

TÂM T. T. NGÔ

Conspicuous performances: ritual competition between Christian and non-Christian Hmong in contemporary Vietnam

After recognising Hmong Protestantism, the Vietnamese state continued an ‘anti-conversion’ politics. It did so by encouraging the revival of what they saw as traditional Hmong religion as a bulwark against Protestantism and by enriching the range of cultural commodities for the growing ethno-tourism market. For the non-converts, not only their resistance of Christianity began to be redefined as ‘the battle’ against Christianity, their belief and practices, up to then highly despised of by authorities, began to be restructured in order to gain new strength to rebound on the national and global religious stage. The new consciousness of the non-Christian Hmong, however, worried the Vietnamese state. This contribution charts the annual competitions held since 2005 between Christian and non-Christian groups in Lao Cai province in organising yearly Hmong communal rituals. It shows that what was meant to become a folklorised bulwark against Christianity became a new mêlée of ritual competition, as pioneering Hmong quickly seized the central stage. Ritual festivals thus become arenas of identity struggle in which none of the usual identity markers (secular, religious, communist, Christian, modern, traditional) can be taken at face value.

Key words atheist secularism, Protestant conversion, ritual competition, ritual pioneer, conspicuous performance

Introduction

After trying to assimilate its Hmong population into Kinh socialist modernity by suppressing their culture for half a century, the Vietnamese state reversed this policy in the first decade of the 20th century, instead encouraging and supporting the revival of Hmong rituals and festivals. In this way, state authorities hoped both to turn Hmong traditional culture into a bulwark against Christianity, to which increasing numbers of Hmong are converting, and to commodify these revived festivals within the fast-growing ethno-tourism economy. This article discusses the resulting ritual dynamics as one of the most important impacts of this policy change on Hmong social and cultural life. While exhibiting many aspects of post-colonial Vietnam’s general ritual politics, these new dynamics also have a new inter-religious dimension and are distinctive in the way they capture the particularities of this historical juncture of Vietnam’s policies on religion and ethnicity. For the case study analysed here, the literature on religion and society in post-socialist societies (e.g. Chau 2005; Humphrey 2002; Luong 1993; Madsen 2010; Saleminck 2001; Taylor 2004) is relevant, but I want to shift the

perspective from a narrative of people merely resisting changing state policies to one in which Hmong people actively shape their own reality. Hmong people turn out to be perfectly capable not only of mimetic adaptation (see Jonsson 2010; Ladwig and Roque 2018; Tappe 2018; Rumsby, this issue) but also of turning the state's demands to their own benefit and making their own interpretations of the situation prevail. In line with other contributions to this special issue (such as Seb Rumsby's), here we see Hmong elites jockeying for advantage in shifting configurations – not, however, against state officials or non-Hmong elites but among themselves, as prestige within the Hmong community is the aim of much of this competition. State officials have been constantly taken by surprise by this turn of events and other such unintended consequences of their initiatives. It is not only that the resistance paradigm (Scott 2009) is not useful for interpreting this situation, but, more important, that new cultural and religious forms have come to play roles that are understood perfectly by Hmong actors and hardly by non-Hmong state actors.

To illuminate the Hmong's creative agency at this special historical moment, this paper presents an ethnography of escalating ritual competitions between the Christian and non-Christian Hmong in a commune near the Sino-Vietnamese border. These rituals, I argue, have become arenas for identity struggle and formation, and theatres for conspicuous and competitive displays of wealth and power. In these theatres, none of the usual identity markers (secular, religious, communist, Christian, modern, traditional) can be taken at face value. I further suggest that the ambiguities and ironies underlying the Vietnamese state's ethnic and religious policies have also complicated the Hmong's ritual politics. In the name of national unity, the state has long tried to eliminate its ethnic and religious diversity, forcing the 'backward' Hmong to try to 'catch up' with the 'forward' Kinh by giving up their culture and way of life and adopting those of the Kinh. The state's repression of Christianity was even broader, also targeting Kinh Christianity – until Vietnam decided to join the World Trade Organization, which required a commitment to religious freedom. But although that led to less repression of Christianity for the Kinh, the state continues to feel threatened by Christianity among the Hmong, whom it views as insufficiently nationalist, partly because of their position on the country's border. But since 'unity in diversity' now has economic advantages, the repression of Hmong traditional rituals has been relaxed and even reversed: in the state's view, the Hmong are good not only as cheap labour but also as tourist attractions. However, the stimulation of Hmong traditional rituals in this new dispensation has jeopardised their creation of ethnic unity, as Hmong groups now use rituals as weapons against one another. Not only has the old ideal of Hmong assimilation into the Kinh fold – albeit lower in the hierarchy – been discarded, but Hmong internal solidarity and cohesion have been sacrificed. What this paper stresses is that rituals are not simply 'restricted codes' that are reproduced to buttress particular power constellations but rather malleable forms for expressing conflict and solidarity within changing political contexts, able to be creatively adapted to respond to new challenges, as the case of the Hmong shows.

