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Photoshopped Ancestors

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Abstract

On the basis of a case study among the Bru of the Central Vietnamese Highlands, I examine how the recent introduction of Photoshop-manipulated photographs into the Bru ancestor cult fits with their traditional religious conceptions about pollution and oblivion. I propose three possible explanations for the entrance of these photographs into Bru culture: culture change, mimicry, and syncretism. Based on this, I raise the question of how to interpret the effects of photographs on the Bru: what do they mean or express in terms of identification with and integration and assimilation into Vietnamese society? After discussing some instances of general photo use among the resettled Bru of Đăk Lăk, I present a case study on how the photos taken from the identity cards of a deceased man and his widow were transformed into a manipulated Bru ancestor photo in a Vietnamese-run photography shop. At the end of my paper I rephrase the question of photo manipulation in a wider context – that of the relationship between subjects and objects, i.e. human persons and the material world.

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Introduction: photographs and idealisation

In Kazakh writer Sherhan Murtazaev's captivating short story *Pesnia tsikady (The song of the cicada)*,[3] a wandering photographer arrives in a small village in Central Asia in the 1970s. The protagonist Kadisha is an old woman whose husband, Maksut, disappeared without a trace in WWII, and she asks to have an old photo of him enlarged to hang on the wall. The photographer mistakes the photo for the woman's son. To dissolve the resentment caused by the misunderstanding and to make good his blunder, he asks for a youthful photo of the woman in which she is shown with a young woman friend before their marriage, with their heads on each other's shoulders, but he does not say why. When he returns a week later with the finished photos, the village rejoices, but the subjects hardly recognise themselves: "The photographer has coloured reality. He clad each and every person in modern clothes and prestigious dinner jackets." Kadisha also receives the enlarged photo of Maksut, but now she is also in the photo with her head on the shoulder of her missing husband. Sensitive to the workings of the human soul, the photographer compiled the picture from two shots: Maksut's in uniform with a fixed stare, and Kadisha's embracing her friend, and he dressed them (partly) in up-to-date clothes. Kadisha is aware of the "deceit" that the photographer "wanted to unite the young couple separated by the war" but she is deeply moved. She stifles her first response, an instinctive rejection, and proudly accepting the picture she lies to the whole village, saying that the photo is an "original" taken right after their wedding. At the end of the story she orders another copy of the photo to send it to her daughter living in a faraway city.

The story sounds familiar to many of us. Since the invention of the photograph in 1839 as a modern technical procedure and a possibility to represent reality, its use has not been limited to capturing reality 'objectively' – if that is possible at all. The birth of photograph was followed almost immediately by the birth of 'retouching', which was originally meant to rectify technical flaws. However, the manipulation of the pictures also quickly began: 'face-lifting', adding 'beauty-spots', eliminating unwanted details or persons, inserting others not present, combining several shots into one – in short, modifying reality for artistic or other purposes. The earliest composite photos date from the 1860s.[4] Other well-known examples are the erasures from photos in Stalin's time, when former political figures fallen out of favour were 'removed' (see King 1997; Brugioni 1999). Examples can be adduced ad libitum.

Idealisation and aestheticising have thus always been present in photography. Technical possibilities and especially artistic ambitions have meant that from the very beginning photos have been more than mechanical and 'soulless' renderings of an 'objective' reality; they sought the dignity and the status of art, transforming, colouring, idealising, and manipulating 'reality'. A quotation from an early article on 'gum print' by a popular Hungarian landscape photographer, Gyula Széchy, at the end of the nineteenth century illustrates this endeavour in a telling way:

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[3] For a biography of Kazakh author and editor Sherhan Murtazaev or Murtaza (1932–2018), who was named the "People's Writer of Kazakhstan" in 1992, see https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Муртаза,_Шерхан. Originally, *Pesnia tsikady (The song of the cicada)* was published in Russian in the volume *Chernoe ozherel'e* (Moskva: Sov. Pisatel', 1977). A Hungarian translation of the story appeared in a selection of contemporary Kazakh short stories entitled *A díjnyertes ló* [The prize-winning horse]. Európa Kiadó, ["Modern Könyvtár" series], n.d. [1978].

[4] An analysis in the Library of Congress *Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue* (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/mystery.html) demonstrates that the photo of General Ulysses S. Grant viewing his troops on horseback at City Point (Hopewell, Virginia), dated June 1864 or a little later, is a composite of three photos – and not all of them are of Grant! On technical and ethical questions related to photo manipulation, see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo_manipulation

"[T]hanks to this device a method is invented through which the amateur photographer may change details which may spoil or heighten the artistic effect of the picture, according to his/her liking. He/she may take away, add, or colour whatever he/she wants. That is to say: he does painting with a negative plate! *Who would dare to pretend that realisation of a picture based on a subject chosen with artistic taste and brought to effect through such a technique is photography without artistic value?*" ([Szy. Monogram] 1899: 16; Tőry 2004, italics and translation are mine, G.V.).

In Europe, photography was overshadowed by painting as a form of art and had to fight for recognition (Behrend and Wendl 1998: 11; Marien 2015; Tőry 2004). In early photo studios photography and painting went hand in hand: photos were manipulated to create painterly effects, or conversely, paintings served as backdrops for photos. Painted photographic backdrops were a standard feature in early photography studios from around 1860 to 1920 (Linderman 2010). By around 1880, customers could choose from catalogues containing hundreds of possible backdrops for their portraits. Victorian garden scenes, idealised landscapes, and real or fictitious townscapes were among the most popular outdoor motifs, while Victorian salons or details of them – a fireplace, a staircase, elegant furniture, gold-framed paintings – and rustic interiors topped the list of indoor scenes (Wendl and Prussat 1998: 29–30). Posing in front of such backdrops created the desired *couleur locale*, be it a 'wilderness' or a palace, or even the Garden of Eden.

Backdrops fell out of fashion with the advent of roll-film cameras that brought photography to the masses, but they are (or were) still in use in altered forms in postcolonial settings in developing countries. In Ghanaian studio photography, for example, clients are photographed in front of hand-painted backgrounds showing them in illuminated modern cities, amongst skyscrapers and elegant blocs of houses; in airports and in front of the gates of planes; in nicely furnished homes, with fridges, electric fans, armchairs, and other symbols of wealth and class (Wendl and Prussat 1998). In India as early as the nineteenth century, we have an indigenous use of photography not merely to represent reality, but to create its own reality through montage and retouching (see Wendl and Prussat 1998; Pinney 1997).[5]

Retouching and/or manipulating photographs received a great impetus in the late 1980s and early 1990s with digitisation and the appearance of editing and processing software, with the program Photoshop developed by Adobe Systems at the forefront; the name of the popular software has come to stand for the process itself.[6] Version 1.0 was released in October 1988; at the time of writing the first version of this article (November–December 2017) version 19.0.1 CC 2018 was available (Jones 2014).[7] In Vietnam the procedure gained popularity in the 1990s and spread all over the country with breath-taking speed.[8] In the last two decades everybody in Vietnam – scholars, tourists, visitors, and residents alike – has surely come across innumerable manipulated

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[5] I thank Florian Köhler for having drawn my attention to these backdrops. I was unfortunately unable to consult Pinney's book.

[6] In addition to Photoshop, the GIMP editor has been available since 1995 (unlike Photoshop, it is free and open source software), and dozens of similar programs have subsequently appeared. Although Photoshop still tops the list, these other programs, with more limited functions but wide availability, have been at least as conducive to the spread of digital picture manipulation and its expansion into a social practice. For simplicity's sake I will use the brand name Photoshop in the meaning of "image editing software".

[7] On the history of diverse versions of Adobe see https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adobe_Photoshop and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adobe_Photoshop_version_history.

[8] Photoshopping old photos started among the Vietnamese in the 1990s and my colleague and friend Đinh Hồng Hải was among the first to use this software at that time. Personal e-mail communication from Đinh Hồng Hải, 9 February 2019.

pictures, whether in homes, on the streets, or in pagodas and cemeteries from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. And the digital revolution is still not over: a 2015 study investigates the first Vietnamese online memorial site; the uploaded pictures of the dead may be manipulated online or digitally edited offline prior to uploading (Heathcote 2015).

Main Research Questions

Photoshop-manipulated photography has received a certain amount of recent scholarly attention. In an article on ancestor veneration in *Đổi Mới* Vietnam (Jellema 2007), Jellema touches on it *en passant*. Writing about newly built luxurious memorials in honour of the ancestors, she mentions how the computer manipulation of ancestral portraits was growing in popularity. According to her, the new technology allows descendants to grant the dead an upward economic trajectory impossible during their lifetimes: "To achieve this retroactive class advancement, a photographic likeness of the deceased's face and hands are digitally retrofitted into stock images evocative of imperial and colonial privilege" (Jellema 2007: 477). Nina Hien in her paper on haptic technologies of the self looks at "notions of the individual and the subject in Vietnam" through an examination of "the capacity of photographic technology not only to depict people as individuals but also to create them as social beings and models of ideal Vietnamese types" (Hien 2012: 472). Though she takes up the question of a status leap both in a material and a spiritual sense, speaking about "control over one's own life and fate", her focus is more on the meaning of the "magic touch" (*tút*): the process of unifying disparate elements expressed with the notion of grafting (*ghép*), which is a common technique in digital photo retouching (e.g. creating photographic composites of families whose members live far apart, 'growing' photographic family trees, or reuniting wives and husbands in the afterlife – just as in the case of Kadisha, the protagonist of Murtazaev's short story). For her, such aesthetic treatments that make bodies whole or connect them with the souls of the departed are new tools that transform human fates and attempt "to redress the errors of history, 'reboot' the moral universe, and project new desires onto the future" (Hien 2012: 488–490).

