some sort of "moral order," religion in Vietnam has to conform to the *political morality* propagated by the Party-State. Thus, on the one hand I pointed out that the analysis of religious revival in the literature on postsocialism had less relevance in my case since most of the works on religion in Eastern Europe and Russia reflect "monotheistic modes" of religiosity and deal largely with institutional religious organizations. On the other hand, I argued that my case could contribute to those debates because it shows a different character of the relationship of *state-religion*.

Furthermore, in accordance with Vasavakul (2003) and Salemink (2007, 2008a) I argued that it is still worth using the term "postsocialism" in the context of Vietnam, since the state retreated from a planned economy and adapted Western-style capitalism. However, my thesis emphasized that the concept of "postsocialism" referring to Asian countries has little to do with the term "postsocialism" that denotes changes in socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (for Asia see Dirlik 1989; Evans 1990; Zhang 1997; Latham 2002; Kipnis 2003, 2008. For Eastern Europe see Verdery 1996; Hann 2002). In the Asian context, the term "postsocialism" describes socio-economic changes (Vasavakul 2003), a transition which took place in "the local rhetoric" (Latham 2002) or it is used in a similar manner as the term "postcolonial" is employed, namely as a reference to a particular historical circumstances and as a form of theory (Kipnis 2003, 2008, Zhang 1997 Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008). In other words, in Asia the transition from a centrally planned economy to an open market was not connected with the fall of the Communist Party but rather with the practical abandonment of socialism, which is still maintained in the state's rhetoric.

9.5   Looking for connections: "The view from the sea"

In my thesis I did not reduce the littoral people to their religious practice within restricted spatial boundaries, but my aim was to show that contemporary "village society" is much more dynamic than the classical village studies assume. I drew on works (Leach 1954; Kirsch 1973; Tsing 1993; Hviding 1996; Chou 2003; Horstmann and Wadley 2006) which deconstruct the notion of national borders and reconceptualize communities at the border through movement and identification. Moreover, inspired by Condominas' (1980) work, but also by classical works in anthropology (Malinowski 1961; Mauss 1990), I did not follow the tendencies that favor a logic of debates on "isolated units" of religion, politics, economy and natural

environment; instead, I showed that they exist in configuration. Looking for connections, I emphasized in my thesis that for Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn people living along the coast, the sea is not a barrier but a "zone of connection" (Salemink 2011). My approach was built on the "Mediterranean analogy" and the view that different regions in Asia, including Southern and Southeastern China and Southeast Asia, are connected across the South China Sea (Sutherland 2003: 14). My focus on connections allowed me to think not only in terms of "political" or "administrative" borders, but to explore correlations and borrowings, and continuity and change beyond these imposed boundaries and show the sea as a unifying and integrating factor. Thus, my research of the two sites—Sa Huỳnh and Lý Sơn—was not a comparative project because these two settings were part of a single cosmological territory and formed an interconnected "littoral society" in which the sea acted as transmitter of beliefs. By looking at the two sites I was better equipped to chart the multi-faceted contestations over religious landscape taking place against the backdrop of changes in the ecology, the economy and in politics.

9.6   Limitation of this thesis

One of the unique contributions of this thesis was that—against a "terrestrial bias" rooted in the tendency to do research in Northern and Southern Vietnam—my approach took into account contemporary people living by the sea, which I glossed as a littoral society. However, at the same time my conceptualization of the sea as a "route" connecting the communities of the littoral society turned out to create its own limitation because it neglected terrestrial links and connections of this society with other areas, such as hinterlands. Therefore, it would be worth exploring connections not only across the sea, but also inland. Pearson (2003: 27) precisely makes this point when he asks, "How far inland must we go before we can say the ocean no longer has any influence?" In a similar spirit as Pearson, Salemink (2011) proposes the "view from the mountains" and pleads for looking at the exchanges connecting the two cultural and geographic zones—highlands and lowlands.

In my thesis I only barely touched on the issue of the relations between lowlands and highlands. I briefly mentioned that through the salt trade Sa Huỳnh people were connected to the Highlands which offered them cassia (a sort of cinnamon) for incense production as well as rice in exchange. In turn, Lý Sơn people were taking red rice plants from the highlanders to experiment with their cultivation of the infertile soil on the island. I also mentioned that the Thiên Y A Na goddess, who is believed to secure the livelihood of the

fishermen on the seashore, was present in the mountain and forest regions of Trà Xuân. In her temple, the Hrê Highlanders, Việt people and ethnic Chinese were engaged in trade in forest goods like cassia and in the past precious eaglewood (*trầm*) used for incense and connected with the littoral society through commerce (Hardy 2009). The goddess and sacred spaces provide a sample of the many examples of economic and cosmological continuity of the coastal villages, which constituted only a fragment of a much wider cosmological landscape that extends up to the mountains and links distant places together (cf. Allerton 2009). Due to space and time limitations, I was unable to pursue this view further.

Imagine that you are standing at the top of the hill and looking out across the sea. If you turn to the west you see the green mountains and the river which connects the highlands with lowlands and flows into the sea. The landscape, at first glance, seems to be static even if your eyes capture roads running through the mountains. Although it is difficult for you to see people, you know that they are there, busy with their daily tasks. Exploring their lives, however, is another project waiting in the future.

Figure 9. "The view from the mountains," Quảng Ngãi Province, 2007

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Glossary of Vietnamese terms used

Administrative terms:

chủ tịch	chairman
Công an Biên phòng	Border Guard Command
huyện	district
Sở Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du Lich	Provincial Office of Culture, Sport and Tourism
thôn	village or community
tỉnh	province
xã	often translated as "commune," refers to an administrative unit denoting municipality consisting of various villages or *làng* – residential units or "villages" or "communities."
Ủy Ban Nhân Dân (UBND)	state institution of the People's Committee

Territorial denominations:

ấp	hamlet (typical for southern Vietnam)
Hoàng Sa	Paracel Archipelago
làng	village
lân	sub-hamlet
Trường Sa	Spratly Archipelago
vạn	self-ruling fishing organization, fishing community
vạn chày	floating fishing community (see also religious denominations)
xóm	hamlet (typical for northern Vietnam)

Terms for organizations:

Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt	Buddhist Association of Vietnam, created by the Party-State in 1981
Phật Giáo Thống-nhất Việt Nam	Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), unrecognized by the Party-State

Religious denominations:

âm hồn	soul of the dead person
chùa	Buddhist pagoda
chủ làng	village senior, master of the ceremony
chủ vạn	head of the fishing community
dinh	literally: "palace"—here "temple"
đình	communal house, political and religious center of the village

lăng	literally: "mausoleum" or "tomb"—here communal temple of the fishing community
mê tín dị đoan	superstitious/superstition
miếu	shrine, temple
Quan Âm	Quan Yin in Chinese
tín ngưỡng	religious beliefs
vạn	fishing religious organization