The politics of Hmong conversion

The Hmong, numbering around 1.4 million people, are one of the 10 largest of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. Despite the service of many Hmong as national and

provincial leaders, the majority of this people are in the country's lowest economic, social and political strata. In the northern highland region, they have gone from being the dominant group to being one of the most marginal ones in just a few decades: because the majority of Hmong reside in and maintain strong transnational ethnic connections across the geopolitical borderlands between Vietnam, China and Laos, this population has suffered the constant surveillance and mobilisation of the state, more than many other Vietnamese ethnic groups. Like their ethnic fellows in China and Laos, the Vietnamese Hmong's political loyalty has often been questioned – partly because of their relationships with Western missionaries (French Catholics in Vietnam, British Methodists in China, and the American Christian and Missionary Alliance in Laos) and recruitment by foreign military powers (France and the USA) during the colonial period. Since the late 1960s, the Vietnamese state has launched various campaigns to subject the Hmong to its socialist rules and thus to the economic and cultural domination of the Kinh, the country's ethnic majority. One result has been the marginalisation and elimination of many Hmong cultural and ritual practices, producing a deep feeling of loss of autonomy and cultural dignity among them. Indeed, by the mid-1980s, many Hmong found themselves in a profound crisis – and it was then that they were introduced to Evangelical Protestantism from the USA, via Christian radio broadcasting out of Manila. With the appeal of its millenarian modernity, Christianity quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of Hmong. The Vietnamese state saw this mass conversion as a dangerous form of cultural separatism and a direct threat to national security, and responded with violent suppression and prohibition.

Three decades after the mass conversion, one-third of Vietnamese Hmong are affirmed Christians, while the rest have steadfastly resisted Protestantism's appeal (Ngo 2016). Most Hmong converts in Vietnam had to practise their faith largely underground until 2005, when the Vietnamese state, using arbitrary criteria, legalised select Hmong house churches. Although the government continued to disapprove of Hmong Protestantism, open prohibition and suppression of Hmong Christianity were no longer possible: Vietnam had applied to join the World Trade Organization, and one of the conditions for admittance was a commitment to improve human rights and religious freedom in the country. This forced the Vietnamese government to take a 'cultural turn' in its ethno-political policies (Luong 2007), including the ongoing 'anti-conversion' programmes. Instead of repressing the converted Hmong, the state began to support their unconverted ethnic fellows in resisting both already accomplished and potential conversions. In some rare instances, state officers even condoned violence against Christian Hmong by non-Christian Hmong (Ngo 2015: 274–5). But the support most often took the form of encouraging and promoting the revival of what the state considered 'traditional Hmong religion', for use as a bulwark against Protestantism. Since 2007, government authorities have financially sponsored traditional Hmong calendrical rituals and festivals, hoping to kill two birds with one stone: preventing further conversion and enticing already converted Hmong back to their 'good and beautiful' cultural traditions (*những truyền thống văn hóa tốt đẹp*) while increasing the range of cultural commodities for the growing ethno-tourism market.

This, however, proved to be an ironic and contradictory move. The socialist state of Vietnam had long condemned Hmong rituals and communal festivals as superstitious, wasteful, anti-modern, anti-socialist and even potentially riotous. During the state's transition to a market economy and economic globalisation beginning in 1986 (*Đổi Mới*), various elements of Hmong religion and culture were written off

as the cause of Hmong inability to adjust to the new economy and capitalist modes of production (Trần 1996). However, as tourism grew in Vietnam, local authorities noticed the interest of visitors in the Hmong's 'authentic' way of life and thus cautiously encouraged the revival of a few traditional practices, such as communal festivals, bullfights and weekly market gatherings (Michaud and Turner 2006; Tỉnh Ủy Lào Cai 2004; Trần 1996). But only when a massive number of Hmong converted to Protestantism did the national government see the need to revive Hmong 'traditional culture', albeit selectively (*khôi phục có chọn lọc*) and for political reasons, as discussed above.

What do the Hmong, both Christian and non-Christian, make of these developments? The converts, initiated into Protestantism in secret and having practised their faith underground for so long, have a very fragmented understanding of what it is to be a Protestant. The loosening up of state control in 2005 has both accelerated their search for public ways of being Christian and, relatedly, increased and intensified confrontations with non-Christian Hmong. In Vietnam, the 'new way' (the Hmong term for Christianity) has encouraged everything from the internalisation of doctrinal and catechist knowledge to the formation of a new morality by changing discourses and practices that govern behaviours around, for instance, gender and family relations (Ngo 2016). This challenge to the kinship-based morality of 'traditional' Hmong society has led Protestant Hmong to see many of the older customs as heathen and to reject them, prompting traditionalists to mount a defence of practices that were previously commonly shared and accepted. Ritual inventions and competitions are thus part of the converted Hmong's search for authentic ways of being Protestant. For their part, non-converts – including many Hmong clan leaders and local cadres – not only redefined their resistance to Christianity as 'the battle' against Christianity but also restructured their 'traditional' beliefs and practices as 'invented traditions' to feature on the national stage of minority representation. In these ways, leaders of both the Protestants and the traditionalists seek to redefine what it means to be Hmong in Vietnam.

These identity politics were expressed in the four ritual events and festivals that took place in the Phong Hai commune in late 2007 and early 2008: a household-based New Year celebration ritual (*Noj Tsiab*) and a community-based New Year festival (*Nquam Toj*), both organised by non-Christian Hmong with political and financial support from the local government; and a Christmas celebration in a Hmong house church and a New Year sport tournament among the house churches in the region, organised by the commune's Christian Hmong under the strict surveillance of an unsupportive local authority and the watchful eyes of the non-Christian Hmong. As conspicuous performances, these events, as the following section details, are similar to conspicuous consumption (Trigg 2001): individual and communal efforts and considerable financial resources are expended in a public display of economic, sociopolitical and organisational powers as a means of attaining or maintaining social status. The competition among prominent community members that drives these conspicuous performances is not new to Hmong society, and it resembles the politics of hosting potlatches, which anthropologists have identified in many societies (Boas 1978; Kan 2016; Kirsch 1973; Trigg 2001) – but in this case without the destructive elements. And yet, just as traditionalists invent tradition here to gain or guard prestige, Christians use their own traditions to try to creatively replace it.