In my paper I examine two interrelated questions in connection with Photoshop montage and idealisation among the Bru of the Central Vietnamese Highlands. Having observed in 2007 the use of Photoshop-manipulated pictures in Đắc Lắc province on the walls of houses, on Vietnamese-type ancestor altars, and on tombs in the cemeteries, I ask how the recent introduction of photographs into Bru ancestor cult fits with their traditional religious conceptions about pollution and oblivion. What impact has this new custom had and what possible changes to traditional religious notions does it imply? What is the function of photography in the Bru ancestor cult? Are photos simply adjustments to a new social environment, a yielding to socio-political reality and power relations, or are they instead integral parts of Bru religion and culture?

Departing from this last question, I raise a second, more general set of questions that follow to some degree upon Hien's approach: what effects might Photoshop-manipulated ancestor photographs have on the identity of the Bru? What is the (involuntarily) agency of the photos? How should it be interpreted? What do the photos mean or express in terms of identification with Vietnamese values and society? Do they express the Bru's aspirations and desires? Do the photos indicate integration and assimilation, or are they the result of social mimicry in Homi Bhabha's sense (1994)? At the end I rephrase the question in a wider context in line with the examination in

new material culture studies of how objects shape humans – that is to say, I raise the question of the relationship between human subjects and the material world.

The Bru of the Central Vietnamese Highlands. Bru culture and history in general

The Bru (known in Vietnamese as "Vân Kiều") are one of the 54 officially recognised and named ethnic groups (*dân tộc*) in the Vietnamese Socialist Republic and make up less than 1 per cent of the total population (74,506 Bru out of a total Vietnamese population of 85,846,997 in 2009. See: *The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census*). Physically, linguistically, and culturally the Bru are very different from the neighbouring Vietnamese (Kinh) majority. They live in the forested hillside regions on both sides of the Trường Sơn mountain range that separate Vietnam from Laos, close to the 17th parallel, the infamous Demilitarisation Zone during the Vietnam War. On the Vietnamese side, they inhabit the provinces of Quảng Trị and Quảng Bình, mainly to the north of the former Colonial Route 9 linking the coast (Đông Hà, Vietnam) to the Mekong Valley (Savannakhet, Laos). Their language belongs to the 'Western Katuic' branch of the Mon-Khmer family.

Fig. 1.: Area populated by the Bru in Central Vietnam. Enlarged detail from the Vietnam Tourist Map Northern Section 1:1,500,000, Third Edition, 2002.

Up until the recent past, they were subsistence farmers practising slash-and-burn shifting cultivation; their staple crop was 'dry' rice (although in some places they also grew 'wet' rice), which was supplemented by maize, millet, sesame, tobacco, and vegetables. They raised poultry, pigs, goats, cattle, and buffalo. Weaving, metalworking, and pottery were mostly not practised, and they relied on trade to provide them with these necessary items in their material culture. In the past decades coffee as a cash crop and wet rice have acquired great importance especially among the resettled Bru of Đắk Lắk province.

Bru society is patrilineal and patrilocal. The basic functional unit in social structure is *ntắng*, which is a shallow patrilineage (or a segment of one) having a depth of 4–5 generations from a common ancestor. It is a named, exogamous, solidary, ritual group headed by the eldest male member; leadership is inherited according to the principle of seniority. The political and landowning unit is the village. Political power is exercised by the village chief. Bru religion is based on the worship of various nature spirits ('animism', 'shamanism') and on ancestor cults; a small number of them embraced Protestantism in the 1960s while Buddhism has practically not attracted followers.

Though a relatively 'isolated' hill tribe, there is clear evidence of contact between the Bru and the outside world for centuries (Vargyas 2000, 2016a and 2017). Situated between "the Siamese anvil and the Vietnamese hammer" (Harmand 1879–1880: 278), they maintained vassal and commercial relations with both the Siamese and the Vietnamese empires. The earliest Vietnamese sources on them date back to the sixteenth century (see Dương Văn An 1961). After several centuries of nominal vassalage, they came under direct Vietnamese control around 1830 during the Siamese–Vietnamese struggle for the left bank of the Mekong. After the arrival of the French in the second half of the nineteenth century and a relatively peaceful era under French rule, the Bru were thrust into the main course of world history with World War II, then the First (1946–1954) and the Second (1960s–1975) Indochina Wars. What came after is likely to be familiar: the fall of Saigon, the country's reunification under communist rule (1975) and the ensuing period of political, economic, and demographic upheavals.

Today, they, like other minorities, have a relatively marginalised position, not so much due to geographical remoteness as economic and cultural marginalisation (Goudineau 2003: xiii). From the point of view of constitutional rights they have equal status with other ethnic groups or 'ethnicities' (*dân tộc*) in Vietnam; according to the current constitution (2013) "the State shall implement a policy of comprehensive development (…) for the minority ethnicities (…)".[9]

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[9] Article 5 of the Constitution reads: "1. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a unified nation of all ethnicities living together in the country of Vietnam. 2. All the ethnicities are equal and unite with, respect and assist one another for mutual development; all acts of discrimination against and division of the ethnicities are prohibited. 3. The national language is Vietnamese. Every ethnic group has the right to use its own spoken and written language to preserve its own identity and to promote its fine customs, practices, traditions and culture. 4. The State shall implement a policy of comprehensive development and create the conditions for the minority ethnicities to draw upon/further their internal strengths and develop together with the country." https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/250222/the-constitution-of-the-socialist-republic-of-viet-nam.html#e0DmtrCdOXZUOZPw.97
For the most notable development projects see http://vovworld.vn/en-US/current-affairs/vietnam-protects-right-to-equality-among-ethnic-groups-635746.vov

SOUTH VIETNAM

ĐỢT 2 :
107 người
(24,25/5/72)

ĐỢT 1 :
2,481 ng.
(19,21/4/72)

LỊCH-TRÌNH DI DÂN **BRU**
Từ Quảng-Trị vào Darlac

Fig. 2.: Map showing the relocation of the Bru after Nguyễn Trắc Dĩ 1972: 74.

Owing to their strategic geographic position around the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the Bru became involuntary participants in and victims of the Vietnam War. Two moments of this devastating war are especially important in relation to them: the Tet Offensive in January 1968,[10] when, following the evacuation of Hướng Hóa/Khe Sanh by the Americans, thousands of Bru fled to refugee camps near Quảng Trị. The other is spring 1972, when, simultaneously with the withdrawal of the American and South Vietnamese troops from Quảng Trị, 2,500 Bru – most of whom had collaborated with the Americans – were airlifted to Đắc Lắc province (about 500 air km

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[10] Tet Offensive: one of the turning points of the Vietnam war, a concerted set of offensives by the North Vietnamese troops in the whole area of South Vietnam that started on 30 January 1968 – the day of the New Year (*Tet*) in the Vietnamese lunar calendar. The siege of Khe Sanh began a week earlier, on 21 January 1968 and lasted for 77 days, until 8 April (see Murphy 2003; Nalty 1973; Pidor 1982; Prados and Stubbe 1991; Shore 1969; Tucker 2011 and Kutler 1996).

away from Quảng Trị) as part of a rescue resettlement project (Nguyễn Trắc Dĩ 1972). The hope was that once the war was resolved as the South Vietnamese and their allies expected, the Bru would be able to return to their homes. However, the end of the war left them stuck there and they still constitute a small enclave among the Rhade/Ê Đê, the original inhabitants, and the newly arrived Vietnamese majority.

Today, the two Bru groups separated from each other by the war remain in close contact with each other thanks to technological development, telephone services, and the explosive modernisation of mass transportation (long-distance shared taxis, etc.).

Fieldwork among the Bru: Quảng Trị and Đắk Lắk. Circumstances of the fieldwork.

My original fieldwork among the Bru took place over a total of 18 months between 1985 and 1989 in Quảng Trị province, the 'ancient' homeland of the Bru, around the town of Khe Sanh, near the Laotian border. It was realised in the framework of scientific cooperation between the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. Thanks to this 'brotherly' cooperation (at that time Hungary still belonged to the communist world), I succeeded in carrying out participatory fieldwork in Hướng Linh district (in the sibling villages of Cóc and Dông Cho). During the final period of my stay, notwithstanding the well-known problems of doing social research in Vietnam, I was left completely free and unsupervised for long periods: local policemen wearied of accompanying me everywhere as early as 1985–1986 during my preliminary investigations, while my Vietnamese ethnographer colleagues took turns joining me in the field in order to keep up with the common project. I moved into a Bru house and lived with one family, shared in their lives for good or ill and learnt the Bru language in a 'classical' long-term participatory fieldwork project.

Contrarily to hopes, I encountered a radically different situation 20 years later when I carried out a second field research stint as an associated external research fellow in a project on Vietnam at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. This 6-month 're-study' took place in 2007 in Đắk Lắk province among the resettled Bru introduced above, in Krông Pắc, Ea Hiu (formerly Buôn Jat, a Rhade/Ê Đê village).[11]

Time has not come yet to tell all the details of this fieldwork. Suffice to say that for a number of reasons, the Central Highlands in general and particularly the area around the city of Buôn Ma Thuột are still closed for (long-term) scientific research. In 2007 the main reason for this restriction was the riots that had taken place a few years earlier in 2001 and 2004 (see e.g. Guérin et al. 2003: 1–7; Salemink 2003; Human Rights Watch 2002) and ended with a most unfortunate bloody retaliation. This, coupled with the resettled Bru's former allegiance to the Americans and their Protestant faith, is enough for the Vietnamese authorities to treat them with the same suspicion they have regarding other minorities (Jörai, Rhade, etc.).

