Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Doing *Gong Culture*

Heritage Politics and Performances in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

Hoai Tran

LIT

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This book employs a framework of 'doing culture' for the sake of preserving 'living heritage' in order to unpack actors' interactions and cooperation in heritage practices. It shows how actors' efforts in 'doing culture' actively contribute to the 'living' appearances and performances of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands, the so-called 'Space of Gong Culture'. Throughout this book, the author examines the colourful activities related to 'doing culture' of various actors (the state, scholars, cultural experts, cultural cadres, leaders of local artists groups, ordinary local artists, etc.) and their involvement in what he calls a 'heritage community'. Regarding the perspective of 'doing', his research shows that, even though UNESCO'S initial idea was to acknowledge and preserve the cultural practices of intangible cultural heritage in their actual living situations, actors' cultural works contain many acts of 'doing' and meaning-making, following first of all the state's cultural, economic and political goals, and secondly the aims of the other actors. Moreover, unlike the perspective that considers the relationship between state and local communities as antagonistic, Trần argues that ''cultural engagements'' between actors emerge by means of their close interactions in heritage practices that lead actors (especially cultural cadres and local artists) to work as 'team mates' in the 'heritage community'.

Tran's research challenges the view that heritagization of intangible cultural expressions is a 'process of cultural appropriation' in which local cultural practitioners might become cultural 'proprietors', who in UNESCO's view differ from 'culture carriers'. Examining in detail heritage activities and performances, he identifies the 'image' of culture that has been produced from heritage practices (the idealized image of 'Space of Gong culture' in the present case) as a 'heritage culture' in the sense of an essentialized and idealized cultural image of a 'structural nostalgia' that helps to empower both the state and the artists who engage in heritage practices and performances. The author distinguishes between 'heritage culture' and daily cultural activities (such as trading in gongs, singing certain social songs, newly composed musical pieces, Catholic identities, and healing sacrifices). These daily cultural activities are unlikely to fit the 'beautiful' image of the 'heritage culture'. Therefore they do not appear in the performative display of heritage, but are hidden in 'the silent background' of a cultural narrative. Instead, local artists, especially artist groups' leaders, have developed a clear idea of the value of 'heritage culture' and how they should perform and act in specific cases, as they have been actively engaging with heritage practices. Moreover, through 'cultural engagement' with other actors in the 'heritage community', local artists contribute to the performance of another 'living' image of the 'Space of Gong Culture' on the heritage stage. Ultimately, thanks to cultural engagements between actors in the 'heritage community' and their active practices, the 'heritage culture', in this case the idealized image of the 'Space of Gong Culture', appears as a living cultural practice or process in the full sense of the term 'intangible cultural heritage' as defined by UNESCO. In practice in this intangible cultural heritage, all actors are 'culture carriers'.

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Cover Photo: The showcasing and performing space at a Bahnar gong artist's home garden, Kon Tum city (Photo: Hoai Tran, April 2018).

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Chapter 1
Introduction

It was a fresh morning in January 2016 in the Highlands. I went early, at 6 am, to the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Kontum to join a business trip that the department had organized for experts from the Vietnam Ethnology Museum (VEM) in Hanoi. They had come to Kontum to choose artists to perform Central Highlands culture, especially the so-called 'gong culture', during the VEM's Spring Festival, one of the VEM's trademarks. Each year, the museum invites certain ethnic groups to perform their culture to entertain and educate people in the capital in the diversity of Vietnamese culture.

This year, Kontum Province, a province in the Central Highlands, had been chosen. One of the reasons for this, as was stated in a meeting between representatives of the VEM and Kontum's Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism, was that 2016 marked the tenth year since the 'Space of Gong Culture' of the Highland minorities had been recognized by UNESCO as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Besides, according to what the representative of the VEM said unofficially, Kontum was preferred over other provinces in the same region because the VEM director, Dr Võ Quang Trọng, had a good relationship with the province. Dr Võ Quang Trọng had conducted many fieldwork trips within Kontum Province to collect the minorities' traditional epics (*sử thi*) as part of a huge project involving the collection of *sử thi* throughout the Central Highlands. During the meeting, which took place one day before the planned visit to the villages, a list of potential villages and artists was drawn up based on the Kontum heritage cadres' suggestions of who their most famous representatives were, which also apparently matched the VEM's knowledge and expectations. The business trip I was allowed to join was to visit these potential villages.

The expert group travelled in two cars, one carrying four members of the VEM, the other Mrs Thủy, Director of the Kontum Museum, and three Kontum cultural cadres in charge of cultural heritage. I was in the car with

the cadres. We got into the cars at about 7 am after a delicious breakfast in a local restaurant. Shortly into the long trip, the driver decided to refuel. While the driver was filling up, Bình[1], the Heritage Cadre of Kontum, took out his mobile phone to call A Thút, the leader of a Bahnar artists' group in Đăk Wơk village, the first village Bình had chosen to visit that day. As those in the car could guess from Bình's brief conversation with A Thút, he was just calling the artist to inform him about the visit. But there seemed to be some problems, as we heard Bình trying to convince A Thút to call his gong group members back and to prepare as quickly as possible to welcome the expert group. As Bình finished the call, his colleague Thắng immediately criticized him for not having contacted the artists much sooner in advance, so that they had time to prepare. And Thắng went further, telling Bình that, in order to 'do' culture (*làm văn hóa*) in a good way (*muốn làm văn hóa được tốt*), he should have maintained good relationships with artists so that 'any time you call, the artist would be willing to work' (lúc nào mình gọi họ cũng sẵn sàng). Later, when we got out of the car in the village, Thắng told me personally that he found Bình's way of handling cultural work rather strange ('*làm văn hóa kiểu gì mà lạ*').

It took us about an hour to reach A Thút's village by car. When we entered A Thút's house, everything looked pretty messy. Clearly, the gong group was not yet ready. Four members of the group had arrived and were already dressed in traditional clothes. A Thút quickly greeted the guests, complained about the last-minute notice from the heritage cadre, then jumped on his motorbike to go and call back his gong players and female dancers, who, not being informed about the visit, had gone to the fields look after their coffee, rubber or cassava plants or to engage in other daily activities.

Some thirty minutes later it became clear that A Thút had been able to call back some people. Five female dancers came running hurriedly into A Thút's house to dress. But A Thút was worried and angry. He had not been able to gather together the whole gong group, and it was only the full group, he said, that could play genuine pieces of gong music.

[1] I have used pseudonyms for most of my interlocutors to protect their privacy, only using the real names of scholars and famous artists.

Plate 1. Chatting while waiting.

Finally, the performance took place with less than half the group, only seven of the twelve players and five dancers being present. The test performances were not good enough to show the museum experts, A Thút complained, but he vividly described how the complete group would have performed. He answered the experts' questions about the sacred and traditional meanings of the rituals that accompany the gong music. He eagerly added more details about the ritual while talking, and listened to and negotiated with the experts' responses and their criticisms of how his group had over-performed and did not look 'traditional'. After an hour of performing, explaining and discussing, A Thút was awarded a contract with the VEM for his group to perform at the New Year Festival in Hanoi.

On the way to the other village, the VEM experts continued to talk about A Thút's group.[2] Even though this incomplete group had not given the experts a positive performance, which they agreed was due to the absence of some of the group's members and the mistake on the part of the heritage cadre, it was chosen because of A Thút's prestige as one of the most famous artists in Kontum Province. A Thút possesses many skills in the performance

[2] After the visit to Đăk Wơk village, I moved to sit in the other car with the VEM experts.

of folklore. He sings epics and plays the *tinh ning*[3], as well as playing the gong and leading a gong group, which is very famous among Vietnam's gong groups. It has performed gong music and traditional songs, and presented the Bahnar-Rơ Ngao traditional sacred rituals[4] not only at many national events but also in international performances in, for example, the United States (Smithsonian Festival 2007), Paris (Gannat 2014) and Korea. A Thút, the group's leader, was described in one newspaper as 'the person who preserves the spirits of Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands) culture'. He himself, as an outstanding local artist, has also been called a 'living treasure' (*báu vật sống*)[5] who contributes to the vibrancy of local minority culture in its living context.

After this trip to choose[6] groups to perform at the VEM, I managed to return alone to A Thút's village for a week. Part of my research strategy was to examine in detail how the chosen groups prepare their culture heritage performances outside their respective villages (see Chapter 8). One important aspect I wished to learn about was A Thút's views on his interactions with the experts and to observe how the group was preparing for the performance. When I reminded A Thút about my previous visit with the experts, he started to complain about the local cultural and heritage cadres and how the cadres in his district of Sa Thầy knew nothing about the trip. 'That was their task', he said; 'they should have known'. 'They do not care about the culture'[7], he continued, still complaining about the cultural heritage cadres in Sa Thầy, whereas he considered those in other districts in Kontum to be more responsive towards cultural work. Then he turned to criticize Bình, the Kontum heritage cadre, who only informed him about the

[3] The *tinh ninh* or *goong* (bamboo zither) is a traditional Bahnar instrument consisting of a bamboo tube with about ten strings. Local artists play the *tinh ning* solo or accompanying traditional songs. Some artists also use the *ting ning* to create new melodies before giving them to the whole *gong* band.

[4] For example, buffalo sacrifices celebrating victories against the village's enemies or rituals to expel bad luck from the village. I will provide more details about A Thút's group's ritual performances in Chapters 6 and 8.

[5] In March 2016, A Thút was officially awarded the title of 'excellent traditional artist' (*nghệ nhân ưu tú*), a title Vietnam created to fulfill the UNESCO requirements for preserving intangible heritage. I will discuss this title and the ways in which local traditional artists like A Thút deal with their new roles in cultural work and heritage practices in Chapter 7.