Conspicuous performances

The winter of 2007–8 was unusually hectic for the Hmong of the Phong Hai commune of the Bao Thang district in Lao Cai Province. Numbering a little more than 2,000, the Hmong of this mountainous commune near the Sino-Vietnamese border have experienced quite a few eventful seasons since the majority converted to Protestantism over two decades ago. While there were a host of economic and sociocultural reasons for this mass conversion (see above), Lao Cai authorities perceived it as threat to national security and ethnic unity, especially because of the commune's geopolitical position. Various anti-Christian campaigns directed by cadres and military personnel thus took place here and applied considerable pressure to Christian and non-Christian Hmong alike (Ngo 2016).

In late 2007, however, there was pressure of a positive kind as both converts and non-converts raced to prepare for several rituals and festivals. The first was the traditional Hmong New Year. Customarily, the Hmong New Year is most importantly observed with a domestic ritual that takes place annually in every Hmong household, usually around the end of December. Also called the New Rice Feast (*Noj Peb Caug*), this celebration is the occasion for the 'wandering' soul of each deceased member to reunite with the family, and for the young to honour their elders and in-laws in a ritual of asking for blessings from the elders of the house and clan and from their in-laws from other clans. House spirits and the spirit of wealth (*xim kaab*) are likewise honoured. In addition, if a shaman is in the house, the healing spirits of Siv Yis (in Hmong shamanistic belief the first shaman, who came down to earth to heal all living persons and things and became the ancestor of all Hmong shamans thereafter) are also honoured and released to wander the land (*Neeb Foob Yeem*) until they are called back right after the New Year (Đỗ 1995; Lemoine 1983; Savina 1924; Tapp 2000).

However, since the early 1960s the Vietnamese state had discouraged the celebration of the 'traditional' Hmong New Year, which was replaced in many localities by Tet, the Lunar New Year observed by Vietnam's Kinh majority, often around the end of February. This policy was part of an attempt to culturally integrate the Hmong minority into the Vietnamese (Kinh) nation. The Hmong had little choice but to acquiesce, quite different from strategic mimesis (Ladwig and Roque 2018). Almost half a century later, in 2007, government officials tried to revive the Hmong tradition by encouraging Hmong families to celebrate their New Year according to their own calendar – but as I witnessed, this was a failure.

From the beginning of December, several meetings were held in the office of Bao Thang's Mass Mobilization Committee (*Ban Dân Vận*), at which government officials explained the significance and aim of reviving the traditional Hmong New Year, for the reasons mentioned above. Invited to these meetings were more than a dozen Hmong clan leaders and Hmong local cadres. I met Mr Xa at one of those meetings. Although it is his brother who is the leader of their clan, Mr Xa, as the Sin Chai village chairman and fluent in Vietnamese, was always invited to meetings like this, as both a clan representative and a local cadre. Mr Xa and his unconverted brothers represented the authorities' last hope for stemming the tide of Christian conversions in their village. I noticed that the Kinh cadre chairing the meeting flattered and pressured Mr Xa to convince him to accept this important role. A few days after we met, Mr Xa called me early in the morning and told me to come *immediately* because his older brother was going to sacrifice a pig in a ritual to celebrate the New Year for their clan. He also said

that it would be a festive day, with a number of government officials present. When my Hmong father and I got to the house of Mr Xa's brother, I felt very puzzled: we were the only guests there. A medium pig was tied to a tree trunk at the edge of the house's muddy front yard. Over the next few hours, Mr Xa and his brother were busy butchering the animal, so my father and I helped to cook the meal. Because invited guests in Hmong communities rarely have to help prepare the feast they're going to eat, Mr Xa was profusely apologetic. Moreover, although we had been summoned urgently first thing in the morning, the ritual did not start until noon, when one government official, the only one of the seven who had promised to come, arrived. As soon as he left, a few hours later, the event also ended. It was clear that reviving the celebration of the Hmong New Year was a struggle for this family, and to some extent for the region as a whole. No other members of the family made the effort to show up. Even most of the Kinh officials did not care enough to participate.

While non-Christian Hmong like Mr Xa were occupied with reviving the Hmong New Year tradition, the Christian members of Phong Hai were no less busy organising their own event, Christmas. Many Hmong house churches were still very cautious in 2006 and most of 2007. At the end of 2007, when it became more certain that the Vietnamese government would not suppress Christmas celebrations as it had a couple of years before, house churches frantically publicised their activities. The 2007 Christmas would be the biggest show ever put on by many house churches. In the Tong Gia church, which was on the list to be considered for government recognition in the coming year, every member was excited. Mr Gia, one of the most active senior members, stressed again and again that this was the first time ever they could celebrate Christmas on 24 December, the day they believed to be Jesus Christ's actual birthdate. The first time I went to Phong Hai, in 2004, the Tong Gia church – like all the other Vietnamese house churches – had to celebrate Christmas in secret and either before or after 24 December to avoid a police raid.

Although the state is willing, albeit grudgingly, to recognise some house churches, it does not subsidise Christian celebrations, including Christmas. Moreover, while hosting and organising are still avenues for gaining social prestige among Christians, feasting, being part of a sacrificial system, has all vestiges of ritual competition carefully removed. For Christmas in Tong Gia, for example, preparing for the communal meal is as important as performing carols, liturgies and prayers. Indeed, the cost of the feast was budgeted in the summer so that every church member had at least half a year to prepare their contribution, in the form of money, labour or goods. This effectively pre-empted the chance – or the expectation – for any member to rise above another in prestige by contributing more, including the church's leaders. In other words, prestige must be earned elsewhere, not at the feasting table. Formed after a mass conversion in 1992 (Ngo 2016: 87), the Tong Gia house church group is now headed by Sung Seo Chinh (31 years old) and his brother Sinh (29), who are among the most mobile and educated of their peers in the entire commune. They grew up in a Protestant household but converted only in the early 2000s, after the government turned down their applications for vocational training out of contempt for their family's religion. After several failed attempts to get jobs using the skills they had acquired through (state-approved) formal education, Chinh and Sinh found the Tong Gia church and its network, which spans into Laos and China and offered them recognition and potential economic opportunities. In no time, after investing themselves in the church, the brothers were voted into leadership positions. Senior members who had led the church until that