Given the historical and political circumstances I can consider myself very privileged to have received permission to enter the area and spend nearly half a year doing research there. But the fact remains that from the very first moment I was subject to an incredible degree of surveillance and restriction that made fieldwork practically impossible. Upon our arrival a chief policeman came to

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[11] If I use quotation marks for 're-study', it is because this was not a re-study in the proper sense of the word, the place of the fieldwork and the community studied being different in the two cases. But it was a 're-study' insofar as the amount of time that had elapsed since the original fieldwork and the resettled community's adaptation to their new environment made an assessment of the trends of cultural change possible.

see us, introduced himself, and explained that I could not leave the house without being accompanied by him. We had to notify him a few minutes in advance by phone, and when he arrived we could set out. We spent the first months of 'research work' in a small team consisting of him, one or two of his subordinates, one or two local party or security leaders, my research assistant, and myself. Moreover, detailed notes on our conversations were made on the spot! It is natural that in such circumstances I had to abandon the idea of conducting any systematic fieldwork. I could not converse freely with my Bru interlocutors, who were frightened by the number and the social position of their visitors. Worrying about causing them inconvenience and appalled by the circumstances, I dropped most of my original plans and tried to improvise with conversations on 'harmless' topics.

The case study on the use of the photos among the Bru in Ea Hiu below is the result of such an improvisation; the circumstances explain the almost total lack of emic information. My paper is necessarily contingent, lacking the appropriate depth. The material was collected in the relocated Bru community but the analysis relies mostly on knowledge acquired during my earlier fieldwork. Since no long-term ethnographic research, either Vietnamese or European, has ever been made among the Bru outside of my fieldwork, what follows is based solely on my own research and knowledge. The reader must accept my provisional explanations until such a time as new data becomes available.

Bru Religion

In order to understand what follows, some introductory notes are needed on Bru religion. Broadly speaking, there are three main domains in traditional Bru religion, all of them related to different spheres of everyday existence. The first is subsistence agriculture and the ritual cycle accompanying it. From a religious point of view, the essence of the subsistence cycle is that dry rice is more than a simple food plant. It is a living being whose 'soul' or divinity, *yĭang* Abon is thought to leave the house and to establish herself in the swidden, returning from it only after harvest with the last ears of corn collected. Most of the agricultural ceremonies recreate this symbolic cycle: first the seed-corn is 'awakened', then *yĭang* Abon departs to the swidden where a miniature hut is built for her. She spends the whole season there and is manifested in each rice-plant and stalk; hence the numerous prescriptions and taboos surrounding the whole cycle, defining not only the appropriate rituals but also the proper technologies from sowing to harvesting The Bru agricultural cycle is thus an intricate complex where each technological phase is preceded or accompanied by an appropriate ritual.

The second important sphere in Bru religion relates to the individual and his/her fate: illness, misfortune, and ways of dealing with them, i.e. shamanism and (magical-religious) healing that reflect ideas about intervention in human matters by representatives of the supernatural world. Communication between the spirit world and that of humans is carried out by the unique Bru religious specialist, the shaman. According to Bru conception, most illnesses are of supernatural origin. Healing consists therefore in identifying the superhuman (*yĭang*) responsible for the disease, identifying the 'transgression' that resulted in the illness, and also settling the 'price' (the animal to be sacrificed) for setting it right. This is followed by performing a sacrifice, a festive and large scale form of which is the shamanic séance, involving the consumption of alcohol. During these spectacular séances and 'armed' with their sword, shamanic headdress, and other symbolic

requisites, the shamans wage a war in prayer and song on the representatives of the supernatural world; they also call back the souls of the humans that have wandered off. Another of their tasks is to eliminate 'bad' death and the resulting 'fear' caused by accidents involving the flow of blood; they also have to exorcise some 'predatory' spirits that devour the intestines of living humans.

Third, and most importantly for this study, the cult of the dead and of the ancestors and the concomitant periodic commemorative funeral feasts, at the end of which, after three generations, the dead are transformed into ancestors, are central elements in Bru religious life. According to the Bru conception, when a person dies, his/her 'soul' leaves the body but remains on the earth, staying close to the tomb and the house-shaped altar/sanctuary (*dống nsắk*) that is built in the forest for the 'recent' dead. In this place, after a year-long liminal phase, it joins the group of the 'recent' dead on the occasion of an annual sacrifice. Furthermore, each decade these agnatic dead, as a group, are the object of a secondary funeral or commemorative feast, which is repeated periodically for three generations. It is only at the end of this series of very complex funeral rites, as the memory of the deceased slowly becomes blurred, that the soul 'rises' to an ill-defined 'sky' and fuses with *yĩang* Kaneaq, the divinity embodying all the different generations of patrilineal ancestors. The most important figure of the Bru pantheon and the ancestor cult associated with it, *yĩang* Kaneaq plays a fundamental role in the cohesion of the group: lineage is defined first and foremost in reference to a common Kaneaq and the group of 'recent' dead who have not yet been integrated into it.

The structure of the elaborate secondary burials is the same as that of those for the newly departed. The only significant difference between them is that in the course of the secondary burials the dead are replaced by small pieces of iron. On the eve of the symbolic funerals these pieces of iron are 'buried' and the 'souls' of the deceased are called 'back' into them. The next day, the iron pieces, which have metamorphosed into the 'dead', are exhumed and carried in a solemn procession to the temporary structure built for the purpose of the feast. Here, they are treated as if they were true bodies of the dead: they are put into symbolic coffins and ritually cleansed, they receive sacrifices and are entertained by funeral songs. At the end of the feast, the 'iron-dead' depart from the world of the living but they continue to come back once every decade. After three generations the circle is closed: the dead are transformed into ancestors, who return among the humans forever in order to protect them. The 'conveyor belt' of this journey towards Kaneaq is always on the move: by the time the old dead leave it and enter Kaneaq, there are new ones who step in and replace them. Residing in the house altar of *yĩang* Kaneaq, the ancestors eternally watch, control, and influence the lives of their descendants who live under their shadow, to paraphrase the title of Hsu's classic monograph on Chinese ancestor cult (Hsu 1948; Vargyas 2018a, 2019b).

There are two basic and recurring concepts in these very complicated death rituals: pollution and oblivion of the personal memory of the departed. As for the first, the Bru conceive of the 'recent' dead as ritually 'polluted/impure' *(nhop)*. This contamination or ritual pollution emanates from the corpse as a dampness/smell/vapour *(hơi)*. In order to grasp the manifold meanings of this intricate notion, let us turn to the neighbouring Vietnamese (Kinh), who have similar concepts that have been analysed in detail in the classic work of Vietnamese religious anthropology by Father Léopold Cadière (1957).[12] In his chapter on "vital breath" ('souffle vital'; *hơi* in Vietnamese) (Cadière

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[12] Father Léopold Cadière (1869–1955), a French missionary from the Missions étrangères de Paris, is considered the founder of Vietnamese studies. He arrived in Huế in 1892 and spent his whole life in Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Tiên provinces, in the immediate vicinity of the Bru (see Dartigues 2018).

1957: 168–180), after 12 pages (!) of thorough explanation full of linguistic, folkloristic, and ethnographic examples, he lays down an equation as follows: steam and breath = emanation = natural and supernatural influence = life principle = breath. He sums it up as follows:

> "We have to keep in mind this fundamental idea that both the totality of beings [including inanimate beings! G.V.] just as each being in its particularity, have a *hơi,* an influence which is conceived of as a breath; that the universe has a constitutive principle which is conceived of as breath, similarly to human beings who have a life principle considered breath". (Cadière 1957: 178, my translation, G.V.)

Later, he adds that this *hơi* or vital breath disappears completely with death. "But if we consider it as a kind of an emanation having a supernatural influence, then it stays with the corpse" (Cadière 1957: 196). It is very telling that the Bru have the same word, *hơi,* with the same meaning. Let us put aside for the moment the question of whether the Bru have borrowed this notion from the Vietnamese or whether they share it through their common descent. What is essential for our purpose is that this emanation is then of *sui generis* nature: it comes from no external source and requires no more explanation; quite contradictorily, *this* explains everything. It comes about at the moment of death, and a very long period of time and numerous purifying rituals are needed for the dead to get rid of their 'contagious' or 'impure' character. *That is why* the 'recent' dead cannot become ancestors immediately after death: they must undergo all the purifying ceremonies as indispensable, essential parts of the periodic commemorative festivities of the dead. The Bru funeral cycle is thus a long purifying process that lasts for three generations and consists of the elements enumerated above: the 'recent' dead remain on the earth, somewhere around the grave and a house-shaped altar/shrine erected in the woods (*dống nsǎk*). During the annual festivity of the dead and the 're-burying' ceremonies approximately every ten years – the purpose and *Leitmotif* of which is purification – the dead are washed, sprinkled (*sarak*) with 'holy water', and cleansed in several other ways (lustration and purifying rites). Owing to their impurity, the newly departed cannot even join the 'recent' dead. Separate altars/huts are erected for them next to the large common shrine in the forest lest they should contaminate others already further ahead on the path toward 'purity'. For the same purpose during the 'ten-year' three-day symbolic 're-burials' the Bru hold a 'meeting of the new and old dead': they symbolically purify several dozen (sometimes up to seventy!) dead together so that later these dead can be treated as a group of largely the same purity. As mentioned earlier, only after a span of three generations and after the periodically performed commemorative rituals and the necessary purifying rites will the dead be pure enough 'to ascend' and become 'ancestors' in the form of Kaneaq.