[6] The visit ended at the end of the same day. Groups from the villages visited were also chosen to perform at the Spring Festival. I will describe all the steps in this visit together with the performances that were held in the Vietnam Ethnology Museum in Chapter 8.

[7] In fact, the cultural heritage cadres of Sa Thầy were not aware of this trip as Bình had not informed them beforehand. However, A Thút still made this point to further compare Sa Thầy's cadres with the cadres of other districts.

visit on the way to the village. Giving such late notice, he said, badly affected the outsiders' view of minority cultures. 'If we do not prepare carefully, they [the experts] may think that we are not preserving the culture properly (*không giữ gìn văn hóa được tốt*)'. 'It is not the way to 'do' culture (*làm văn hóa ai lại làm thế*),' A Thút concluded, again bemoaning the cadre's mistakes.

Though the performance had been less than impressive, A Thút was convinced he had been able to demonstrate that he was preserving the culture properly and that this was what had earned his group the contract for the spring performance. He continued:

> They have chosen us because I showed them how I could preserve the culture. I showed them the store where I keep gongs, the drum, the bamboo zither (*tinh ning*), traditional costumes, etc. I have performed successfully in France, the US and Korea; I could explain the meaning of the gongs and rituals to them properly. This is what gave them trust in me (*thế người ta mới tin*).

In fact, A Thút showed the experts that he had ability and knowledge regarding the culture that stretched well beyond its actual performance. Indeed, this is what the experts themselves had admitted in the car.

This opening vignette illustrates nicely the main story I propose to tell in this work about heritage politics and heritage practices in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Indeed, the encounter between different levels of the state's cultural experts (experts from the VEM, local museum cadres and local heritage cadres) with local folk artists like A Thút and his group shows how actors in the 'heritage community', through their own specific efforts, contributed their work in 'doing culture' to national projects to preserve 'living' intangible cultural heritage. In the following sections of the introduction, I will elaborate the main research question and the theoretical framework I use throughout this volume to describe the 'intimate' relationship linking the actors in the 'heritage community' in Vietnam as they discuss and negotiate how to perform, and thus create, the Highlanders' cultural identities.

The Space of Gong Culture: Main Issues and Research Questions

Zooming out from the specific example I described above regarding the interaction between local artists and state cultural heritage experts and cadres, we need to consider the larger cultural political context in which the 'living culture' of minorities is collected as representing the diversity of Vietnamese culture in the international sphere.

On 25 November 2005, the 'Space of Gong Culture' of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam was added to UNESCO's list

of the World's Intangible Cultural Heritage. This 'space', which was once described as a 'shattered world' (Hickey 1993) devastated by war (see Chapter 3), has been and still is perceived by the socialist government as one of Vietnam's most remote, backward and underdeveloped regions, one that needs to catch up with the lowlands. Since 2005 it has also been depicted as a 'cultural space' for the expression of 'authentic' ethnic identities, representative of a unified yet diverse Vietnamese culture, and 'imbued with national identity' (Resolution No. 5; 1998).

Gongs themselves are very ancient and traditional ritual musical instruments among ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. They were and are usually played in an orchestra. Each ethnic group has developed its own way of playing gongs and composed its own melodies for particular occasions. The key individuals who promoted gongs to the UNESCO's Masterpieces programme[8] (see Alperson et al. 2007) describe gong music as an 'ancient and rich musical tradition' with a history of more than three thousand years. In their explanation, gongs play a significant role in the sacred life of the highlanders because the musical tradition 'reflects the animistic, agrarian, and ancestral aspects of traditional ethnic life and, as such, has connections with ritual and the sacred, as well as with the mundane' (ibid.: 17). What UNESCO proclaimed to be a 'masterpiece' on 25 November 2005 is not only the gongs and the gong music itself but the 'Space of Gong Culture', a label that includes all the other 'traditional' characteristics of the cosmology with which the gong is associated: ritual practitioners, shamans, village headmen, the communal house, longhouses, wine jars and other elements that help one imagine a pure picture of traditional 'Tây Nguyên' culture.

The present work looks at the politics, practices and performances of the 'Space of Gong Culture', an intangible cultural heritage preserved by the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands of Vietnam, which was officially accepted as an addition to UNESCO's Masterpieces programme on 25 November 2005. In the heritage discourse, the term 'Space of Gong Culture' implies an entirely traditional image of Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), crucially represented by gongs and ritual gong music in the ethnic minorities' 'spaces' of sacred ritual performances. From UNESCO's perspective, all the traditional aspects of this intangible heritage are embodied in its 'culture carriers', the local traditional artists.

In my research, I ask why and how the ideal image of the 'Space of Gong Culture' emerges and persists, despite the rapid political, economic,

[8] I follow Thomas Smith's (2008) use of the term 'Masterpieces programme' (Proclamation programme) to refer to UNESCO's programme for the recognition of 'Masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity'.

religious and cultural changes this mountainous area has undergone since the French colonial era. This image remains not only in the government's discourse, but also in the media, in the lowlanders' and highlanders' imaginations and in heritage practices and performances. Paying particular attention to the local level, I ask how Highland ethnic minorities deal with a situation in which they must both live in a rapidly changing social, cultural, economic and religious environment and join in heritage practices in order to perform and present their 'traditional' historical pasts.

The image of the Central Highlands and its attractions have been described in the wider media as a mysterious, magical area imbued with the traditional cultural identities of the ethnic groups that live there. Ritual gong music is a part of this image. Since UNESCO recognized the Space of Gong Culture as an outstanding intangible heritage, many national and international festivals have been held in the provinces of the Central Highlands and in Hanoi to perform this living culture and draw huge audiences of urban Vietnamese to enjoy this 'space'. Television programmes repeatedly portray the values and very existence of this culture.

The actual existence of this 'Space of Gong Culture' has been questioned by scholars, who ask what this image looks like in reality. One of the strongest critical voices has been Salemink (2013). In his brief but comprehensive work questioning the term 'The Space of Gong Culture', he points out that the rapid multi-dimensional (demographic, agricultural, religious) changes to Tây Nguyên have led to the disappearance of the earlier ritual contexts of gong performances. As Salemink (ibid.: 213) puts it, 'The Central Highlands is no longer a "remote area" but a hotspot of globalization, integrated into national and international market networks and subject to global cultural flows. The situation as it once existed is definitely gone, and irreversibly, too.'

If most critical perspectives on the Space of Gong Culture have taken issue with the essentialization and appropriation of culture in various guises, some perspectives have questioned whether the space even existed within living memory. Sometimes, the same authors (notably Salemink) have pursued both lines of criticism. The strongest argument against the very existence of the Space of Gong Culture invokes its sacred and ritual dimensions and points out the significance of conversions to Christianity in the Highlands since the French colonial period in undermining it.

French colonization, the destructive effects of war and the rapid social and economic transformations the Highlands have experienced under socialism in recent decades go along with what Salemink (2013) calls the 'massive *religious transformation'* (ibid.: 131, original emphasis) of the Central Highlands. Conversion to Christianity, which has been going on

since French colonial times, seems to be efficiently carrying out the double work that Salemink calls 'marking difference without breaking off contact'. That is, conversion connects the new mostly Catholic minorities with transnational, global networks, yet situates them as citizens of the modern state. Conversion to Protestant Christianity, which is more recent, having started before 1975 but only seeing large-scale success since the 1990s, seems to have had similar effects. Both cases 'can be seen as an attempt at integration rather than at fencing off' (Salemink 2013: 47).

Thu Nhung Mlô (2002: 356), an indigenous voice, perceives conversion as a way of reacting to the negative attitude of the authorities towards their traditional belief systems. She states that 'when minorities are deprived of their traditional religious beliefs because those beliefs are treated [by the government] as primitive and backward, they surely have to rely on other religions' (my translation).

With the arrival of other religions practised by migrants from lowland Vietnam (Buddhism, Cao Đài), the religio-scape of Tây Nguyên became more multifaceted. This 'massive *religious transformation'* prompts Salemink (2013) to make another argument criticizing the Vietnamese government's and UNESCO's term 'Space of Gong music' because it over-idealizes the image of Highlanders' culture as existing in a pure and ideal traditional environment. He concludes, logically, that the transition from swidden agriculture to cash crops led to changes in the ecological cosmology. In addition, people no longer had the resources to invest in expensive rituals (sacrificing a buffalo, for instance). Moreover, the highlanders' traditional rituals were alien to other religions such as Christianity. All these factors made 'community-based ritual life' and 'gong culture' disappear fast. Indeed, Salemink states that:

> The gong music … is, was and is largely ritual music…, but with the rapid changes in the demography, economy and environment of the Central Highlands and the massive conversion to Christianity among these groups, the space for this music is shrinking equally rapidly, thus making the gong music truly secular (Salemink 2012a: 284).

In other words, when the 'cosmic harmony of man – nature – cosmos' (Hickey 1982a) disappears, the ritual space disappears with it.

Despite the fact of rapid political, economic, religious and cultural change in the Central Highlands, the beautiful image of traditional Tây Nguyên implied in the term 'Space of Gong Culture' remains not only in the media, but in government discourse, the imagination of many lowland peoples, and also in the highlanders' own imagination. In the Highlands, the image remains in the ways that people present their culture in the heritage performances I am describing in this work. In the face of both local and

international scholarly criticism, we might ask: Why has the very complete traditional image of Tây Nguyên implied in the term 'Space of Gong Culture' remained in government discourse, the imagination of many lowland peoples in Vietnam and even in the Highlanders' own imagination? This is a crucial question for not only the uses but also the existence of 'Tây Nguyên'. It is also a good way to understand the role of 'Tây Nguyên' in social, ritual and heritage practices.