point told me its future depends on people like Chinh and Sinh, capable of guiding the church and dealing with a suppressive government. Everyone therefore supported the brothers' plan to use the occasion of Christmas 2007 to demonstrate to the state that mature Christians made up this church, which thus deserved official recognition. With this as its aim, the church service was quite well organised. About 60 people attended the service, with elaborate sermons and multiple rounds of hymn singing and prayers, while 30 other members prepared the feast. Half an hour into the service, a group of five government officials and police arrived in the church while the congregation was in the middle of a prayer. When the prayer was finished, amid the suddenly tense atmosphere, instead of singing 'Muaj Ib Tug Vajtsvw Tau Yug Los' (He is born, the Holy Child) as originally planned, Chinh quickly fished out of his handbag and read, loud and clear, in the Kinh language, a copy of the letter that the Northern Evangelical Church's head pastor had sent to all Hmong Evangelical churches for Christmas that year. At the part of the letter that quoted several key points from Vietnam's Instruction No. 1 on religion and religious freedom, he slowed down and read even louder. Once the reading was over, the programme resumed its planned course, but the following singing and praying were somewhat more serious. Everybody suddenly seemed to want to get their act right.

After Christmas, a rumour went around in Phong Hai and Phong Nien, the neighbouring commune, that many non-Christian Hmong felt they needed to pull off a huge festival that could compete with Christmas. I do not know to what extent this rumour reflected the sentiments of all non-Christian Hmong. All I know is that in January, non-Christian Hmong leaders and many government cadres were very busy preparing a big *Nquam Toj*, a Hmong festival usually held on the fourth day after the Hmong New Year. This was the first time *Nquam Toj* was organised in Bao Thang, where the majority of Hmong are Protestant. In the previous two years, the event was held first in Muong Khuong and then in Bac Ha, two districts of 'role model' Hmong who had resisted conversion and remained 'traditional'. This Hmong traditional festival, once banned as wasteful, superstitious, dangerous and exploitative, is now welcomed back (Ngo 2016). In the words of Dr Trần Hữu Sơn, an ethnologist and, as the Lao Cai Cultural Department director, an adviser to the government, such rituals can help to preserve cultural identity (*góp phần bảo tồn bản sắc văn hóa dân tộc*), strengthen beliefs and folklore customs (*củng cố niềm tin và tín ngưỡng dân gian*), increase group solidarity and, most important, prevent the loss of traditional culture as foreign religions, such as Protestantism, continue to spread. Dr Trần also claims that 'in areas where traditional cultural festivals have been revived and developed, there are no incidents of people throwing away their traditional belief and ancestral worship to adopt alien religion. In such areas, people are even more determined to boycott 'fake religion' (*tà đạo*) like *vàng chú* (Hmong Protestantism) [and] *thìn hùng* (a millennial movement of the Dao ethnic minority which has merged with Protestantism)' (2016: 78). Moreover, Dr Trần added in an interview I conducted with him, the revival of traditional rituals and ethnic festivals will help to increase and diversify products for the emerging travel economy, and the profits from the growth of ethno-tourism will directly benefit the Hmong.

When it was first revived, in 2005 and 2006, the *Nquam Toj* festival was mainly a show put on by the state, with the programme scripted by Cultural Department officials who followed a so-called research paper on 'the history of the *Nquam Toj* festival' likewise written by state officials, and with a musical act (*biểu diễn văn nghệ*) by

professional singers and dancers from the Lao Cai Provincial Singing and Dancing Troup, accompanied by a group of local Hmong students performing the song 'Meo People Are Grateful to the Party' (*Người Mèo Ôn Đảng*)¹ and one money-stick dance (*múa gậy xinh tiền*).² In 2007, however, *Nquam Toj* became a show in which the non-Christian Hmong in Bao Thang seized the centre stage. Since the end of December 2006, clan leaders from several communes had competed to host the event. A number of Hmong elders told me that in the past, before the government banned *Nquam Toj*, this type of competition was very fierce among big clans. *Nquam Toj* was then an occasion when each community's big man demonstrated his economic and political power through hosting and gift giving. One of the competing clan leaders, Grandpa Meeg, proudly told me that his grandfather, the head of a powerful Cwb clan in Bac Ha, once had so many buffalos, cows and pigs butchered that their blood tainted a large stream for three days. This meat not only fed the thousands of guests at the *Nquam Toj* feast that he hosted one year in the 1930s but also went home in gifts of big slabs with the hundreds of close relations who attended. Although the government largely subsidised the revived *Nquam Toj* in Bao Thang in 2008, the prestige from hosting it was perceived as significant enough to overcome any implication of this fact.

In mid-January, Phong Nien's Mr Giang Xeo Pha, the head of the Giang clan's non-Christian part, the largest non-Christian group in the commune, won the competition. The communes that were not chosen to host then shifted their focus to training their dancing groups and flute players to perform at the festival. Two important reasons for Phong Nien's choice as the location for the *Nquam Toj* are that Mr Pha is a distant relative of a powerful Hmong politician, and his clan kept most of its members from converting to Christianity. Additionally, Mr Pha is an educated Hmong and served as a local cadre for many years. Although his father was a famous shaman (*txiv neeb*), Mr Pha received two Letters of Appraisal (*giấy khen*) from the district government, in 1989 and 1992, for contributing to anti-superstition campaigns in his commune. After the *Nquam Toj* ceremony, however, Mr Pha told me he regretted denouncing his father's shamanistic practices and had spent the previous decade discretely learning shamanism from him and many others, as he recognised more and more elements of Hmong traditional culture as being 'good and beautiful'.