As for the other concept, oblivion or de-individualising remembrance, we have seen: the 'dead' become 'ancestors' when they no longer have descendants who knew them when they were alive. This principle is voiced explicitly by the Bru. The limit of direct, personal recollection of an individual in every human society, including the Bru, is three or a maximum of four generations.[13] When the personal memory of the deceased has vanished together with the persons who knew them when they were alive, the dead become ancestors. Or, more precisely, they merge into the single primordial ancestor deity, Kaneaq, via the series of secondary burial rituals.

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[13] To this question, see Assmann's "communicative memory" as opposed to "cultural memory" (see Assmann 2013: 49–57).

One could ask whether periodic 'commemorative' feasts might not just as easily be a way of evoking personal memory of the deceased rather than a way of erasing it. There are, however, a number of facts contradicting this view. First of all, the Bru deal with their dead only in groups. Except for the very first year when the departed cannot even join the house-shaped altar/shrine (*dống nsǎk*) erected in the woods for the 'recent dead' because of his/her polluting state, and a special hut is erected for him/her, he/she 'lives' in one compartment of one huge structure, side-by-side with all the other 'recent' dead, and receives a single sacrifice once a year when his/her name is evoked – together with all the other names. I would argue that one unique remembrance *en masse* and per year is not very much, if the purpose were personal commemoration. The same holds true for the 'ten-year' periodic 're-burials'. Here, too, the dead are treated *en masse*. On these occasions the recent dead are treated and commemorated as a category, not as particular individuals. True, at the beginning their personal names are still evoked together with the names of the others, but again, it is not so much about their personal identity as about their ritual state: the focus is on the question of their (relative) purity. Bru funeral songs and special rituals, as a rule, deal with human fate *in general* but never with personal idiosyncrasies. No personal memories, no deeds of, no stories about the departed are evoked at the funerals. Everything seems to point towards de-personalisation and amalgamation! And let us not forget: all this occurs only once every ten years.

Second, the Bru never visit graves and cemeteries. On the contrary, they keep clear of them due to a great fear of the spectres *(kumuiq)*. Once they leave behind their dead in the cemetery, they never return there except during the first 15 days, when they regularly bring them food and drink. At the end of the funeral they ritually 'close' the road in order to hinder the departed from coming back. If there is no return for the departed, there is no return to the burial site for the living either. There are no prescribed dates each month to visit the graves as there are among the Vietnamese, there is no more mention of the departed unless it cannot be avoided, there is no 'all souls' day'. Third, when consuming alcohol, there are certain prescribed prayers and gestures to the recent dead (*satia kumuiq*). These prayers are never personalised; standardised kinship categories are enumerated in them, 'our dead fathers, mothers, uncles' etc., but there is no mention of true names, of concrete persons. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, there is no historical remembrance whatsoever. No 'heroes', no heroic deeds of the past, no historical epic. The Bru do not recall the name of any exceptional person, chief, or hero. There is no corporate and public remembrance of history or historical events.

Perhaps this much is enough to convince the reader that there are a lot of mechanisms to ensure that remembrance is de-individualised. In sum, one major aim of the commemoration of the deceased over three generations is to erase the personal memory of the dead from collective remembrance and to replace it with an anonymous primeval ancestor god.

Photoshopped Ancestors

Let us turn now to our case study. The practice of photo manipulation in the Murtazaev short story described at the beginning of this paper is taking place today at full speed in other parts of Asia, specifically Vietnam – and thanks to the new availability of photo manipulation software, at a scale that far surpasses the old-fashioned photo montage in 1970s Central Asia. What Jellema described as a growing custom around Hanoi and the Red River delta in 2007 and Hien as a booming industry

in Ho Chi Minh City in the early 2000s, was also a flourishing fashion in the Central Vietnamese Highlands (Tây Nguyên)[14] in 2007 when I was doing my fieldwork among the resettled Bru around Buôn Ma Thuột in Ea Hiu. This part of the paper reports on the phenomena I observed and documented there.

I first took note of this phenomenon when I visited a few Bru at home in Ea Hiu at the beginning of my research stay. To my great astonishment, I caught sight of a manipulated photo of the shaman assistant *mpơaq* Yon, a dear old friend of mine from the time of my fieldwork in Quảng Trị province, Hoong village (Hướng Linh district) in 1985–1989 (figs. 3–5). I immediately recognised his distinctive face despite the incongruity of the surroundings he was shown in. He was wearing a European coat and tie, sitting in an elegant armchair with upholstered back and seat, more European than Vietnamese, beside a carved round table in a similar style. Across from him at the table sat his wife in another armchair, in Vietnamese *áo dài* costume; there was a teapot with cups, and a vase with white flowers (roses?) on the table. The background was a huge poster showing Lake Hoàn Kiếm in the centre of Hanoi, with an enormous tree in bloom hanging its branches over the lake, suggestive of the atmosphere of 'nature' so highly esteemed in Asia and in Vietnam: as if the persons sitting in the photo were having their afternoon tea on the porch looking out upon the lake.

I was flabbergasted by the photo and started inquiring about it. It turned out that the host, *mpơaq* Khăm was the brother of *mpơaq* Yon's wife, one of the most important representatives of the high-prestige group of 'wife givers' (*kuya*) for *mpơaq* Yon. *Mpơaq* Khăm received the photo made by a Vietnamese photographer in Khe Sanh as a keepsake from *mpơaq* Yon and his wife during a visit in 2001, because they wished to express their reverence for the maternal uncle (MoBr)[15] in this way. *Mpơaq* Khăm and his family had heard a lot about me from *mpơaq* Yon, so they were happy to meet me in person. The manipulated photo bridged the 20 years and 500–600 km that separated us, radiating the light of an old friendship upon our new shared acquaintances.

It soon turned out that there were pictures/photos on the walls or altars in most houses. The oldest were mostly placed on altars (fig. 6). These are usually scanned versions of old photos, typically 'cropped' from identity cards – a free source available for everyone – and improved by Photoshop or some similar software: the scratches, dots, moles, pimples, wrinkles get eliminated, contours sharpened, colours added – and the photo is ready for an altar. These photos are not put before any background or inserted into a 'ready-to-use' setting – they are merely improved and embellished, most often by colouring.

At this point I have to emphasise that when I concluded my first field research project in 1989, the Bru had no photos at all.[16] They never depicted their ancestors and/or deities in any form, whether painting, sculpture, or any other form of art. The present-day use of pictures and photos by the Bru in Ea Hiu (and Quảng Trị) has only come about through massive Vietnamese influence that has led them to adopt the customs of the national majority. And the custom itself – placing photos on altars of the ancestors – is relatively new among the Vietnamese themselves! It came about after World War II when the photo as a commodity became available cheaply on a mass scale for

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[14] The region comprises the following five provinces: Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Lâm Đồng.

[15] *Mpơaq* Khăm was 'maternal uncle' for *mpơaq* Yon's children.

[16] I disregard here the fact that they must have had ID cards (with photos) in 1985–89, but they practically did not use them – at least I hadn't seen any. I also disregard the fact that during my fieldwork I gave my contacts hundreds of black/white photos of them taken during field research, which they carefully wrapped up and put away for preservation. By now, as I learnt during a quick visit to Quảng Trị in June 2018, all these photos have been ruined as a result of the wet tropical climate.

common people. Prior to this, the Vietnamese instead used ancestor tablets (*bài vị*) onto which the names of the deceased were written in Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters.

During French colonisation a new phase of ancestor representation came into fashion in Vietnam: portraits (*truyền thần*) drawn by skilled artists based on photos in ID cards.[17] (fig. 7) According to an internet source, this art "developed in Hà Nội during the early years of the 20th century, mainly as a means of creating artistic renditions of deceased family members from old photographs which could then be used for ancestor worship on the family altar";[18] a personal communication from February 2019 supports this account.[19] Specifically, the portraits were created by applying charcoal powder to paper with a special pen. This form of art was very popular: as recently as 1995 more than 250 portrait artists were still active in Hanoi. My Vietnamese assistant and friend during the fieldwork in Ea Hiu district in 2007, the then-36-year-old Đinh Hồng Hải, related to me that during his university studies he had earned quite good money from such jobs, being a talented student of art. He confirmed this in an e-mail from 21 November 2008: "I made these portraits during my studies at the art university in Hanoi in 1991–1996; I received for them Vietnamese Dong (VND) 80,000 to 150,000 as payment."[20]

Nowadays, with the rapid spread of digital photography and cheap cameras, this form of art is waning in popularity.[21] Photos have replaced drawings in almost every sphere of religious life, on ancestor altars, in the cemeteries and pagodas. And not only there. In the past two decades anybody acquainted with Vietnam must have seen thousands of Photoshop-manipulated pictures in our Vietnamese friends' houses everywhere from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. The industry has become so popular and common that it hardly attracts attention anymore.