One way of starting an explanation is to invoke Erik Harms' (2011a) insights into Vietnamese ways of 'myth-making' and 'officializing ideologies. By exploring official and popular representations of rural-urban spatial relations in Vietnam, Harms shows how the categories of city and country, urban and rural, are produced and reproduced at all social levels to become ideal terms, always maintaining an essential difference, an ideal distinction, between them. He shows that, in order to grasp this binary, it is not enough to understand 'mass culture' as 'state-constructed popular culture' which the masses have been considered to need so that they might conform to an 'ideologically rigid construction of true culture' (Harms 2011a: 20). Instead, he suggests that mass culture meets other needs. He observes that, 'Today people at all levels of society express a keen fluency in and affinity for a set of simplifying schemes that describe what counts as Vietnamese culture in highly reductionist terms' (Harms 2011a: 21). That is, cultural work at both the political and the mass levels involves 'myth-making', creating 'officializing ideologies' and 'totalizing strategies [that] seek to homogenize difference by creating legible, governable subjects' (Harms 2011a: 23).

Indeed, for the state the simplifying, officialized discourse of the rural-urban dichotomy is essential in garnering support for development projects, such as building roads. At the mass level, this dichotomy is reproduced outside easily identifiable official needs. For example, female traders may wear peasant clothes when selling fruit in order to suggest the clean, fresh rural roots of their produce. In this sense, ideal categories not only create discourses for state projects, they provide the conditions for the everyday practices of lay people. On the other hand, everyday social actions use these categories in 'accepted conventions' for their own needs, reproducing, reinforcing and naturalizing them. For this reason, 'although ideal categories suffer descriptive deficiencies when faced with the elements of actual social life, they have tremendous staying power' (Harms 2011a: 25).

By extension, we can say that Salemink is completely right when he concludes that the former ritual context for performances of gong music in Tây Nguyên no longer exists, and irreversibly so. The 'original' space of Tây Nguyên, as described in the application for recognition by UNESCO,

has also disappeared. And yet this space does exist, and it plays an important role because it is officially a representative element of Vietnamese culture. Invoking this space provides a way for Vietnam to strengthen its international relations and bolster its socialist legitimacy (Salemink 2012b: 274). But there is, of course, more to it than that.

The main question I explore in my research is how these processes of 'doing culture' to beautify the image of minority cultures take place at various levels. Rather than viewing Vietnamese heritage politics and practice as acts of an 'appropriation of culture' (Salemink 2013), I adopt the lens of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997, 2016). To speak of appropriation emphasizes the state's power to select, integrate and use certain cultural items of its people to serve its own political, economic and cultural ends. By using the lens of 'cultural intimacy', however, I am able to present a more genuine picture from the points of view not only of the state, but also the Highland minorities' point of view.

'Doing Culture', Heritage Practices and 'Cultural Intimacy'

'Doing culture' (*làm văn hóa*) is a typical but unofficial term which the state's leaders and cultural cadres use to describe their work in the cultural sphere. The term covers different kinds of 'work' around culture: using, managing, promoting and preserving it. It has been used to address the state's cultural work since the initial era of the Communist Revolution, when 'culture' was considered a 'front' (*mặt trận*).[9] It has remained in use in recent years when the global situation, such as UNESCO's evaluations of intangible heritage and the 'market', have played more important roles in the state's cultural work.

Fascinatingly, this term can be linked with a broader theme in anthropology which examines how people 'do' things. This emphasis on the processual elements of identity is conveyed by phrases such as 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987), 'doing race and class' (Austin 2004) and 'doing culture' (Gilmore 2000; Hörning and Reuter 2004). According to these authors, 'doing' signifies the practical ways in which cultural agents attempt to set up, express, perform or strengthen their identities. For instance, West and Zimmerman show that, through everyday interactions, individuals 'do' gender in the way they perform a 'gender role' or 'gender display'. In their words, 'participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behaviour of others in a similar light' (West and Zimmerman

[9] On how gongs and gong music were used by the Vietnamese state at the 'front' of culture, see Chapter 3.

1987: 127). In their collection revisiting approaches to 'doing culture', Hörning and Reuter (2004) note that practice theory is very important in cultural study. Indeed, in their view, practice theory is essential for examining culture in its practical implementation. They stress that to study culture one should focus on its practical and pragmatic uses instead of prefabricated cognitive meanings and structures. In a more specific work on 'doing culture' (2000), Gilmore shows how a tradition (in this case Filipino folk dance) may be produced differently in different settings according to the different aims of the practitioners in their own specific settings. In the context of community associations, Filipino folk dance is performed with a sense of 'nostalgia': student ethnic organizations dance in order to celebrate a timeless 'cultural identity', while professional dance companies stress the authentic techniques of dance as the key to 'cultural representation'. For each of these authors, attention to 'doing' has proved powerful in exploring the relationship between agency and structure and in seeing how, in their daily practices and interactions, individuals contribute to the strengthening of an idealized role and image.

In my research, I find this approach relevant in examining how different actors at various levels (scholars, cultural experts, cultural cadres, local artists, etc.) take part in the cultural work (or 'doing culture') of creating, arguing, explaining, using and performing cultural symbols (the Space of Gong Culture) and images of Highland minorities' cultural identities (such as gongs, sacrifice rituals and the artists themselves) on various occasions both nationally and internationally. In the current study it is crucial to link an emphasis on 'doing' with 'cultural intimacy', especially in order to unpack the relationships between the state and local communities and their interactions in respect of heritage practices.

Many works clearly and rightly show how, through heritage politics, the Vietnamese state appropriates the culture of local communities. For instance, with respect to a particular cultural and religious practice, *Hầu đồng*, a ritual of spirit possession practised by the lowland Vietnamese majority, Endres (2011b: 182) shows that the socialist government's policy of 'heritagization' is an instrumental way of demonstrating the 'attention' it claims to give to culture and of officially declaring only certain cultural practices, expressions and skills to be 'heritage'. Other research, like Meeker's (2010), demonstrates the relative powerlessness of rural citizens to define their own heritage vis-à-vis the state. From research on intangible heritage in the Vietnamese lowlands, Meeker concluded that the state's distance from local communities means that villagers are 'inaudible' to it. Villagers preserve 'inaudible stories', while 'the center places a monetary value and a culturally determined "heritage" value on [their] socially

embedded practices' (ibid.: 66). In this way, cultural practice is turned into heritage but is also uprooted 'from the very social context upon which [its] value depends' (ibid.). Why is it, Meeker asks, that local people do not have the right to speak?

As mentioned above, Salemink (2013) has called the official politics of national identity and cultural heritage a 'process of cultural appropriation'. In this process, local communities cease to own their own culture, at best becoming 'culture carriers' in UNESCO's perspective. Their culture becomes an alienated kind of property, enclosed, appropriated and commoditized by the state, but also, through the worldwide process of cultural heritagization, made both material and 'intangible'.

Cultural politics in Vietnam involves 'selective preservation' (Evans 1985; Salemink 2000), that is, selecting and then preserving the 'beautiful tradition' (as distinguished from superstitious practices) (Salemink 2000: 141; Endres 2002, 2011a). As an example, in managing the public celebration of traditional festivals, 'selective preservation' is applied by dividing such festivals into two parts: a prelude ritual or ceremony (*lễ*), followed by the proper festival (*hội*). Published discussion of festival management reveals a concerted effort, criticized by local scholars, to increase the 'festival' part and decrease the 'ritual or ceremony' part of such organized festivals. One Vietnamese scholar alleged that, 'In the future, the ritual/ceremony part will completely disappear. There will only be the "festival" part. The "ritual festival" is going to become [just] "festival"' (Lê Hữu Tầng 1994: 295, my translation). In the case of the festivals of minorities in the Central Highlands, this has led to ritual gong music being separated from the ritual context of the buffalo sacrifice (Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2006; Lê Hồng Lý et al. 2010).

In my research, I found Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997, 2016) useful in examining actors' 'engagement' with the process of performing cultural work. Herzfeld's term assumes that the state is an important actor, despite it being composed of individuals with identities and commitments beyond those defined by their state functions. The term therefore helps to explore the process whereby meanings are essentialized and produced through the self-representations of the various actors and 'levels' I mentioned above. For instance, it can be said that the state chooses a certain image or identity to show off in international relations and conducts various policies and practices to fulfil its international commitments as a state. It would seem that on the international stage the state is not constrained by the opinions or practices of its citizens, but rather has the power to enforce its internationally produced image on to its citizens. Although this is partly true, 'cultural intimacy' provides a tool for examining

the active relations between the grassroots and the state, even in questions concerning national identity in the international arena.

In other words, 'cultural intimacy' focuses attention not on the confrontational situation of the state, but on its processes of engagement. In his theoretical work, Herzfeld avoids viewing the state as 'it' in an abstract sense. Instead he sees the state's bureaucrats as 'active human being[s]' (Herzfeld 2016: 5) and examines their day-to-day interactions with the state's citizens. In this way, he is able to show how, in Greece, 'officials so often seem to connive in perpetuating that sneaky persistence [of the state] in everyday life' (ibid.: 2). In addition, he shows how citizens participate in the process of essentializing 'to making [the state] a permanent fixture in their lives' (ibid.: 6).

With respect to my own research, 'cultural intimacy' describes many aspects of the relationship between Vietnam's ethnic minorities and the modern socialist state. Using it enables me to draw attention to and examine how individual representatives of minority groups actively participate in the process of essentializing the traditional image of their own culture, and Highland culture more generally. It further helps ground this perspective in an analysis of how the state and the minorities negotiate in the context of interactions between the cadres and local communities.