On the festival day, the ceremony started with two long speeches, one by the province's vice chairman (a Hmong himself) and one by the Bao Thang district chair, and then proceeded to the main ritual, which Mr Pha conducted. While he was in the middle of his song, which was occasionally accompanied by flute music, a cultural official intervened to ask him to cut the song short because it was too long and not entertaining enough for the audience. In fact, only the Kinh government representatives, who were seated in a row for guests of honour, appeared bored – the rest of audience, all Hmong, seemed fascinated by the ritual. Although the state has sanctioned the return

¹ Although the term Meo is now seen as pejorative, it still appears in the title of this song, which was written in 1956 as propaganda about how the Hmong (then commonly called Mèo by Kinh cadres) are grateful to the Communist Party for changing their lives. Tam Ngo (2016: 38–9) has described in detail the song's racism and patronising tone. While not popular at all among the Hmong, the song is a 'must-sing' at all government-organised events in Hmong areas, even today.

² For details on similar *Nquam Toj* festivals organised by the Hmong/Miao in China, see Tapp (2000, 2001).

of traditional rituals and cultural festivals, there is an unwritten but firm condition: the festive, not the religious, nature of these events should be the main focus. Nonetheless, the master of ceremonies angrily refused the official's demand, on the grounds that shortening the ritual would upset the ancestors and other spirits with whom the ritual master was communicating. Indeed, several similar incidents occurred throughout the event whenever Hmong performers deviated from the state's scripted programme, but none of the officials from the supervising team succeeded in derailing them.

A month earlier, several Christian Hmong leaders had complained to me that the *Nquam Toj* festival was a condemnation of their conversion, by both the state and their unconverted Hmong fellows. They were determined to respond with an even bigger event: a *Noj Tsiab*/New Year sport tournament, modelled on the Hmong Sport Tournament in the USA. Although the Khe Den church in Thai Nien, a commune neighbouring Phong Nien, hosted the event, it was a collective effort by many house churches in the region. The tournament took place on 10 February 2008 – the same day as the *Nquam Toj* festival. It attracted nearly 1,000 people. When I arrived in Khe Den, just after 8.30am, despite very cold weather, hundreds had already filled the large field of many then-dry rice terraces in front of the village. Although each house church sent a choir and/or a sport team to the tournament, the Khe Den church was represented by the most people.

A young man in a Western-style suit played master of ceremonies, standing at the middle of the stage and speaking loudly into a microphone. He introduced the event's meaning and purpose, outlined the programme that would follow and then led a communal prayer. From a chaotic scene one moment earlier, the whole field transformed into an impressive homogenised crowd, everyone's heads bowed, eyes shut, all murmuring a long prayer in one voice. Next, the head of the Khe Den church made a speech about how important it was for all to join in that day to celebrate and welcome a new year as members of one unified Christian community. At this point of entering the new year, he asked everybody to review what they had gained and lost in the previous year, and what they wished for the new one. He then invited the crowd to pray to God to give everyone on the field strength and determination to achieve what they wanted to in the new year and, most important, to remain faithful to the Lord, the one who creates all lives on earth.

Once this prayer was over, the singing and dancing competition started. Each team received loud applause and support from the other members of its house church in the audience. After the singing and dancing, the master of ceremonies led everybody in another short prayer, and then it was time for the sport and game competitions. In the middle of the field, chairs were cleared away for the badminton tournament.

Folklorising religion and the ambiguities of cultural politics

During the Sino-Vietnamese border war (1979–89), every aspect of social and cultural life in the borderlands was politicised (Ngo 2020). For example, the traditional festivals of ethnic groups such as the Hmong, who live on both sides of the border, became occasions for the Vietnamese state to showcase its political power and perform sovereignty. Reviving these public events came with a challenge, however: the state wished to avoid

revitalising what it saw as their backward, superstitious and rebellious characteristics – the very reasons for their pre-war suppression. In a 1982 paper, Trần Hữu Sơn, mentioned above, then a cadre of Hoang Lien Son's Department for Culture, Information and Mass Mobilization, detailed the problem and offered a possible solution:

Most festivals have three components; ritual (*ngghi lễ*), artful performance (*hội*), and games (*trò chơi*). Of these components, the *ngghi lễ* contains many superstitious elements. In addition to bringing into play the positive elements in the traditional culture, [we] need to determinedly abolish superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*). These negative elements are mainly remnants of primitive religions and poisonous aspects of formal, institutionalized religions. These are harmful magic and witchcraft, casting charms, exorcism, etc. For example, some Hmong people still believe that [Kinh cadres] have poisonous vital spirits (*vía độc*), harmful to them. This belief can be easily abused by the enemy [Chinese] to destroy national unity. (Trần 1982: 57)

As a Kinh cadre, Trần drew on his own ethnic customs to propose steps to safely revive Hmong festivals while pulling them into the fold of Kinh national culture. Specifically, he suggested changing the soul of these festivals by replacing the religious rituals with 'socialist rituals'. He praised, for example, the introduction of a series of new ceremonies (*ngghi thức mới*) that increased the positive, socialist elements of Hmong festivals in the border commune where he worked, such as 'rewarding flag procession' (*lễ rước cờ thưởng*), 'reporting achievement to Uncle Ho [Chi Minh]' (*lễ báo cáo thành tích với Bác Hồ*) and 'mobilizing emulation [of Hmong farmers] in growing the winter-spring crop' (*lễ hội thi đua làm vụ đông xuân*) (Trần 1982: 59). A Hmong cadre told me that for a long time in the *Nquam Toj* festival a national flag replaced the Hmong hemp cloth hung from a bamboo pole as a religious ornament, and an official 'reporting' the community's achievements to 'the Party and Uncle Ho' supplanted the shamanic ritual inviting ancestors and other spirits to attend the event.