None of this could be found among the Bru, however. Bru literacy is recent, starting in the 1960s.[22] Consequently, there was no recording of names on the graves of the dead – which in any case are made of perishable materials instead of stone, unlike the Vietnamese practice. Owing to the fluidities of teknonymy,[23] it is hard for them to recall the dead by name and trace them backward in time. And, as we have seen, the Bru funeral practices and ancestor cult point towards de-individualising remembrance, which could (or should?) exclude, *in theory*, reinforcing the memory of the departed with photographs. This is why I found these pictures intriguing: According to my understanding they contradicted the principles of Bru religion and ancestor cult delineated above. Why were they put on the ancestor altars if they run counter to the desired goal of forgetting? A second theoretical question, realised unfortunately only after my departure from the

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[17] This is conditional upon the general use of ID cards. In the first phase of the French colonisation, the population was registered and checked using village name lists. Later, in the second phase of the French period, the ID card was introduced for more effective control. E-mail from Đinh Hồng Hải to Gábor Vargyas, 18 March 2013.

[18] http://www.minmaxtravel.com/travel-guide/vietnam/art-performance/39;truyen-than39;-portrait art/ (accessed 13 February 2019).

[19] E-mail from Đinh Hồng Hải to Gábor Vargyas, 9 February 2019.

[20] At that time, VND 150,000 was equal to the monthly salary of a starting worker. Since Đinh Hồng Hải was not a 'specialist', his pay was less than that of a master specialised in altar pictures. In his first year of studies, his scholarship was VND 32,000 and a meal at a restaurant was around VND 500 (today it is 30,000). His clients were nearly all acquaintances and relatives. He drew and engraved the pictures onto polished black limestone in his home province Nghe An. E-mail from Đinh Hồng Hải to Gábor Vargyas, 18 March 2013.

[21] There are believed to be less than 30 *truyền thần* portrait artists today, operating mostly in the Old Quarter of Hanoi.

[22] Bru literacy was spread in the 1960s by the Protestant missionaries and linguists John D. Miller and Carolyn P. Miller. See J.D. Miller 1964, 1967; J.D. Miller and C.P. Miller 1963, 1971, 1976; J.D. Miller, C.P. Miller, and Phillips 1976. The currently accepted transcription was homogenised by Vietnamese linguists on the basis of this work; see Hoàng Tuê 1986; Vương Hữu Lễ 1997.

[23] Greek *teknon* = child, *onyma* = name. Teknonymy: naming a person through others (children, grandchildren, wife, etc.): X's mother, Y's grandmother, Z's husband. This means in practice that a person may have several, up to 6, 8, or 10 names in a lifetime, each referring to his/her age, family status, social position, and place in the kinship-family relations, unlike in Europe, where an unchanged 'Ego' is presumed and indicated with the same name from birth to death.

field, concerned impurity. How is it that the 'admission' of (the portrait of) such 'contagious' dead into the home is possible? Why is the picture of the 'recent dead' not polluting? Does this mean that the whole funerary system and the concomitant concepts of impurity/polluting are being disregarded or replaced?

I was inclined to see in the phenomenon a religious revolution (or devolution), particularly after a quick visit to Ea Hiu cemetery with its Vietnamese-type concrete tombs seemed to convincingly prove to me that religious transformation was going on at dazzling speed among the resettled Bru. I could hardly find anything among the legion of Vietnamese-type graves of stone and concrete that reminded me of the Bru funerary practices I was familiar with. Moreover, in Ea Hiu I saw several manipulated photos that had been created of still-*living* persons for their ancestor photos in the future! To mention but one example: in the house of *mpoaq* Thao, whom I visited several times, a computer-manipulated photo of himself was created and put on the wall between two of my visits. He declared *expressis verbis* that it was made to serve as an ancestor photo. Such is the photo of our host Sam Ly's mother, *ayoaq* Thaq, made using her ID card photo (discussed in detail below), which the son carefully put away for the future.

The question was all the more intriguing in that at the same time, I also had data that ran counter to the above tendency and exemplified the persistent survival of traditional cognitive ideas and social values. *Mpoaq* Thao, for example, did not put his late wife's photo next to his father's photo on the altar, because the daughter-in-law and the father-in-law were taboo for each other as *kuya kunh* categories of relationship. He therefore made a separate ancestor altar for his wife. In other words, in one case (his own ancestor photo) he completely ignored earlier ideas about the departed, while in the other (the photos of his wife and father) he observed existing social categories and prescriptions even while displaying the photos. He was not the only one. After having participated in two funerals, one shamanic ceremony, two house-warming parties, and several other events, I realised that a true cultural transformation was taking place in which the older ideas and religious structures persisted alongside the new, notwithstanding the heterogeneity, accidentality and somewhat improvisational character of these sets of ideas. Culture change was thus one possible way of explaining the phenomenon.

Concerning the pictures, however, I received some very interesting answers to my cautious questions in the fieldwork situations delineated above. First of all, the Bru expressly admitted in a number of cases that "this is what the Vietnamese expect us to do": "When they enter our house, they look round and immediately ask: 'Where are the photos of your ancestors?'" This raises immediately the question of power relations and the enormous pressure exerted by the majoritarian Vietnamese/Kinh to conform to their socio-religious expectations, which the Bru have never been able or brave enough to defy.[24] The question arises then whether the Vietnamese-type ancestor altars with ancestor photos in Bru houses are not the result of a kind of societal-level simulation or mimicry, to use Bhabha's apt term (1994). Mimicry has been a salient concept in post-colonial social criticism since Bhabha's fundamental work (1994) and refers to the seeming adoption of the cultural patterns of the colonisers ("we pretend as if"), with the absorption of these transformed patterns always resulting in some 'hybrid' reality – a concept that is worth considering in this case.[25]

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[24] About the historically justifiable 'timidity' and accommodating strategies of the Bru, see Vargyas 2000, 2008, 2016 and 2017.

[25] Mimicry takes a wide variety of forms around the world, from Africa (Ferguson 2006) to post-Soviet Siberia (Mészáros 2013: 196).

I could adduce several examples which support the idea that there may be a certain amount of feigning regarding Bru ancestor altars – but I do it with reluctance for reasons explained above. The most obvious case was observed when I was inspecting one household's Vietnamese type ancestor altar with colour ancestor photos on it and a picture of president Ho Chi Minh on the wall above and asked the owner whether he had Bru house altars, too. With a mischievous smile, he drew up the 'curtain' constructed of glued-together newspaper sheets hanging down from the pole plate and pointed to the altars in question, which were completely camouflaged by the sheets of paper. Today, relying on my faded memories, it seems to me that he even made a comment about 'camouflaging', but I cannot not find any trace of it in my notebooks, and therefore I do not dare to assume it is accurate. However, at another house we located the 'no longer existing' altar of the 'recent' lineage dead in the coffee garden thanks to the help of the owner, who by now had become more forthcoming. Here, since forest no longer surrounds the houses, its role is taken over by the coffee garden, which evokes, through its lush vegetation, the jungle or nature. In a third case it was again the coffee garden that hid in symbolic form – in the form of a wild flower – the 'soul' of the dry rice which the Bru are no longer allowed to cultivate.[26] This flower had been, as a rule, placed on huge specially woven rice containers or granaries after abundant harvests. Here, among the resettled Bru where both forest and dry rice existed only in their memories, the remembrance of the rice – and with it that of the rice goddess, *yĩang* Abon, who is perhaps the most important divinity in the Bru pantheon – took the form of secretly planting her 'soul-flower' in the coffee gardens that symbolically took the place of the swidden. In other cases the make-believe was not so evident, but owing to the spatial position of Bru house altars above the pole plates high in the relative darkness of the rafters, symbolically 'half-way' between Earth and Sky, these altars do not attract attention. Especially, if they are surrounded, as I have seen many times, with flashing-coloured-large-ostentatious-glitzy objects which catch the eye of the viewer. To be sure, however, house altars were quite often not hidden at all.

Besides cultural change and mimicry, a third possible explanation for the surprising presence of photos on Bru altars is syncretism: in several places the Bru house altars and the Vietnamese ancestors' altars are set peacefully side by side, in harmonious accord. It is difficult to choose among the three explanations because I only realised the religious-ritual problem implied by the photos of the 'recent dead' as I was analysing the material at home after my return from fieldwork. I will thus never be able to learn how those concerned would have explained the phenomena I observed. I am inclined to favour the mimicry explanation since I have explicit data confirming it. But obviously more emic statements are needed. Whichever explanation proves true, the fact remains: in order to comply with the expectations of the Vietnamese – the adoption of a 'correct' custom – the Bru must *either* radically transform their entire religious system, *or* must practice mimicry on a social scale, *or* adopt syncretistic thinking. Or all three. Of course, those who expect them – however benevolently – to perform this 'harmless' adaptation are unaware of the implications of this expectation.

There is one last set of questions regarding the pictures that needs to be clarified. First of all: what is their function? What are they used for: remembrance or communication? The answer is straightforward: they are simple (but 'ennobled') images of the departed with the sole function of commemoration: during prayers and sacrifices incense is burnt and offerings are placed in front of

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[26] Dry rice cultivation is banned by the Vietnamese authorities because of its alleged destructive effect on the forest. Religious conceptions and agrarian rituals are tied up only with dry rice cultivation among the Bru.

them. As far as I know, they are never used in any ritual for communication. Second: how long are they kept on the ancestor altars? Several years, several generations, or 'forever'? The question is hard to answer because, as we have seen, their use dates back no more than 10–15 years, i.e. barely one generation. I do not know of any example in which the person on the picture would have transcended the first ascending generation. In this respect then, we can only conjecture owing to the necessary time-span. But given that the Vietnamese themselves keep these ancestor photos only for three generations,[27] it is not hard to guess what will happen: the Bru will most probably proceed as the Vietnamese do and give up their ancestral pictures when they reach that point. In this sense, I have to admit that even the title of my paper is misleading to some extent: the photos in question are not that of the 'true' ancestors but that of the 'recent dead', i.e. the ones who still are on their way to become part of Kaneaq! There is an obvious reason for it: 'ancestors' are the amalgamated, de-individualised mass of the dead of innumerable generations. It is impossible to render their 'image' with an image, to portray the multitude of faceless faces, de-personalised persons. And yet? Who knows? Who knows how long this will be the case? Photography as a form of art and, especially, digital photo-manipulation have enabled humankind to represent even the most unrepresentable ideas. Let us wait for some years and for an artist equal to the task! History shows that what is possible technically will become a reality sooner or later.