Minorities in a 'Rite of Passage'

The socialist state's vision and policies, which incorporated the ethnic minorities into the socialist agenda (see Chapter 3), recall the term 'rites of passage'. Turner (1979 [1964]) borrowed the term from Van Gennep (1909) to describe rites which accompany the socially significant changes in an individual's or group's condition (such as place, state, social position and age) and which are marked by three phases: separation, liminality (or *limen)* and aggregation. In the first phase, an individual or social unit, identified as a 'neophyte' or 'initiand', is detached from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or set of cultural conditions, undergoes a series of trials in the second phase, and is finally reintegrated with a new stable status in the third phase. In Vietnam's ethnic policies, it could be said that the minorities were identified as 'neophytes' or 'initiands'. Starting from their backward, stable condition as 'primitive', they were to undergo a revolutionary, transitional period, which would end with their re-integration into the Vietnamese nation as socialist humans.

In comparing the Socialist Party's discourses and agenda with 'rites of passage', I do not intend to frame my research within structural theory. Nonetheless even a cursory consideration of minorities as ritual neophytes yields some benefits to this study. The first observation concerns the

invisibility of the neophyte's present state as such. Turner describes the condition of the neophyte as invisible in the liminal period. In this period, the neophyte has a twofold character, at once no longer classified and not yet classified. This, Turner argues, 'is often expressed in symbols modelled on processes of gestation and parturition. The neophytes are likened to or treated as embryos, new-born infants, or sucklings by symbolic means which vary from culture to culture' (Turner 1979 [1964]: 236). It is also typical of these transitional beings that 'they have nothing...no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows' (ibid.: 237). In this condition, 'the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge' (ibid.: 236). Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories.

I argue that Vietnam's Highlanders, like minorities in general, may be interpreted from the perspective of this 'twofold character'. Beyond their assigned role as the Party's 'younger brothers' in socialism, they manifest this paradoxical situation in other discourse. They have been widely seen as undeveloped peoples in need of improvements to their ways of life, and even as 'victims of development'. Yet, on the other hand, they are considered to be the holders of rich, traditional cultural customs and practices. They seem to exist in an ambiguous, 'betwixt and between' situation: once backward, but seemingly destined to become rich paragons of culture. Or perhaps it is the other way around: the richly cultured becoming poor and disenfranchised? Either way, they cannot simply be present as beings in the process of change; they are invisible as such, only becoming visible with reference to stable categories that they no longer represent or do not yet represent.

This liminal period, as Turner points out, is also a 'stage of reflection', when the 'neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them' (ibid.: 53). Invisible (and also inaudible) minorities ought nevertheless to be expected to form ideas and opinions about their place within society. Turner's second observation about neophytes suggests that we should not simply criticize the effects of politicians' policies on minorities without exploring the latter's own reflections on these same policies.

In recent years, many critical voices have been raised about the negative effects of development projects on minority groups. Jamieson, Le Trong Cuc and Rambo (1998: 16), describing the 'deepening crisis in upland development', state that 'many upland minorities are victimized by stereotypes that portray them as backward, superstitious, and conservative'.

In the cultural sphere, minorities have become consumers rather than producers:

> Local knowledge is increasingly considered secondary and often inferior to national culture as processed and distributed by the mass media. Traditional ethnic dress, for example, is being replaced by modern lowland styles at a rapid and accelerating rate. This process of integration into a larger cultural system, although having potentially liberating aspects, decreases local control over information flow, weakens local symbols of identity and converts upland people from producers to consumers of culture (Jamieson et al. 1998: 15).

For instance, Philip Taylor (2008: 5) indicates that many scholars portray ethnic groups as being subjugated, disciplined and circumscribed. That perspective, in Taylor's view, overstates the power of the state and fails to recognize the ability of minorities to negotiate with it. This argument calls to mind Kerkvliet's (1995, 2001) observations about the dialogical relation between the Vietnamese state and society. The perception of ethnic groups as 'victim[s] of development', as Harms (2011a: 7) puts it, presents a one-sided view of marginalized people. Harms therefore calls for new research to 'retell the story of the Vietnamese nation by peering in from the outside, thus fundamentally altering the way we understand the formation of the Vietnamese state and what this has meant for minority populations' (ibid.).

Logan (2010) acknowledges changes in the cultural practices of Highlanders through the influence of the outside world on the younger generations, such as pop music, Western dress and modern hairstyles. Yet, from a human rights perspective, he states that they have a right to choose how to experience their own lives. From this perspective, the logical question arises: what would happen to their identity and heritage if their interest in achieving higher living standards were to make them reject tradition and modernize their cultures? How should the balance between protecting gong-playing culture and promoting the rights of Tây Nguyên people be maintained? In Logan words, 'will it have the effect of turning a traditional set of skills into an economic resource that will help achieve these social goals?' (Logan 2010: 198). Logan does not ignore the significant impact of tourism on the highlanders, but on the other hand, describing the example of a northern upland tourist town, he argues that tourism does not necessarily destroy minority culture (Logan 2010: 203).

Indeed, in opposition to the concern that the commodification of culture necessarily leads to a dilution of ethnic identity, John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) show that the tourist market may also help to preserve, enhance and enrich such identity. They show how the 'ethno-

commodity' may deepen an individual's and a group's sense of identity, thus generating ethnicity, as they put it: 'just as culture is being commodified, so the commodity is being rendered explicitly cultural—and, consequently, is increasingly apprehended as the generic source of sociality' (ibid.: 28). They refer to this logic as a 'dialectic between the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture'. From the local people, those who sell their culture, they show that commodification becomes an essential means of survival. As one Tswana man asked them during research: 'If we have nothing of ourselves to sell, does it mean that we have no culture? [...] If this is so, then what are we?' (ibid.: 10).

By comparing the Highland minorities with those whom Turner identifies as 'neophytes' or 'initiands' in a process of liminality, in this research I examine how they deal with the ambiguity of their situation within the state's political, economic and cultural projects. Yet, I also show how these minorities, with their very diverse ethnic, social and religious backgrounds, deal with the state's cultural and heritage policies and with being integrated into an economy of cultural commodification.

Chapter Overview

The next chapter, Chapter 2, describes the complex experiences I had while conducting fieldwork in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. I describe the advantages and difficulties I faced as an ethnically Viet (Kinh) scholar in conducting research in a Highlands area among other ethnic groups. My advantages and difficulties were compounded by my working closely with the 'heritage community' during my long field trip.

Chapter 3 describes the historical background of the Central Highlands in general, and provides a more detailed description of the villages, communities and individuals I engaged with during fieldwork. I contrast images of the Central Highlands in different historical periods, from the 'ideal past' to becoming a French colony, through the destruction of the Indochina War to the period since 1975, when the Highlands have been integrated into Vietnam as a socialist nation state.

Chapter 4 shows how, in different historical periods, folklore in Vietnam, and more specifically in this research the gongs and gong culture of the Central Highlands minorities, have been acknowledged and used by the state, being endowed with specific meanings to serve the state's political goals. After 1975, the gongs gradually came to be considered an essential symbol of Vietnamese 'national identity' and have helped to strengthen the nation's cultural identity significantly. Since 2005, using the 'Space of Gong Culture' as a brand, the gongs and their spiritual and social contexts have been presented as 'intangible heritage' and honoured as a 'masterpiece' of

human achievement. In addition, they are considered to contain within them 'outstanding' value in urgent need of a programme to protect them in order to preserve this heritage from the threat of modernization. Chapter 4 further examines the discourses of Vietnamese scholars to see how they contribute to the state's acknowledgement and use of local folklore, especially in the case of gongs and gong culture. Finally, the chapter describes how the state works closely with UNESCO to shape its political and legal framework and shows how it is designing a bureaucratic system to manage and support cultural heritage in a systematic and modern fashion.

Chapter 5 explores the different meanings and performances of gongs and gong music in heritage practices and discourse, as well as in daily life. In doing so, the chapter is intended to illustrate the intimate interactions between the state and its minorities, as well as between the state and the Catholic Church, which shape the vivid and flexible 'image' of minority cultures in different political, cultural and religious contexts. Specifically in this chapter, I show that, in the state's policy of managing and protecting gongs, criticisms and warnings about the 'draining away of gongs' (i.e. their physical disappearance from local communities through sale) can to some extent be seen as the state's way of performing its 'spatializing' effects. Certainly, the state uses such warnings to demonstrate how keenly it feels its responsibility for protecting local culture. On the other hand, even though the trade in gongs and the traders themselves have come under criticism, the traders (especially when they are locals) have an intimate and integrated place within the heritage community. Trading gongs (if not their sale) is a constituent part of gong culture, and the traders are among the acknowledged 'keepers of tradition'.

Exploring the lives of gong music, I argue that the heritage discourse of authenticity, which emphasizes the protection of tradition, leads traditional artists to hide their 'creativity'. Their role in 'composing' the whole musical work is hidden behind the mask of tradition. Heritage explanations for the meaning of the 'Space of Gong Culture' often put gong music into its ritual context. However, in the Highlanders' daily lives nowadays, many of the earlier ritual environments for the performance of gong music have disappeared. Thus, there are two different pictures of ritual gong music. Music related to agricultural rituals that have now disappeared are usually performed on the heritage stage, while the gong music played at funerals is still practised in daily local life. Before going into the specific points I propose to discuss further, I provide basic information about gongs, gong music and the culture that is imbued with this heritage.

Chapter 6 explores the roles and practices of rituals in the 'Space of Gong Culture' in both heritage performances and the minorities' everyday

lives. Rituals, especially sacrificial rituals, are usually described as particular to minority cultures, especially those with a 'Space of Gong Culture' heritage. However, behind this beautiful image, Highlanders' rituals have had multiple experiences in the public arena. In this chapter, I first show how the 'traditional' image of the Space of Gong Culture in the Central Highlands has been represented through ritual and festival heritage performances. I then draw attention to recent public criticisms and discussions of the 'savage' aspect of the (buffalo) sacrifices that are publicly held by the government for touristic and political purposes. By exploring both etic and emic perspectives, I will examine complex ideas of modernity and ideas and practices concerning culture among both the Vietnamese majority and the Highland minorities.