Trần's rather pragmatic application of a Stalinist understanding of Hmong ritual became standard in Vietnamese intellectual debates and the state's management of religious and communal festivals a decade later (DiGregorio and Salemink 2007; Đinh and Lê 1993; Endres 2002; Malarney 2002). In post *Đổi Mới* Vietnam, he was well known as a pioneer in managing and commodifying ethnic-minority culture. In the mid-1990s, he also gained prestige for earning a doctorate in ethnology and authoring a book on Hmong culture in Lao Cai while serving as the director of the province's Department of Culture, Information, and Sport. As a scholar of Hmong culture, Dr Trần has advocated the revival and preservation of Hmong traditional rituals and festivals in the most authentic form possible. But as a cadre who manages cultural affairs, he must ensure a 'proper' development of cultural life in Lao Cai according to Communist Party guidelines, which now means no Christianity, superstition or other decadent beliefs and practices. Since 2006, when his department annexed the Department of Tourism, Dr Trần has also overseen policies to ensure that tourism provides the most lucrative returns for the province – and as we have seen, 'authentic' can be seen as unprofitable.

The Hmong case reveals fascinating contradictions and ambiguities in the now common trend of folklorising and commodifying religious and other communal rituals in Vietnam (Đinh and Lê 1993; Nguyễn 2012). As the ethnography above shows, although their festivals are being revived, traditional Hmong religion is not being

encouraged at all. What the state wants is only a modified and purified form. However, it is partly *because of* the folklorisation of their religion that many Hmong who are desperate for religious experience have turned to Christianity. Hmong religion, having been turned into folkloric culture, basically superficial performances, is at the same time expected to compete with Christianity, which requires a religious fervour that is still banned by the state.

It thus does not make sense to the many non-Christian Hmong who want to revive their tradition when people like Dr Trần instruct them to divide the totality of their cultural practices into ‘good and beautiful’ traditions and ‘negative’ (*tiêu cực*) and backward superstitions. For them this is no halfway game. As shown above, cultural cadres failed to stop Hmong actors who altered the script for the festival performance written by the state. The Hmong want to decide for themselves what parts of their culture to preserve. Although actively participating in the state-directed revival of their old traditions, non-Christian Hmong in Vietnam have their own agenda: on the one hand, to publicly declare to their Christian Hmong fellows their position – i.e. remaining ‘traditional’ in the face of Christianity’s advance – and, on the other hand, to assert some degree of autonomy as Hmong by deciding how such cultural events as *Nquam Toj* should be celebrated.

Because of the peculiar circumstances of their conversion, most of the Christian Hmong in Vietnam were still in the process of internalising their new faith and establishing their new community in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s. Inventing and participating in a new set of Christian rituals were ways for them to assert the physical existence of their Protestant community and to authenticate their new Christian subjectivity. Yet, as the ethnography shows, these events usually promote ‘secular’ activities, such as badminton, singing contests and sport competitions. In fact, Christian Hmong culture’s embrace of badminton, singing and dancing makes its modernity appear much closer to a Kinh modernity – which is what the state has always wanted to achieve with its various social-engineering programmes. But ironically, because these activities were promoted under the rubric of Christian rituals, Vietnamese authorities did not support them. And *precisely because* learning to play badminton and performing music and dance on the stage were organised under the rubric of Christianity, Hmong youth could quickly overcome their shyness and not feel humiliated for learning things that they used to reject as belonging to the Kinh. The road that they have pioneered continues to widen, as Seb Rumby shows (this issue). Perhaps, besides religious forms of modernity, conversion to and routinisation of Christianity offers a secular form of modern religiosity.

In a further irony, the state’s promotion of ritual revivals because of ‘secular’ reasoning – i.e. to fight against Christian conversion and to promote ethno-tourism – has had a religious outcome among Hmong traditionalists. In the *Nquam Toj* festival, for example, Hmong actors now emphasise the shamanic element. This is new: according to Savina (1924) and Bourotte (1943), the Hmong New Year in early 20th-century Vietnam, apart from the family feast and domestic rituals, focused on games and other entertainment. Savina (1924, 224) specifically listed *qeej* dances, the famous ball game of catch (*pov poj*), blindman’s bluff and the ‘greasy pole’ game, in which participants try to climb up a slippery post to get prizes hanging at the top. This is a Hmong version of a game that is popular around the world, like the English maypole, and generally associated with spring and fertility. Savina mentioned that his friend P. Bougault wrote to him about the *Nquam Toj* celebrated by the Miao in Yunnan (called *tchai houa chan*,

or ‘treat the flower mountain’ in Yunnanese), during which young boys and girls went to a mountain on which a slippery pole had been raised – made from a tree chosen by a sorcerer and believed to have powers of fertility – and all sang around it. While Savina’s and others’ descriptions note such beliefs about fertility, they say nothing about the *Nquam Toj* festival’s other religious or shamanic elements.