Let us return now to the field. 'Digitally retrofitting' old photos into stock images evocative of colonial and imperial privilege' which Jellema discussed, was also in fashion in Ea Hiu in 2007, both as decoration hung up on the wall (fig. 8) and placed on the ancestors' altars (fig. 6). The previously mentioned case of the picture of *mpoaq* Yon (see fig. 5) exemplifies the decorative use. Another similar example is a Bru man clad in mandarin attire, wearing a blue turban (*khăn xếp*) and blue silk tunic. Pictures of a man and a woman from two houses show them in European costumes and in strikingly similar European setting. The man wears a dark suit and red tie and has a wristwatch on his right arm; the woman (fig. 9) is dressed in a black ankle-length skirt and dark-red or violet tunic with a high neckline (it might pass for an 'Asian' garment). The setting of both pictures is almost identical, with slight differences in the arrangement of the items : both subjects sit beside a turned round table reminiscent of modern European furniture. On the table in the man's photo there is a portable radio with double cassette player, a glass bowl full of fruits, a porcelain vase with flowers, an ornate teapot and cup, and on the wall there is a clock and European-style landscape paintings. In the picture of the woman the setting is almost identical, but the radio is on the wall (looking like a painting rather than a gadget), and a fan is set in a corner. The motifs of the paintings on the wall are also different.

Interestingly enough, however, the photos did not evoke colonial and imperial privileges so much as a *contemporary* environment with persons dressed in urban gala attire. The tendency is best epitomised by the wedding photos. A startling rare example is a set of two photos of a couple in different costumes (figs. 10–11): in one they wear 'Bru' clothes, in the other 'Vietnamese'. Both adjectives are in quotes, because the husband – in line with the current fashion in Vietnam – wears a European suit and tie, while the wife is clad in a 'typical' Lao dress in the 'Bru' photo: a blue indigo jacket with European mother-of-pearl buttons, a colourful cotton skirt wrapped around her waist, a silk scarf crosswise on her chest, and European women's shoes; on her head an unidentifiable (atypical) headgear and ribbon can be seen, and she has a bouquet of flowers in her hand. To be sure, this outfit could with some generosity be regarded as 'Bru', for in the 'original'

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[27] I thank Kirsten Endres for having drawn my attention to this very important fact.

home of the Bru in Quảng Trị province their costumes were strongly influenced by Lao clothing. Yet this photo is too 'urban', too rich, and too 'nice' for the circumstances of a simple rural Bru woman. It is thus an apt illustration of Jellema's observation about "redressing (…) disparities in wealth and class" or Hien's about how retouched photos offer "the chance to redress the errors of history, 'reboot' the moral universe, and project new desires onto the future" (Hien, 2012: 490). What is different here is the adjustment of their present situation to their aspirations, with the 'upward economic trajectory' being realised in the lifetime of those concerned, and not after their death. Such 'exhibitionism' at the main stations of human life – wedding, birthdays, baptism – is well known in European societies, too. Just think of the fashion among secondary-school graduates in Hungary in recent decades of hiring a 10–15-metre-long 'stretch-limo' with a driver and waiters in bow-ties serving ice-cold champagne from the bar during a one-hour ride round the brightly lit city before their banquet. Once in a lifetime everyone would like to look rich!

The use of the adjective 'startling' to describe the photo of the couple above was elicited by the fact that it is a rare instance in which a Bru is depicted in 'Bru' costume. Apart from two other wedding photos, I am aware of only a single picture showing a Bru person in 'Bru environment' or apparel: it is a full-length picture of *achuaih* Be, or *ông* Hôm,[28] an exceptional man in all regards. He is shown barefoot with a bushhook on his shoulder in the 'jungle'. I have unfortunately no additional information about the photo, which seemed real and devoid of computer manipulation; when I paid a short visit to the 108-year-old man, I had no opportunity to inquire. If I mention his picture at all, this is because notwithstanding his odd, unidentifiable garments, the outfit strongly reminds me of the 'sylvan attire' worn by earlier Bru: a vest made of beaten bark cloth 'tapa' and the loincloth also made of tapa.[29] Whatever the occasion or purpose of the photo, it also emanates a seldom-seen self-confidence and calm assurance, an open declaration of Bru identity that is so rare among the Bru.

It is of course understandable that the urban photo and computer centres owned by Vietnamese do not have prefabricated, 'ready-to-use' stock images of the costumes and venues of national minorities around them for the purpose of retro-manipulation, and likewise understandable that it would not occur to them to produce such a thing. They are not champions of multiculturalism but rather everyday businessmen who are interested first and foremost in making a living. Nearly all of their customers are surely Vietnamese. This circumstance, however, must have some effect on the visual world that the prefabricated series exude and that the pictures are meant to construct.

Before embarking on this matter, let us consider the photos – the majority of them – that show Bru men and women in their best clothes. Several portraits of well-dressed men and women can be seen in Ea Hiu on ancestors' altars, beneath the Kaneaq altar or next to the shaman altar, on gravestones in the cemeteries, or as ornaments on the wall, both in religious and non-religious contexts (figs. 12–14). They are not portraits in the strict sense (i.e., images showing the head and shoulders only) but half-length images showing the entire torso, because the head alone is not suitable to retro-manipulation. The garments are everyday or festive urban clothes: the men wear suits and white shirts with ties; the women wear some sort of blouse and a necklace, rarely a jacket or tunic.

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[28] Vietnamese '*Ông*' = 'grandfather, mister, Sir'. The Vietnamese designation with the Bru name indicates that he was widely known by Vietnamese, too. He was the infamous, omnipotent commander of the Bru in American military service, and also a famous shaman.

[29] About beaten bark cloth garments among the Bru, see Vargyas (2016b).

Since such a photo, including the manipulation, cost around VND 100,000 in 2007, common people could afford it and there was continuous demand.[30] This business was flourishing in the towns: in Buôn Ma Thuột there were two shops offering this service, open long hours – until 11 pm, including weekends – and vying with each other for clients. Though they kept their 'tricks of the trade' a secret, it did not mean that they work behind closed doors; the customers were not locked out. At least in one of the shops we saw the clients sitting in the shop which was also the workshop, waiting calmly while the employees were working. One might expect that they would have decided what clothes or 'prefabricated' venue or setting they wanted for the photo, but in most cases they did not interfere and instead waited for the technicians to complete the job assigned to them by the boss.

Nevertheless, when we first began to inquire about the work process at one shop, the employee we were talking with became suspicious. Under the pretext that the process would take longer, he recommended that we should leave the photos there and return the next day. Upon the suggestion of my colleague and friend, Đinh Hồng Hải, we had namely arrived with photos so that we could follow and document the process of photoshopping. When we were turned down, we went over to the other shop, where we were more successful. Hải's explanation convinced the staff to give us the green light for our project, and we were even allowed to take photos of the process.

The occasion for all this was the intention of Sam Ly, our host in Ea Hiu, to hold a house-warming party with a sacrificial offering to celebrate moving to his new house. Like the majority of Bru in the area, he had a Vietnamese-style ancestor altar featuring a picture *(truyền thần)* of his late father drawn after the photo in his ID (fig. 15); in place of his old unused Bru house altars he had had new ones made that were already fastened to the wall.[31] Since his mother *ayoaq*[32] Thaq was eager to have her husband's photo improved and fitted out in a manner 'worthy' of him, we offered to pay to have it done as a present for the house-warming. I took digital photos of the drawing *(truyền thần)* on the ancestor altar (fig. 16) as well as the ID photo of Sam Ly's father, which was cherished as a relic, and *ayoaq* Thaq's current ID card. (The original ID photos were taken in 1962 [husband] and 1971 [wife].) Equipped with these, we set out into town to the photo and computer centre to have the pictures made.

At 10 a.m. on Sunday, 22 July 2007 we arrived in the Fujifilm shop in downtown Buôn Ma Thuột. It was packed with customers (fig. 17). Of the five employees, only one – a young woman – was free; the rest were busy working. We gave her the pictures, she put them into the computer and began working on them at an incredible pace. Since many were waiting in line, we had no time to ask questions about details. Besides, she was apparently reluctant to expose the 'tricks of the trade' despite our explanation and permission for our research; she did not want – or was unable – to explain everything step by step. We had to be content with the conditions that she and the circumstances dictated and tried to understand as much as we could without interrupting the process. We were able to see much more than we'd expected in any case.

Using an earlier version of Photoshop, she first outlined the heads in both pictures, cut them out and placed them onto a neutral background. She massively retouched *ayoaq* Thaq's portrait: she drew around all scratches, dots, and faded or darkened details, the original flaws and anything she deemed in need of improvement, cut them out and filled the empty spots, blended it, sharpened the

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[30] Colour photos are evidently somewhat more expensive, and the size of the photo also affects the price. For the sake of comparison: in 2007 a bottle of beer cost VND 15,000–25,000, depending on the quality and place of consumption.