Chapter 7 examines the case of artists. I show that, even though 'folk artists' appear in heritage documents as the static and pure figures of 'culture holders' and 'living treasures', they are hardly so in real life. For the title to be assigned to any actual individual requires that local artists themselves engage in a series of complex engagements with heritage practices. As shown in the opening vignette of this introduction, a local artist like A Thút has only been recognized as a representative of Bahnar culture and as an 'excellent folk-artist' because he takes the effort to learn how the 'heritage community' works; he 'does culture', builds up his group, performs in certain ways and, importantly, distinguishes himself from other artists in the eyes of the cultural and heritage cadres. Moreover, he does more than 'carry' culture; his skill in performing culture means that he in fact creates lively new versions of culture in interactions with his audiences.

As integral actors in the network, artists interact closely with other actors in a 'heritage community' (cultural cadres, cultural experts, event managers) both on and off the heritage stage. As I show in Chapter 8, all these actors contribute their voices, attitudes and work to the long process of preparing and performing cultural heritage. In analysing their co-operation and controversies, I unpack the complex relationships within and interactions between actors in the 'heritage community,' showing the different perspectives on 'authenticity' that are held by various actors and how these shape the specific cultural image that is consequently performed to audiences.

The ninth and last chapter summarizes the main arguments of this study. I conclude that it is not 'the state' as a monolithic construct or the local population that creates the 'living' representative image of the 'Space of gong culture'. Rather, all actors, the state, scientists, cultural experts, cultural cadres, local artists, etc., are actively involved in the process of its creation, preservation and performance. This ideal picture of the minorities'

historical tradition, which I call ‘heritage culture’, should not be viewed as fundamentally different from the everyday cultural habits of the local people. After all, all actors are ‘carriers’ of this intangible cultural heritage.

Chapter 2
Fieldwork and Methodology

In mid-March 2015, I conducted a two-week pre-fieldwork trip to Kontum Province to investigate potential field sites for my main period of fieldwork, which was to begin in August 2015. Luckily, a Cultural Sports Festival for the Young People of ethnic groups (*Ngày hội Văn hóa Thể thao Tuổi trẻ các dân tộc tỉnh Kon Tum*) was being held in Kontum City at the same time. I was eager to attend the event, which took place over three days. The first day and the second morning were set aside for sports competitions, including 'traditional' activities such as shooting the crossbow *(bắn nỏ)*, tug-of-war *(kéo co*), bag-jumping *(nhảy bao bố)*, and walking on stilts (*đi cà kheo*). A competition in cooking traditional foods took place on the third day. The final night was saved for the most important cultural practices: gong music and ritual performances. According to the introductory leaflet read out by a representative of the organizers, these competitive musical performances were meant to be the central activity of the festival and were intended to offer young artists from different villages throughout the province a chance to meet each other and to present and exchange their skills. In addition to all this, the young artists were able to express and enrich their knowledge of their own traditional cultures. The festival, as the First Secretary of the Youth Union of Kontum Province explained in her speech opening the competition, was also intended as one of many practical activities (*hành động thiết thực*) to showcase the generation of young artists that will be protecting the heritage of the 'Space of Gong Culture'.

What the organizer did not explain was how the participating groups had been selected, nor why some groups performed without competing. However, the leaders of the various groups were keen to talk about precisely this element of the festival. Y Klin's group, for example, gave the opening performance before the competitions began, but did not compete. I wondered why. Y Klin, now aged 54, is an important folk artist in Kontum Province. She is also a secondary schoolteacher and had organized pupils in her home village to become a quite famous musical gong and xoang dancing group. I

had followed Y Klin's group some days before the festival to observe their preparations and had learned that they would not be competing. I asked Y Klin why, and she explained that, compared to other youth groups, hers had reached a good standard. They had performed in many provinces in Vietnam and had made one trip abroad to China. Thus, they joined the festival only to perform and to exchange cultural knowledge (trao đổi văn hóa) with other groups.

The day after the festival I visited A Láo, an 82-year-old Jrai folk-artist in the village of Plei Sar. A Láo, who was to become one of my key informants, is known for making traditional Jrai wooden statues, as well as for performing rituals and gong music. A Láo had calendars from a number of years, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, tacked on to his wall, which I asked him about. On each calendar, he said, he had noted carefully the heritage activities he had joined in that year. He had attended at least one or two cultural events in 2012 and 2013, but in 2014 the markings stopped. Even in June 2016, when I finished my main fieldwork, he had not been invited to any further heritage activities. Why? 'Maybe I was already old', he said, adding: 'Youngsters like A Hanh, another famous Jrai folk artist in Chốt village, are healthier and more active in going [and joining heritage practices]'.

In these two early encounters with folk artists in the field, the latter were ready to explain their roles and status to me in comparison to other artists and groups in the province. In fact, the more deeply I probed in my project on heritage, the more I found practices of comparing and selecting at work in the choice of representations and representatives at various levels, from state ideologies to the work of state institutions, as well as among the local folk artists. This was to be expected: in her review of heritage study, Kuutma (2012: 27) describes heritagization as a selective process of choosing certain cultural representations: 'The identification and the evaluation of cultural heritage are inevitably surrounded by contestation. Programs for preservation and safeguarding pertain simultaneously to the politics of inclusion and exclusion: about who matters, who is counted in, who defines'. It is easy to imagine that such practices matter in institutional or theoretical terms, as salient national cultural representatives are chosen. I found that this is also relevant to heritage practices on the ground, as some folk artists emerge and disappear as actively engaging with the state's heritage institutions and are salient actors in the presentation and performance of heritage in the 'Space of Gong Culture'. Therefore, my initial strategy in conducting my research adopted multi-sited research in order to follow cultural heritage cadres and local folk artists in their activities and points of view.

Map 1. Research area within the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Choosing Field Sites: From Comparative Points of View

In order to conduct this project, one of the essential research strategies I used was multi-sited research. Marcus (1995) proposes this method of doing fieldwork as a useful way of investigating transnational processes because fieldwork in multiple locations can show the interconnections of people, things and ideas through the process of globalization. In her critical review of heritage study, Kuutma (2012: 33) agrees that multi-sited research is useful for 'analyz[ing] decision-making on various levels: international, national and particularly local'. But, she argues, 'the "local" itself also needs to be studied and analyzed as a multi-sited field' (ibid.). In other words, multi-sited research is a practical method for tracking how the idea of heritage has been taking shape, and how it has been perceived and practised through multiple levels of heritage activities around the 'Space of Gong Culture': from UNESCO to the Vietnamese state, to local cultural cadres, and to local folk artists (*nghệ nhân*).

At the state level, I look at how the state maintains its close relationship with UNESCO, actively responding to and fulfilling new UNESCO requirements for applying various titles and managing culture. Studying the management and organization of Vietnamese cultural heritage, I collected official state documents regarding cultural heritage policies and activities and conducted interviews with the leaders of state cultural institutions (such as the Director of the Cultural Heritage Department and the Director of the Institute of Cultural Studies). In addition, I explored how the government's heritage management system has been organized and looked at how heritage policies are deployed at various administrative levels. My fieldwork experience showed me that the lower cadres are in the bureaucratic level, the more closely they interact with the artists. Indeed, the most important bureaucratic levels are the provincial, district and commune, the levels at which the cultural cadres interact very closely with the local folk artists. Thus, I also worked closely with cultural cadres at these levels to examine how the state's heritage management performs in reality.

By examining the state's cultural heritage system within its broader political and economic perspectives, I attempt to show how the state demonstrates and performs its ownership of minority cultures through its bureaucratic practices. This demonstration is part of a project to integrate the Central Highlands into the Vietnamese nation state.

Local points of view are crucial to my research. I investigate the minorities' experiences of heritage and how they adapt to the state's cultural heritage management and activities. I explore what heritage means to the indigenous people. This perspective is also helpful in studying how local people practise and perform their culture in the different circumstances of their village lives and their cultural heritage performances.

Map 2. Field sites in Kontum province.

I did my main fieldwork in four villages in Kontum province. Two of them were Catholic villages: Kon Ktu village, Đăk RơWa Commune, Kontum city (Bahnar ethnic group); and Đăk Wơk village, Hơ Moong Commune, Sa Thầy District (Bahnar-Rơ Ngao ethnic group). The other two were 'traditional' villages: Đăk Mế village, Bờ Y Commune, Ngọc Hồi District (Brâu ethnic group) and Plei Sar village, Ia Chim Commune, Kontum city (Jrai ethnic group). Besides these four villages, I also conducted fieldwork in Plei Chốt village, Sa Thầy District (Jrai ethnic group), mainly to follow my informants in Plei Sar in attending a three-day buffalo sacrifice in this village. I chose the field sites following the suggestions of both the Kontum cultural cadres and my informants. For example, the head of the Heritage Department (*Phòng Di sản*) of the provincial-level Kontum Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism (*Sở Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch tỉnh Kontum*) quickly gave me strong recommendations for some notable places and people.

Plate 2. The traditional communal Rong house of Kon Ktu village.

I followed his advice, and his suggested villages became my core field sites: two Bahnar villages (Kon Ktu and Đăk Wơk villages) and a Jrai village (Plei Sar village, Ia Chim Commune). Interestingly, he somehow did not mention that the two Bahnar villages are, in fact, Catholic villages. These villages are certainly among those that should have undergone what Salemink (2012a; 2013) calls the 'massive religious transformation' of the Central Highlands, but they are still presented as representatives of the Space of Gong Culture. Given the arrival of universal religions (Christianism, Protestantism) and lowland Việt migrants' religions (Buddhism, Cao Đài) in the Highlands, the religio-scape of Tây Nguyên is plural in appearance. But let me first describe the villages as they initially appear from the point of view of heritage. Kon K'tu (Đăk RơWa Commune) is a Bahnar Kontum village. In newspapers it is described as one of the oldest, that is, most nearly original villages of Bahnar Kontum. It is located just seven kilometers south-east of Kontum City.