Therefore, rather than being suppressed by the state’s control, Hmong traditional religious practices today derive their form and structure from the state’s intervention – a good example of efficient mimesis (Jonsson 2010). In fact, there are fewer and fewer people who know how such traditional rituals should be performed. Being asked to organise *Nquam Toj* in an authentic way has given Hmong leaders much anxiety, because they are aware that they lack the knowledge to conduct the festival – and having invested so much meaning in bringing it back, they want to be even more certain that they are following the correct procedures. These anxieties have thus revitalised their religious agency. It is interesting that after protesting the state’s interference in their rituals, Hmong leaders practised what Katherine Swancutt (2016) terms ‘the art of capture’,³ looking to what ethnographers have written about Hmong traditions for answers to how these rituals should be carried out. One of the leaders I met in Bao Thang in 2007, Mr Lu, went to an elaborate Hmong New Year festival in Honghe country in Yunnan to learn the ‘authentic’ way to run such an event. Little did he know that this festival’s script – mirroring those of the *Nquam Toj* festivals in 2005 and 2006 discussed above – was based on the research of a group of Chinese Hmong cadres whom Chinese state authorities had commissioned around that time to visit a number of ‘undeveloped’ Hmong communities, including in Vietnam, to record traditional practices believed to still exist in pure, authentic form, unspoiled by modernisation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the politics of the construction by Vietnamese Hmong elites of Hmong identity, be it Christian or non-Christian, through ritual and ritual competition. Hmong Christian leaders are at best tolerated by the government, but their Protestantism provides them with both a platform for their organisational skills and a religious network that reaches into China and beyond. On the other hand, traditionalist leaders receive direct state support in the part of their competition for prestige in the Hmong community that plays out in the revival of their traditions, but this intervention is full of contradictions and ambiguity. In the context of massive Hmong conversion to Christianity, Vietnamese ethnologists-cum-officials have come to perceive this ethnic group’s festivals and ceremonies as less ideologically dangerous than before (Culas 2004), when they were seen as resistance to the (Kinh) nationalist project – now they are deployed as a bulwark against the worship of Jesus. Yet because Vietnam is officially a socialist country, the revitalisation project must be done under strict state control, including the use of approved scripts for ‘traditional’ ritual performances. However, although the state was determined to suppress the religious components of such performances while encouraging the revitalisation of their secular aspects, as

³ Swancutt uses ‘art of capture’ to refer to the way in which the Nuosu people of southwest China reconceptualise religious (animistic) ideas under the influence of state discourse, global imaginaries and ethnographic encounters.

explained by Dr Trần (1982), this obviously did not work in the case of the invented 'traditional' New Year celebration that this article describes. Indeed, it is not revitalised Hmong traditions but rather Christian events that have introduced secular forms of entertainment, such as badminton, which bring the Hmong culturally closer to their Kinh neighbours. The rituals and festivals detailed in this article are arenas for the staging of identity struggles in which all of the common identity markers (secular, religious, Communist, Christian, traditional, modern) are questioned and redefined. It is worth bearing in mind that conversion to Christianity is not a singular event but a lengthy transformation – of both converts and non-converts – that carries a plurality of meanings, of which those of 'modernity' are perhaps the most potent (Ngo 2016: 139–61). Playing badminton and participating in singing contests influenced by popular media and preceded by prayers are ways in which Christian Hmong contest the state's avowed backing of so-called traditional religion; staging rituals that have not been performed for a long time but are suddenly supported by the Communist state while also resisting that state's attempts to transform these rituals into cultural and touristic performances is how the 'traditionalists' respond to Christianity's advance.

Acknowledgements

The research and writing for this article were enabled by generous financial support from the Netherland Organization for Scientific Research and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. I am especially thankful to Peter van der Veer, Nicholas Tapp (†), and Oscar Salemink for helping me to shape the earliest versions of the paper. Oliver Tappe, Rosalie Stolz, the three anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Social Anthropology* have offered invaluable feedbacks and suggestions to improve the final version of the paper. I thank Juliana Froggatt for her meticulous editorial work. I wish to dedicate this paper to the memory of Kao Ly Ilean Her, a dear friend of mine who recently passed away due to the Covid. She was the most remarkable woman I have ever known, who in her capacity as a law maker, leader, and the Regent of the University of Minnesota has shaped the political and cultural life of the Hmong community of Saint Paul. During my fieldwork in Saint Paul in 2007 and 2008, Ilean had guided me, with the care of an older sister and the knowledge of an expert, to understanding the role of festivals and rituals in preserving the culture and Hmong way of life.