[31] On the forms and location of house altars, see Vargyas (2008: 164–214).

[32] Literally grandmother.

contours. Using the 'layer' function she combined the photos (figs. 18–20): one showed the original drawing, the next the improved photo, and the third displayed the 'prefab' sets of 'ready-to-use' garments, venues, and backgrounds. Each set of stock photos contained 6 x 4 = 24 images grouped thematically: e.g. European gentlemen's wear, black and blue suits (although there was a white suit, too), mainly for wedding photos; the ties were brightly coloured (fig. 21). These images are usually half-length without heads so that the required portrait could be inserted. There was even an academic gown and square cap of the type worn at graduation in American universities, and there were some varieties of Vietnamese traditional costume, too. Some pictures were not busts but instead images of sitting, standing, or walking figures. Another image set featured army uniforms and 'casual' clothes, and in two pictures the same standing male figure could be recognised with hands in his pockets – a typical Hollywood gesture! (see fig. 21). The supply was huge. I managed to take photos of 6 sets, i.e. 144 different images. But I must have missed at least as many, and I'm sure there are many more at the disposal of the 'creators'. There was a mind-boggling abundance of female photos, too: busts, seated, standing, walking ladies, in *áo dài*, military uniform (!), or casual clothes, with the necklace as a recurring ornament. Interestingly enough, the women's dress appeared to be more conservative: most apparel consisted of traditional Vietnamese costumes including turbans. As a sign of the socialist present intruding into the visual realm, there was also a set of 24 different medals that could be added as accessories. There were several image sets showing finely constructed venues or scenes. Most frequently, the portrayed person sat on a throne-like armchair, one hand on the arm of the chair or on the table next to it. There were about 50 versions of this: a single person or a couple (husband and wife, on either side of the table), in European or Vietnamese costumes, in European or Vietnamese environment.

The employee hunted through these photo sets with magical skill, leaving hardly any time for us to take a snapshot; then after a few tests – and without asking us a thing – she chose the 'right' environment for the photos. She combined the layers, merged them and after a last 'embellishing' she saved it and burnt it to a disc – and it was ready. At 12:23, two-and-a-half hours after our arrival, we had the photos in hand, printed, and covered with a transparent plastic film necessary to protect the photos from the humid climate (fig. 22). A few hours later, back at home in Ea Hiu, we gave the pictures to Sam Ly and *ayơaq* Thaq. I quote from my diary:

> "Sam Ly is very happy about the two large photoshopped photos and puts them away immediately. *Ayơaq* Thaq isn't [so happy], or I can't decide: she laughs and snickers, but it's more a sign of incredulity about 'that silliness': because '*Yúh! Taq yuan!*', that is, 'we are mad, we've gone crazy' because 'we've turned her into a Vietnamese!' and she is more unhappy than happy about it. Yet, apparently, she is impressed by the photo with a golden chain and *áo dài*, she is at a loss, embarrassed. I take a few shots of her with the large photo in her hand." (see fig. 23)

Ayơaq Thaq's complex, ambiguous feelings strongly remind me of the emotions of Kadisha, the protagonist of Murtazaev's short story. The reason must be the same: they are aware of the 'fraud', the manipulation of reality, which evokes joy and at the same time dissatisfaction. The question is whether they want the reality that the picture – including their portrait – represents. Do they identify with it, do they accept that now they are living in another, more modern world in which things are different than before? In which they also look different? How do they interpret it: as compensation for the existing financial and social differences, or as assimilation forced upon them?

I clearly remember the tone of *ayơaq* Thaq's voice when the words "you are crazy" escaped her. A Bru woman would hardly ever say such a thing to a Vietnamese man, let alone a white man. At the same time, the scene somehow resembled a theatrical performance. Her anger – whether pretended or real – vanished in seconds, giving way to nonplussed giggling: "what have I lived to see?" I cannot be sure about her real sentiments, and however much I would have liked to talk with her about it in the days that followed, there was no opportunity to do so. In any case, my snapshot shows a calm old woman smiling and moved by the photo of her long-dead husband and her youthful self, made to fit into a Vietnamese world that has left her behind.

We have already seen how and why the photos enter into the religious world of the Bru and how – in theory at least – this implies a transformation of the old religious system. Technological development paired with socio-political pressure brings about, even demands changes in religiosity everywhere in the world. *Ayơaq* Thaq, a conservative old woman, was far less enthusiastic about the adoption of new customs than her son Sam Ly, deputy head-master of the local elementary school and perhaps the richest entrepreneur in Ea Hiu, one of the few Bru who have adapted themselves exceptionally well to the local Vietnamese society. Whatever the case, some weeks later, on 18 August 2007, the picture retro-manipulated with the help of Photoshop was consecrated during a great sacrificial house-warming ceremony and it assumed its place on the Vietnamese ancestors' altar of the new house, thereby becoming part of the Bru religious realm (fig. 24).

Further Research Questions. Subjects and objects.

As with any research, this investigation does not come to an end with publication, reflecting as it does but the present state of our knowledge. There are numerous questions remaining that are worthy of further study. Perhaps the most important task is to elucidate whether photos of the deceased are just pictures of them or are true embodiments, on a par with the deceased themselves. In the first case, the main problem of pollution as discussed above is can be put aside because mere pictures would not be polluting. In this respect let us recall the fact that the Vietnamese give away the belongings of the deceased at the tomb, and what is left is burnt.[33] Although I have never seen the Bru of Quảng Trị doing this, they do not keep or use the personal objects of their dead; as of 2007 the Bru of Ea Hiu had taken over the Vietnamese custom. Seen in this light, pictures are not 'personal belongings' but objects of remembrance which are not equated with the individuals portrayed. While this seems to underline the importance of commemoration, it contradicts to the principle of forgetting.

A great deficiency of this paper was, as we have seen, the lack of emic statements relating to the photos and to the aspirations, desires, and life strategies of the Bru in Đắk Lắk. Given the socio-political conditions in the Vietnamese Highlands, it seems impossible to learn more about this aspect of Bru culture for the time being. Observations from the 1980s in Quảng Trị may offer clues, but surely cannot be automatically extended to apply to the resettled Bru today.[34]

Let us reconsider now our case study in a wider theoretical context. Regarding the relationship between things and subjects, there has long been a major debate about "whether the material world forms the subject in interaction or conversely, it is the active subject that changes and shapes the material world to his liking and by his needs" (Berta 2008: 36). After more than a century of

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[33] In an e-mail dated 9 February 2019. Đinh Hồng Hải confirmed this: "The same Vietnamese custom from the north to the south. I think Bru learned it from the Vietnamese."

[34] On this question, see Vargyas (2016a, 2017).

philosophical and scientific antecedents (e.g. Morgan 1877; Childe 1936; Marx 1955, 1977; Engels 1974)[35] the 'new material culture studies' have confirmed: there is a dialectical relationship between things and subjects. "Man is a tool-making animal" (Benjamin Franklin)[36] but the objects he makes act in turn upon him. Both are "producers and products" of their interaction and of each other,[37] "the two realms evolve and assume their meanings in the context of their interaction" (Berta 2008: 36). It follows that things – including photos – have agency. That is why today we are less interested in "how subjects create objects" but rather "how objects (things) create subjects" (ibid.).

Rethinking the above-discussed case in this light, we have to conclude that the photos on the ancestors' altar bring about new subjects (figs. 25–26). They influence the Bru, the Bru's mentality, identity, and self-image, just as, from another angle, their creation is the outcome of the joint will and cooperation of the Bru and the Vietnamese. Whether the Bru put their 'Vietnamised' photos on the ancestor altars out of simulation, out of compulsion to adapt, out of their own interest or a sincere desire, from the moment the photos were deposited there a mutual relationship, interaction, and relationality is formed between the people and the images. When a Bru looks at the photo and sees his/her own ancestor in Vietnamese garments, in a Vietnamese environment, as a Vietnamese citizen, s/he can't help wondering about his/her own position, desires, goals. Is the world portrayed by the photos real or false? Does the viewer want to belong to the world suggested by the photos, is he part of it or not? Maybe the photo will bring home the realization that this adaptation is simulated. Even if a photo were an 'objectified' reality of the individual, its interpretation is subjective, depending on the viewer and the context. In any case, the person always gets some message from the photo: feedback, confirmation, or negation. He or she may interpret it negatively, rejecting the photo as being a fraud. In this case, the message says: "Yes, this is the world I have to adapt to, but I don't want to belong to it, I only pretend it." In this case the photo reinforces this opposition, the Bru identity against the Vietnamese (position of opposition). He or she may interpret it positively: "Yes, that's my world, I belong here now." In this case the photo is supportive, it helps the Bru to rise above reality and feel that despite all social-economic-political indicators, he or she has taken a place in Vietnamese society (position of assimilation). There is a third possible interpretation, both positive and negative at the same time: "Yes, I'd like to belong to this world, but however hard I try, I can't succeed" (pragmatic intermediate position).