Plate 3. Inner construction of the Rong house in Kon Ktu village.

Tourism was promoted about ten years ago because of its proximity to Kontum City, its beautiful landscape (Đăk Bla River, hills, and woods) and its traditional layout, with houses surrounding a traditional communal *rông* house.[10] Newspapers also call it a community imbued with Bahnar cultural identity, as evidenced in the traditional *rông* house, traditional festivals, gong music and *xoang* dancing. It is considered a must to visit for anyone seeking to understand the Space of Gong Culture and is popular with tourists, mainly international ones, who visit the village mainly in the dry season from November to March. In other months, it looks like any other typical Bahnar village. When tourists come, they may go and climb the surrounding hills or rent boats along the Đăk Bla River, and often they pay for a gong music show and a performance of *xoang* dancing by the villagers. More recently, bio-tourism has been promoted and developed.

Đăk Wơk (Hơ Moong Commune, Sa Thầy District) is a Bahnar RơNgao village forty kilometers north-west of Kontum City. Until about thirteen years ago it was located in the fertile valley of the Đak Krông River,

[10] The *Rong* house is an essential social, cultural, and religious symbol of each indigenous village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It is the central place for the whole village where rituals and festivals take place. Traditional *Rong* houses are built with an exceptionally high curved roof that generally stands up to 25-30 meters and are made from natural forest materials such as bamboo and wood; the whole construction rests on wooden pillars (see Plates 2 and 3).

surrounded by woods. In 2003 the villagers had to move to make way for the Plei Krông hydroelectric project. Leaving their traditional wooden houses in the former site, they moved into the simple majority Kinh-style houses that the hydroelectric project built for them. Although the new village is nothing like a traditional Rơ Ngao village, the principle of 'intangible culture' places it on the heritage map of the Space of Gong Culture. This is the village where A Thút lives and leads a very famous gong group that has performed in the United States, France and Korea, as well as in many provinces in Vietnam. Indeed, as the Head of the Heritage Department told me when recommending the village, it was the fascinating and famous A Thút whom I must meet. Beloved by the media, A Thút is sometimes described as 'he who keeps [the] spirit of Tây Nguyên culture,' as if he were the Space of Gong Culture itself (Phạm Thọ 2011; see also Đào Loan 2015; Khánh Ngọc 2015).

Plate 4. A Kinh-style house in Đăk Wơk built by the Plei Krông hydroelectric project for resettled families.

In my first three months in the field (September–November 2015), I focused on these two Bahnar Catholic communities. I paid additional attention in these months to studying the Catholic Church's strategy of 'inculturation' in the Central Highlands. The Catholic ethnic groups in Kontum appear to be people 'in between' the Church's strategy and the state's cultural heritage policies and practices (discussed further in the last part of Chapter 5). While I was staying in the villages of Kon Ktu and Đăk Wớk, I noticed that the Bahnar referred to the Jrai (as well as to the 'traditional' Brâu group in Đăk Mế and the Jrai in the Plei Chốt village, which I describe below) as *Sa mắt* or *Hơ mắt* ('Satan's people'). The Catholic Bahnar consider people who

have not yet been converted to Catholicism as uncivilized. I nevertheless insisted on collecting data in 'traditional' villages such as Plei Sar, Đắk Mế and Plei Chốt to gain a comparative and broader view of ritual changes and the diverse lives of gong music.

Plate 5. Hơ Moong Commune from a distance, looking like a peninsula that is partly surrounded by the Plei Krông hydroelectric lake.

In December, I extended my research to the Jrai village of Plei Sar, Ia Chim Commune). Jrai artists, like A Láo mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, seemed to be less famous than those in the Bahnar villages. Plei Sar village is said to be a traditional Jrai village practising traditional rituals uninfluenced by conversions to Catholicism. It is home to famous Jrai artists (*nghệ nhân*), who are usually invited to heritage performances. Within a few weeks of fieldwork, I found that nearly half the families in the village were not so 'traditional' and that many 'traditional' practices are no longer observed. Of the 264 families in the village, some sixty were Catholic and fifty were Buddhist. Moreover, these were recent conversions made mostly in the early 2000s. Many of the Jrai's traditional agricultural rituals are no longer practiced in Plei Sar village. They have disappeared along with agricultural changes from swidden cultivation to planting wet rice and trees for industrial use (see Chapter 3) and with the state's 'selective preservation' policies (see Chapter 4). Despite the fact that they have given up agricultural rituals (e.g. to the gods of rice), the Jrai still conduct communal rituals (e.g.

for the god of the *rông* communal house, or for the village's water source) and rituals of offerings to say farewell to their dead relatives (*pơ thi*), cure the ill and feed the spirits of the ancestors. Yet, both from afar and up close, it is easy to see how the villagers and their practices have a 'traditional' appearance. Even the Catholics and Buddhists in the village join in the communal rituals, though they avoid certain symbolic acts (e.g. praying to the traditional gods), and the Buddhists criticize the killing of animals in the offering rituals.[11] This complex religious situation shows that, besides research on Jrai heritage, it is also interesting to explore how villagers discuss, interact and negotiate with each other from the perspectives of their respective beliefs and religious backgrounds, as they practice rituals and everyday life activities. For my part, during fieldwork in Plei Sar village in Ia Chim Commune, I conducted research on many rituals, including weddings, funerals, the ritual for a new house, curing and rain-calling.

The data I collected in the Bahnar Catholic villages provide two useful comparisons to the Jrai village of Plei Sar. First, they make it possible to compare the effects of Catholic conversion on local ritual. The Bahnar can be viewed as 'standard' Catholics in comparison to recent Jrai converts. The Bahnar are actually the largest Catholic group in Kontum and have been converted since Catholic missions first went to the Highlands in the mid-nineteenth century. The Bahnar language is even the official language of the Kontum Catholic diocese. Secondly, they make it possible to compare how different ethnicities with different religious backgrounds perform gong music.

I also integrated the Brâu into my research for two crucial reasons. The first is their special pair of *tha* gongs, mentioned in the UNESCO application as a remarkable example of gongs. The second reason is that a Brâu group, together with A Thút's group, was invited to perform in the Spring Festival in the Ethnology Museum (see Chapter 8). The Brâu speak a Mon-Khmer language belonging to the Bahnaric branch. All the Brâu in Vietnam currently live in a frontier village ten kilometres from the junction of the Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian borders (Đăk Mế village, Bờ Y Commune, Đăk Glei District, Kontum Province). With a population of only about four hundred in Vietnam they are one of the country's smallest ethnic groups, and are sometimes described as a 'nearly extinct group' (*tuyệt chủng*) because of their low population and precarious cultural situation.[12]

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[11] Buddhists and Catholics in Plei Sar village still observe many traditional practices that they might not be expected to do. They may also seek the help of traditional sorcerers when a family member falls ill.

[12] According to Laos's population census in 2003, the Brâu population is 17,544, mainly in the districts of Phu Vong, Sanamsai and Saisettha in Attapeu province (Schliesinger 2003:

Like other groups living in the Central Highlands, the Brâu used to practice agricultural rituals at every stage of rice cultivation: choosing the land, clearing the land, planting seeds and harvesting. Since 1975, when they arrived at their current settlement from the border areas between Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia (see more in Chapter 3), the Brâu have been subject to the state's fixed cultivation scheme (*định canh định cư*), which means they had to abandon their custom of shifting cultivation. Their adoption of fixed cultivation is seen as being responsible for the non-observation of rituals, although they retain knowledge of their traditional rituals. As Thao La, the representative of Brâu artists in the village, explained:

> We only do them [agricultural rituals] when the government opens its pocket, investing money for us to run certain rituals as cultural events in this village or as performances in Hanoi. That's it. If we were still doing shifting cultivation on our former mountainous fields, there would still be rituals.

The rituals they conduct without government support are mainly for curing the sick.

In official heritage discourse, the Brâu are not only notable for their low numbers, cultural specificity and perceived precariousness; they are also important for their ownership of a pair of *tha* gongs. In Vietnam's application to UNESCO for recognition of the 'Space of Gong Culture' (VICAS 2006)[13], as well as in various newspaper articles (see, for example, Dương Đức Nhuận and Huỳnh Kiên 2008; Đinh Sỹ Tạo 2010; Quang Thái 2017), *tha* gongs are described as among the oldest gongs. They originated in Laos and are made of a special alloy which makes loud tones with many harmonies. The *tha* are always played in a pair, with one gong designated as the husband (*jơliêng*) and the other as the wife (*chuar*). More interestingly, in Brâu belief *tha* gongs are inhabited by a god who must be given offerings before the playing can begin. Before playing their *tha*, the Brâu therefore perform a small ritual: wine and chicken blood are sprinkled on to the inner side of the *tha* 'to invite the *tha* to eat' and 'to invite the *tha* to speak' (*goh tha*). Once the ritual has been performed, the musicians can play the *tha*

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14). In 2015, the Brâu population in Laos was 22,772 (Department of Ethnic Affairs 2015: 1). In Cambodia, in 2008, their population was 9,025, and they lived in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces (Schliesinger 2011: 173). In 2013, the Brâu population in Cambodia was 13,902 (National Institute of Statistic of Cambodia 2013).

[13] In 2006, the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies published the original application to UNESCO of the 'Space of Gong Culture' intangible heritage as a book entitled 'Kiệt tác di sản truyền miệng và phi vật thể của nhân loại, Không gian văn hóa Cồng chiêng Tây Nguyên' (Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, Cultural Space of Tây Nguyên Gong).

without worrying that the god will punish them.[14] The description of this ritual appears again and again in newspapers, research and *tha* performances. When I first met Lân, the cultural cadre in Đăk Glei District, he told me the same story and suggested that I should stay in Đăk Mế village to have a chance to attend the ritual.