Tâm T. T. Ngô 

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Göttingen

Germany

NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies

Amsterdam

Netherlands

t.ngo@niod.knaw.nl

References

- Boas, F. 1978. The potlatch, in T. McFeat (ed.), *Indians of the North Pacific coast*, 72–80. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Bourotte, B. 1943. 'Mariages et funérailles chez les Mèo Blancs de la région de Nong-Het (Tran Ninh)', *Bulletin de l'Institut pour l'Etude de l'Homme* 6: 33–56.
- Chau, A. Y. 2005. 'The politics of legitimation and the revival of popular religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China', *Modern China* 31: 236–78.
- Culas, C. 2004. Innovation and tradition in ritual and cosmology: Hmong Messianism and Shamanism in Southeast Asia, in N. Tapp *et al.* (ed.), *The Hmong/Miao in Asia*, 97–126. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- DiGregorio, M. and O. Salemink 2007. 'Living with the dead: the politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38: 433–40.
- Đinh, G. K. and H. T. Lê 1993. *Lễ hội truyền thống trong đời sống xã hội hiện đại* [Traditional folk festivals in modern social life]. Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội.
- Đỗ, Phương Quỳnh 1995. *Traditional festivals in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publisher.
- Endres, K. W. 2002. 'Beautiful customs, worthy traditions: changing state discourse on the role of Vietnamese culture', *Internationales Asienforum* 33: 303–22.
- Humphrey, C. 2002. Shamans in the city, in C. Humphrey (ed.), *The unmaking of Soviet life: everyday economies after socialism*, 202–21. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jonsson, H. 2010. 'Mimetic minorities: national identity and desire on Thailand's fringe', *Identities* 17: 108–30.
- Kan, S. 2016. Competition and cooperation, hierarchy and equality, in S. Kan (ed.), *Symbolic immortality: the Tlingit potlatch of the nineteenth century*, 211–50. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Kirsch, A. T. 1973. *Feasting and social oscillation: religion and society in upland Southeast Asia*. Data Paper no. 92. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Department of Asian Studies, Southeast Asia Program.
- Ladwig, P. and R. Roque 2018. 'Introduction: Mimetic governmentality, colonialism, and the state', *Social Analysis* 62: 1–27.
- Lemoine, J. 1983. *Kr'ua Ke (Showing the way): a Hmong initiation of the dead*. K. White (trans.). Bangkok: Pandora.
- Luong, H. V. 1993. Economic reform and the intensification of rituals in two North Vietnamese villages, 1980–90, in B. Ljunggren (ed.), *The challenge of reform in Indochina*, 259–91. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development.
- Luong, H. V. 2007. 'The restructuring of Vietnamese nationalism, 1954–2006', *Pacific Affairs* 80: 439–53.
- Madsen, R. 2010. 'The upsurge of religion in China', *Journal of Democracy* 21: 58–71.
- Malarney, S. K. 2002. *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Michaud, J. and S. Turner 2006. 'Contending visions of a hill-station in Vietnam', *Annals of Tourism Research* 33: 785–808.
- Ngo, T. T. T. 2015. 'Protestant conversion and social conflict: the case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46: 274–92.
- Ngo, T. T. T. 2016. *The new way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Ngo, T. T. T. 2020. 'Dynamics of memory and religious nationalism in a Sino-Vietnamese border town', *Modern Asian Studies* 54: 795–829.
- Nguyễn, V. H. 2012. 'The questions of maintaining and promoting the values of traditional festivals: the discussion on the basic conceptions', *Journal of Ethnography* 4: 44–54.
- Salemink, O. 2001. Who decides who preserves what? Cultural preservation and representation, in O. Salemink (ed.), *Viet Nam's cultural diversity: approaches to preservation*, 205–12. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Savina, F. M. 1924. *Histoire des Miao*. Paris: Société des Missions Etrangères.
- Scott, J. C. 2009. *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Swancutt, K. 2016. 'The art of capture: hidden jokes and the reinvention of animistic ontologies in Southwest China', *Social Analysis* 60: 74–91.
- Tapp, N. 2000. Ritual relations and identity: Hmong and others, in A. Turton (ed.), *Civility and savagery: social identity in Tai states*, 84–103. Richmond: Curzon.
- Tapp, N. 2001. *The Hmong of China: context, agency and the imaginary*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tappe, O. 2018. 'Variants of frontier mimesis: colonial encounter and intercultural interaction in the Lao-Vietnamese uplands', *Social Analysis* 62: 52–75.
- Taylor, P. 2004. *Goddess on the rise: pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tỉnh Ủy Lào Cai [Lào Cai People's Committee] 2004. 'Người Mông Lào Cai và một số giải pháp, kiến nghị, về xây dựng đời sống văn hóa vùng đồng bào Mông hiện nay' [The Hmong of Lào Cai and some solutions and proposals for building sociocultural life in Hmong areas], in V. B. Trần (ed.), *Văn hóa các dân tộc Tây Bắc: Thực trạng và những vấn đề đặt ra* [The cultures of ethnic minorities in the northwest region: facts and issues], 310–28. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia.
- Trần, H. S. 1982. 'Phát huy vốn văn hóa truyền thống các dân tộc và tổ chức đời sống văn hóa ở vùng cao Hoàng Liên Sơn' [The task of developing the traditional culture and organizing the cultural life of ethnic minorities in the highlands of Hoang Lien Son], *Tạp chí Dân tộc học* 4: 55–75.
- Trần, H. S. 1996. *Văn Hóa Hmong* [Hmong culture]. Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Dân Tộc.
- Trần, H. S. 2016. 'Giải pháp quản lý lễ hội hiện nay' [Solutions for ritual and festival management today], *Tạp chí Thế Giới Di Sản* 10: 75–8.
- Trigg, A. B. 2001. 'Veblen, Bourdieu, and conspicuous consumption', *Journal of Economic Issues* 35: 99–115.

Performances ostensibles: compétition de rituelle contemporain entre les Hmong Chrétiens et non-Chrétiens au Vietnam

Après avoir reconnu le protestantisme Hmong, l'État vietnamien a poursuivi une politique « anti-conversion ». Il l'a fait en encourageant la renaissance de ce qu'il considérait comme la religion traditionnelle Hmong comme un rempart contre le protestantisme et en enrichissant la gamme des produits culturels destinés au marché croissant de l'ethnotourisme. Pour les non-convertis, non seulement leur résistance au christianisme a commencé à être redéfinie comme une « bataille » contre le christianisme, mais leurs croyances et pratiques, jusqu'alors hautement méprisées par les autorités, ont commencé à être restructurées afin d'acquérir une nouvelle force pour rebondir sur la scène religieuse nationale et mondiale. La nouvelle conscience des Hmong non-Chrétiens a toutefois inquiété l'État vietnamien. Cet article retrace les compétitions annuelles tenue depuis 2005 entre les groupes Chrétiens et non-Chrétiens de la province de Lao Cai pour l'organisation des rituels communautaires des Hmongs. Je montre que ce qui était censé devenir un rempart folklorique contre le christianisme, est devenu une nouvelle mêlée de compétition rituelle, les pionniers Hmong s'emparant rapidement de la scène centrale. Les festivals rituels deviennent donc des arènes de lutte identitaire dans lesquelles aucun des marqueurs identitaires habituels (laïc, religieux, communiste, chrétien, moderne, traditionnel) ne peut être pris pour argent comptant.

Mots-clés laïcité athée, conversion protestante, compétition de rituelle commune, pionnier, performance ostentatoire