I am afraid the cases discussed above are examples of the third position. The photos depict a 'superior', 'better' Vietnamese way of life, a world into which the Bru would probably like to integrate but which – as most know by experience – is out of reach for most of them. But their ancestors in the photos look upon them as if they had successfully travelled the path from secondary citizenship to real citizenship with full entitlement. Originally objectified expressions of respect for the dead, the photos thus become agents of a 'superior' way of life, the unintended tools of ethnic assimilation. For the Bru won't take their place in Vietnamese society before – paraphrasing the title of Margaret Mead's book *New lives for old* – they have new ancestors for old.[38]

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[35] I must express my thanks to Mihály Sárkány for the effective help he lent me with the (Marxist) philosophical interpretation of the subject–object relationship and with orientation in the specialist literature.
[36] The quotation was borrowed from Benjamin Franklin by Samuel Johnson. Cited in James Boswell: *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) (entry on 7 April 1778). See http://izquotes.com/author/benjamin-franklin/26
[37] See Engels: "The hand is not only the organ of work, it is also its product" (2010: 453).
[38] See Mead (1956).

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Illustrations

Fig. 3.
Mpơaq Yon singing old-type love songs to the tape recorder.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, Hoong village, Hướng Linh district, Quảng Trị province, 1986.

Fig. 4.
Mpơaq Yon blowing the idioglot bamboo clarinet as a shaman assistant.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, Hoong village, Hướng Linh district, Quảng Trị province, 1985.

Fig. 5.
Mpơaq Yon's (and his wife's) photoshopped picture(s) on the wall of *mpơaq* Khăm's house.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 1 May 2007. Ea Hiu, Đắk Lắk province.
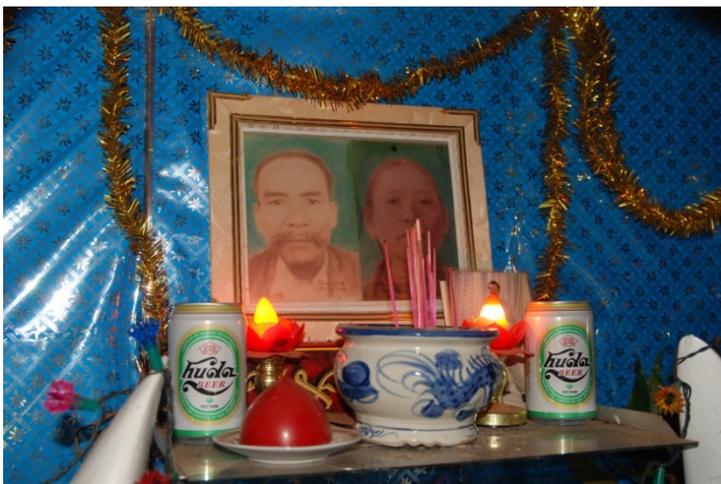
Fig. 6.
Ancestor altar with photos improved and coloured with Photoshop of the owner's father and mother.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 26 April 2007. Ea Hiu (Buon Jat A.), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 7.
Hand-drawn picture (*truyền thần*) of the deceased mother of the owner on a column of the house.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 16 November 2006. Ea Hiu (Hương Hoá), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 8.
Interior of the house of a widow. On the wall is a poster of Hồ Chí Minh's letter to the mountain nationalities (19 April 1946), next to it a Photoshop manipulated photo of her late husband, and another one of her son who died of malaria while clearing the forest by burning. On the other side behind the TV set is another retro-fitted photo of the son in European setting. A CD has been hung above each photo as decoration.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 29 April 2007. Ea Hiu (Hương Tân), Đắk Lắk province.
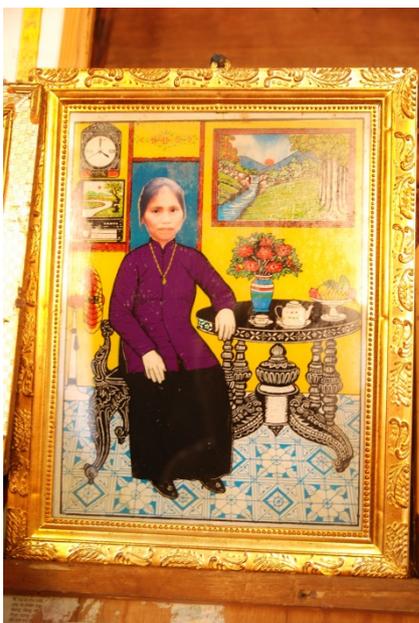
Fig. 9.
Retro-fitted picture of a woman, the departed wife of the house owner, in European setting. It was made 2–3 years earlier to my visit.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 2 May 2007. Ea Hiu (Hương Án), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 10.
Wedding photo of the house owner's son and daughter-in-law in 'Bru' costumes.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 3 September 2007. Ea Hiu (Hương Tân), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 11.
Wedding photo of the house owner's son and daughter-in-law in 'Vietnamese' clothes.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 3 September 2007. Ea Hiu (Hương Tân), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 12.
Photoshop manipulated pictures of the house owner's father and mother as well as his drowned grandchild on the Vietnamese type ancestor altar. A banana and incense-burner have been placed before the photos as sacrificial offerings.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 2 May 2007. Ea Hiu (Hương Án), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 13.
Inside the house of *achuaih* Vơai, one of the last shamans in Đắk Lắk. In front: the old man with a pipe in his mouth; behind him his Bru house altars and shaman altar; next to this latter, on the wall the Photoshopped portrait of his wife who died young, on a Vietnamese-type ancestor altar. On the other wall is a portrait of President Hồ Chí Minh and newspaper clips.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 16 November 2006. Ea Hiu (Hương Hiệp), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 14.
A Bru grave in the Ea Hiu cemetery with a mounted and photoshopped colour portrait of the deceased – a true time capsule perpetuating the place of birth in Quảng Trị and the place of death in Đắk Lắk of the deceased both with Bru and Vietnamese scripts.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 20 August 2007. Ea Hiu, Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 15.
Sam Ly's Vietnamese-type ancestor altar in his old concrete house. It features a drawn portrait (*truyền thần*) of his late father based on his ID card photo and sacrificial gifts, money.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 17 June 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 16.
Portrait of Sam Ly's late father drawn after his ID card photo (*truyền thần*).

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 4 July 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 17.
Interior of the shop with the busy employees and the waiting customers.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.
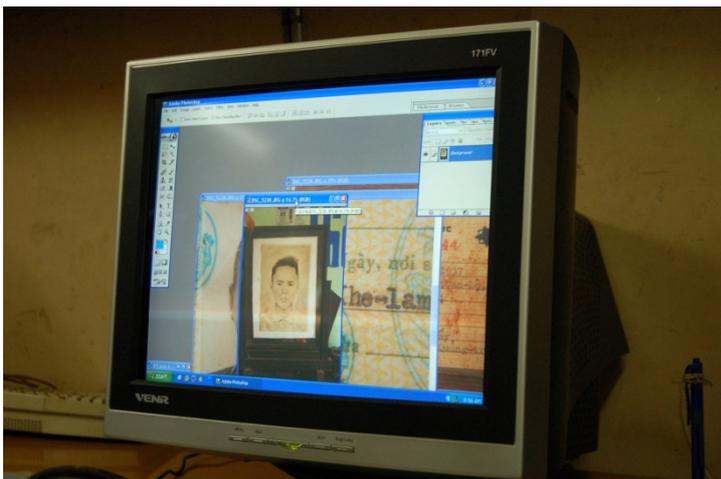
Fig. 18.
The drawing (*truyền thần*) of Sam Ly's late father and his ID card with the photo, the basis for the drawing, superimposed in several layers, in Photoshop.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.
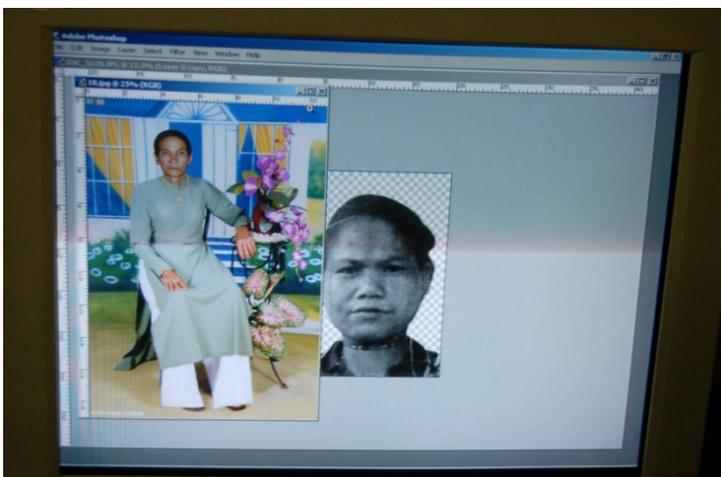
Fig. 19.
Ayơaq Thaq's retouched photo with the 'ready-to-use' background chosen for her, showing a picture of an old Vietnamese woman sitting at a table.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 20.
The process of assembling two minutes later: *ayơaq* Thaq's photo inserted into the stock image.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 21.
Prefabricated set of 24 images: men's clothes, and poses, e.g. a man with hands in his pockets.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 22.
Đinh Hồng Hải with the ready printed Photoshopped photo of Sam Ly's father in his hand.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Buôn Ma Thuột town, Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 23.
Ayơaq Thaq, with the photoshopped pictures in her hand.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 22 July 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 24.
Consecration of the new 'ancestor photo' at the house-warming party of Sam Ly's new home: Bru animal sacrifice is offered before a Vietnamese-type ancestor altar.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 18 August 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 25.
New 'ancestor photo' of Sam Ly's father.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 23 July 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.

Fig. 26.
Ayɔaq Thaq's future 'ancestor photo'.

Photo by Gábor Vargyas, 23 July 2007. Ea Hiu (Cam Lộ), Đắk Lắk province.