So it was that in January 2016 I conducted fieldwork in this village. I was particularly focused on all the steps of the process in which Brâu artists became involved in their preparations for the Spring Festival at the Vietnam Ethnology Museum (Hanoi) in February 2016 (together with Đăk Wơk village). These observations helped me explore the Brâu artists' experiences of bringing their sacred ritual instruments, the *tha* gongs, to the heritage stage and engaging with other actors in the 'heritage community'.

Besides these four main field sites, I also conducted some short fieldwork trips to the Jrai village of Plei Chốt in Sa Thầy district. During the first four-day visit at the beginning of April 2016, I accompanied A Bên, a gong player in Plei Sar, to attend a three-day buffalo sacrifice ritual in this village. Observation of this ritual helped me improve my previous knowledge, acquired in Plei Sar, regarding buffalo sacrifices and traditional *tre* (responsive) singing[15] during the nights of the ceremony.

While conducting interviews with some gong players at this ritual, I learnt that in April 2014 the artists of Chốt village had been invited to perform a buffalo sacrifice ritual in a festival at the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism (Hanoi).[16] A Thút's gong group also performed an animal-offering rite at this cultural event. Different reflections and experiences of 'traditional' Jrai and Catholic Bahnar, told to me by artists in both villages, towards the sacredness of sacrificial rituals while performing this type of ceremony are interesting for reasons of comparison and are explored further in Chapter 6.

In Chốt village, I also managed to interview an artist (A Huynh) and a gong trader and traditional gong master (A Ram). A Huynh, who is 37, is much younger than A Ram, who is 82. And, although A Ram owns many

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[14] The fear of the *tha* gong god's 'punishment' will be discussed in Chapter 8.

[15] I describe this *tre* singing tradition and its relations to gong music in Chapter 5.

[16] The 'Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism' is a project of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam. The targets of the village are well described on its website: 'It is a center of cultural, sport and tourist activities of a national nature where the focus is on re-creating, preserving, promoting and exploiting the traditional cultural heritages of the Vietnamese ethnic groups; strengthen solidarity, mutual understanding, educate the national pride and love of the homeland of the Vietnamese citizens; promote friendship, cooperation and cultural exchange with the peoples of the world. It serves the needs of visitors, tourists and researchers in the country and international tourists' (Source: http://langvanhoa.com.vn/about-us).

sets of valuable gongs and is among the best gong masters in the village, A Huynh has received more attention from the heritage institutions, being awarded the title of Excellent Artist in March 2016. I will discuss their cases in comparison with other artists in Chapter 7. I did not meet these two Jrai artists during the first four-day trip to Plei Chốt, but I did manage to visit and interview them in May 2016 and January 2018. In addition, in March 2016 I accompanied ethnic artists from Kontum to the March Festival at the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism. A Huynh and A Thút also joined this trip, not to perform but to attend a meeting of famous Vietnam artists. During the trip, I discussed with both A Huynh and A Thút issues surrounding the state's recognition of and policies for local traditional artists.

In each of these villages, I followed the artists and explored how they and their co-villagers performed rituals and gong music in their village life. I also followed these artists as they prepared for, travelled to and performed at heritage events. In addition, I looked at how they arranged their cultural work, both by themselves and in interaction with cultural experts and cadres, and also with judges in competitions. These observations allowed me to trace how the cultural identities of minorities are discussed, negotiated and performed. Using multi-sited methods allowed me to examine 'cultural engagement' among heritage actors (the state, the state's cultural heritage organizations, scholars, cultural cadres and local people) and activities (rituals, performances, festivals) within the broader space of a 'heritage community', borrowing Cash's (2011) term 'folklore community'. The interactions of actors in the 'heritage community' will be described in Chapters 7 and 8.

Entering the Field(s)

The administrative procedure for obtaining a research permission for my fieldwork in Kontum was relatively simple because I had a letter of introduction from the Institute of Cultural Studies (Vietnamese Academy of Social Science), where I still held a position as a researcher. However, I still needed specific authorization to be allowed to travel to and stay in a village, and sometimes to deal with unexpected encounters as well. This was the permission of other locally important people, the 'correct red stamp', as Turner (2013: 3) calls it in a collection of accounts of fieldwork in upland socialist Asia.

The first village I visited was Kon Ktu. Approaching the village, I stopped to buy a bottle of wine and a chicken; when I arrived, I went directly to the house of the village's traditional chief (*kara plei*). Over greetings together with cups of wine, I asked some general information about the

population, tourist activities and gong performances in the village. Then I asked if I could stay in the village, specifically at the chief's stilt house. He himself agreed, but asked me to wait for a few minutes while he went out. After a while he returned with two other men, whom he introduced to me as A Ben, middle-aged, the state's village chief (*trưởng thôn*), and a younger man, A Thoa, the village policeman (*công an viên*). They agreed to my requests, but there was one other person I needed to meet. A Thoa explained that my letter of introduction from the Academy, although accepted with a red stamp by the Kontum Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, was not quite enough. 'You still need another red stamp from the commune police office', he said.

The next day I went to the police office of Đăk RơWa Commune and showed them my letter. The Head of the Commune Police turned over the letter, wrote some notes, and then stamped it anew with his fresh red stamp (*dấu tươi*). I returned to the village with another bottle of wine. The kara plei went out again to call A Ben and A Thao. After carefully looking at the notes and the red stamp for some seconds, A Thoa said 'everything is fine' (*được rồi*). From then on, he never asked me about the letter or red stamp, even after they had expired.

The political and symbolic role of the 'red stamp' reminds both the researcher and the local cadres about the state's authority, for which local residents must serve as gatekeepers. In most of the villages where I conducted fieldwork, the extra 'red stamp' was an important requirement. At the beginning, it always seemed as if it might be difficult to obtain because the local police (*công an viên*) took it very seriously, but I soon learned that once the requirements had been fulfilled, the police could relax and allow me to conduct my research unhindered. In exceptional cases, the prestige of a 'big man' in a village allowed me to stay without showing a stamp or seeking a new one. Such was the case, for example, when A Thút invited me to stay in his house and village.

Talking with villagers, artists and government officials, I often used semi-structured interviews. I would start by posing a problem and then follow my informants' stories, experiences, discussions and arguments. I also collected the life histories of local artists, which allowed me to track their experiences through different periods of Highlands history. Living in the Highlands, they had experienced rapid and critical changes. Older artists had lived through the war (when many gongs were destroyed by bombs), as well as the period of socialist cooperatives, when many surviving gongs were sold for just a little money, before becoming 'heritage artists'. When I focused on the history of the gongs themselves in these stories, my method

resembled taking a 'biography of things' (Kopytoff 1986) or documenting 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998).

Plate 6. The anthropologist learns to play the gong in front of the traditional communal rong house (Kon Ktu village).

I found that it was essential to introduce my research interests briefly but well in order to obtain access to field sites and to initiate relationships with prospective informants. I soon learned that 'gong culture' (*văn hóa cồng chiêng*) was a handy phrase, as it was easily accepted as a topic of research at any administrative level, including by ordinary villagers. It seems that cultural heritage practices have made 'gong culture' a shared norm among not only state cultural institutions, but also local people. It also became a very helpful phrase to explain my research without raising questions about the attention I might give to minority religious practices, a sensitive issue in the Highlands.

In every village, I decided to stay with my principal informant, usually the most highly respected man of the village. In Kon Ktu, I stayed in the house of Pah Bưn, the traditional chief (*kara plei*) of the village. Every day villagers who have specific problems or issues go to Pah Bưn asking for solutions. His house is also where the important persons of the village gather and discuss significant issues of the community. Gong musicians also gather

in Pah Bưn's house after performances. In Đăk Wơk, A Thút offered me a room in his comfortable house. In the Jrai village of Sar, I also stayed with a gong ritual music master, A Láo, who is also the former village head and continues to be consulted on problematic issues and conflicts in the community. These were ideal places for me to stay to learn not only about gong music, but also about other community issues. The respected men of the village are also those who are expected to attend many rituals. By staying with them, I was easily informed about upcoming rituals and was happily allowed to accompany my hosts to them.

Staying with respected men had some drawbacks. One thing I struggled with was that, when I went around to learn from other villagers, many of them initially told me that my host must have already taught me everything about their customs, culture and gong music. Surely, they said, they would have no more than that to share with me. To get such informants to talk to me, I had to exercise considerable patience, carefully drawing out specific stories that they were willing to tell.

As a researcher from Vietnam's Kinh majority, after some first weeks of fieldwork I learned the best ways to be welcomed into an ethnic minority community: learning the language, joining in overnight rituals, and enjoying parties or feasts. Villagers started to be more interested in talking to me when I began to practice some Bahnar vocabulary (with very poor pronunciation). After some months, my Bahnar speaking skills were still only capable of very basic communication, but the villagers gave me much encouragement. As Bahnar is the standard language for Catholics in Kontum, I was happy to be able to use it to communicate with Catholic Jrai in Ia Chim commune.

Joining an overnight ritual offers an ideal chance not only to learn about local ways of conducting rituals and about ritual gong music, but also to achieve closer and more genuine relations with villagers. During rituals, local people were always willing to explain the steps and meanings involved. They also taught me about the meanings of the ritual gong music that they played at every stage of a ritual and of social gong music they played overnight during funerals and buffalo sacrifices.

Parties and feasts are a crucial part of almost all rituals, including birthdays, weddings and funerals. Villagers from all religions enjoy them in almost similar ways. The most important roles of these parties are to strengthen social relationships. These were ideal chances for me to conduct studies of the economic and social roles of rituals, as well as to establish and strengthen my relations with the villagers.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Positionalities

From the beginning, and at all administrative levels, I introduced myself as a PhD student collecting data for his dissertation. At that time, I decided to not include 'studying abroad' as part of my personal profile in order to avoid unnecessary difficulties. 'Foreign elements' (*yếu tố nước ngoài*) have proved to be one of many sensitive issues in the Central Highlands since 1975 due to conflicts over religion and/or land use conflicts (which I describe in Chapter 3). I adopted this strategy following advice from the Institute of Cultural Studies, which had provided me with the introductory letter enabling me to conduct fieldwork, as it would help avoid difficulties not only for me, but also for the Institute in Hanoi in deflecting inquiries from the cultural police (*công an văn hóa*).

However, later in the field I often found that this 'foreign element' in my biography improved my standing when I approached certain types of informant, particularly foreigners and Catholic priests. During my first month in Kon Ktu village, I met two French agricultural students, Marie and Florence, who had spent six months in the village and were approaching their last six weeks. I took the opportunity to visit them sometimes for a short talk and to learn from their experiences and attitudes something more about this tourist-related village. Florence also wanted to talk with me, though once revealing that Marie, who was much colder towards me, thought I was working for the government. Sometime later, over a drink in the house of the kara plei, I told them my research was for a PhD project in a German institute. After this, although Marie did not become much more open, she at least joined in the conversation.

When approaching Catholic priests, I also mentioned the 'foreign element' of my research. As with Juliette and Camille, it was important to imply the independence of my research, and to indicate that it was not 'for the state'. However, this was not my only strategy in approaching priests. Establishing relationships and taking opportunities to talk to religious leaders is difficult in the Central Highlands because religion and religious practices are a sensitive issue. Nonetheless these contacts were crucial for exploring the influences on local ritual changes. As the state considers religion and religious practices a sensitive issue in Central Highlands Vietnam, during my fieldwork I had to proceed carefully, step-by-step. Nonetheless I managed to find opportunities, usually through local followers, to talk to Catholic priests and Buddhist monks. My links with Buddhist monks went more smoothly; Catholic priests always appeared to welcome me with open arms, but then were 'too busy' to offer me more than a short conversation. Sometimes I asked villagers who were the close friends of priests to visit them and to let me come along too.

I invested more time in learning about the Catholic community from local catechists (*Yao phu*) who had undergone three years studying catechism in the main church. Many of them were also experts in the gongs, and I would start my relationship with them and talk to them about my interest in learning their ritual gong music. By following them to rituals, I was able to learn not only about gongs, but also about how Catholic rituals are different from or similar to those of other villagers.

The way local people interacted with me depended a great deal on their previous encounters with outsiders. This offered different advantages and challenges in each village. For instance, the Bahnar in the tourist village of Kon Ktu have become well used to interacting with outsiders. As many Vietnamese and international students had also spent time doing fieldwork in the village, the villagers were already willing to teach me too, as a student, about their culture and way of life. However, A Thút in Đăk Wơk village seemed to expect me to become a resource that would offer him and his group further opportunities to perform. This expectation, in fact, created some difficulties in my relationship with him in the first weeks of research in his village.

My travelling back and forth between villages did not interrupt my relations with the villagers and artists but even helped to strengthen them. Each time I came back, I received an even friendlier and warmer welcome from the villagers. This is similar to what Roszko (2011) experienced during her multi-sited fieldwork as she travelled flexibly between the coast and an island off the coast of central Vietnam. Moreover, the method of following artists as they prepared and travelled to perform gong culture outside their villages to Hanoi helped to a certain extent to create and maintain the 'social intimacy' (Herzfeld 2016: 8) that anthropologists experience during long-term fieldwork. This 'social intimacy' helped, step by step, to solve initial difficulties in my relationships. Moreover, I was gradually able to explore the 'backstage' of A Thút's performances, both as a significant artist and during preparations for his group's cultural shows.

Chapter 3
Changes in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

I first visited A Thút's village for just one day on 11 October 2015. That was before I conducted my main field research in his village, as well as in other field sites in Kontum province, in the following months. When I arrived at about 10 a.m., A Thút offered me a cup of tea in his cosy guest room. During our initial short talk, I introduced myself, and he gave me some general information about Bahnar culture. He started by showing me his collection of three sets of gongs. He told me the oldest yet most valuable set was called 'Laotian Gong'[17] ('*chinh Lao*' in the Bahnar language or *chiêng Lào* in Vietnamese), which he thought had been imported from Laos to the Central Highlands a very long time ago, maybe even before the French colonial period (from the mid-nineteenth century until 1954). To give me an even more impressive idea about that very ancient time in the Central Highlands, A Thút sang a small part of a Bahnar epic for me, which tells the story of a mythical hero of the Bahnar people who helped his village in fighting their enemies.

After this brief journey back into this mythical time, A Thút led me on a tour around his village. It took us some minutes of walking to get to the Catholic church located at the edge of the village. He explained to me that the Bahnar were the first ethnic group in the Central Highlands to convert to Catholicism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. We then headed to A Thút's hill-field (*rẫy*). On the way, he stopped on top of a rise and pointed to a high barren hill located far away to the west. 'This was the Charlie Hill, the deadly hill during the American War'[18], he told me. While still on the way to the field, we stopped again, where he thought we would have an ideal view of an impressive landmark: an immense hydroelectric reservoir. A Thút explained to me that his village was once located in one of the fertile valleys

[17] I will offer more details about the history of gongs in the Central Highlands in the next chapter.

[18] I provide more information about this war later in this chapter. The battle that took place on 'Charlie Hill' in 1972 was one of the bloodiest of the Vietnam War.

now covered by the waters of the reservoir. In 2003, the villagers had to leave their traditional wooden houses in the original village and relocate to the present site, where they now live in simple Kinh-style houses built for them by the hydroelectric project.

Finally, we arrived at A Thút's hill field. Even though still called a rẫy ('swidden'), the current hill fields no longer resemble the 'traditional' fields for which the Highlanders used to clear a small part of the forest to plant various kinds of hill rice and vegetables. Instead, as A Thút told me, 'in the Central Highlands today, we have to plant "industrial trees"', i.e. trees for industrial use. Indeed, A Thút's well-cared-for rẫy was separated into different areas for planting cash crops such as coffee, cashew nuts and cassava.

Plate 7. One of A Thút's fields with industrial trees.

On this short walk following A Thút from his cosy guest room through the village and up to his hill field, I gained a lively impression of the complex history of the Central Highlands. Even though A Thút mainly talked about 'traditional' Bahnar culture, and especially about ritual gong music, the short trip also provided plenty of evidence of outside interventions in the course of history: French missionary activities, the Vietnam War and recent state economic projects. These interventions have had a deep impact on indigenous peoples' lives and the highland landscape.

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the Central Highlands. This history is complex and involves many aspects, which I cannot cover fully within the scope of this chapter, though they have been

treated comprehensively in earlier scholarly works (e.g. Hickey 1982a, 1982b; Salemink 2003). Instead, what I am attempting to convey here is the historical background that is relevant to the main theme of this research, namely the Vietnamese state's and local people's heritage practices by which the Highlanders' cultural identity is created and performed.

Administratively, in Vietnam's present geographical landscape, the area officially called Tây Nguyên is divided into five provinces: Kontum, Gia Lai, Đắc Lắc, Đắc Nông and Lâm Đồng. Tây Nguyên literally means 'Western Highlands', but it is usually called the 'Central Highlands [Western Plateau]' in English, a designation introduced by the United States. Though Tây Nguyên is often treated as a distinct region, its five provinces share similar geographical, ethnic and cultural characteristics with neighboring provinces in central and southeast Vietnam, that is, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định and Phú Yên.

Throughout time, different labels have been used for this upland area. In the colonial period, French Catholic priests and ethnographers called it the 'Hinterland Moï' (hinterland of the Moi) or the 'Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois' (Montagnard country of South Indochina). Before 1975, the South Vietnamese regime called it Cao Nguyên Trung Phần or 'Central Highlands' (Hickey 1982a). Today, it is also known as 'the southern area of the Truong Son Mountain Range [Nam Trường Sơn]' (Nguyên Ngọc 2008).

Before great flows of migration from the north changed the ethnic structure of Tây Nguyên after 1975, which I will describe in more detail in the following parts, the region was populated by indigenous ethnic groups from two main language families: Malayo-Polynesian (closely related to Malay and Bahasa Indonesia) and Mon-Khmer. The three ethnic groups I focus on in Kontum province belong to these two language families: the Bahnar and Brâu speak Mon-Khmer languages, the Jrai a Malayo-Polynesian language.

There are also several names, which outsiders have used to identify the Highland peoples. Before the French colonial period, the indigenous groups were called Mọi (by the lowland Việt), Kha (by the Lao) or Phnong (by the Khmer). All three names meant 'savage'. The French called them 'Sauvages' (literally savages), and later 'Montagnards' (mountain dwellers) (Hickey 1982a). The Americans continued to call them Montagnards, and used the term 'Highlander'. The South Vietnamese regime called them *đồng bào thượng* (highland compatriots) or *người sắc tộc* (ethnic people/minority groups). Then, under socialism, they found themselves called *dân tộc thiểu số* (ethnic minorities) (Salemink 2003: 28-29).

Even though there were many groups living in the Central Highlands, scholars found that they share similar ways of life. Hickey's works (1982a,

1982b) are an apt example of this view. By reviewing earlier works by French archaeologists, historians and anthropologists, combined with his own observations during the Vietnam War, Hickey offers a comprehensive monograph on the history of the people in the Central Highlands from prehistoric times until 1975 and draws a broad image of Central Highlanders in contrast to the 'civilized people in the lowland' (Hickey 1982a: xvi). According to Hickey, each ethnic group had its own distinctive cultural identity, yet shared with others many similar cultural characteristics in social relations, beliefs (animistic spirits), ways of holding rituals (sacrificing animals as offerings and drinking alcohol from jars) and subsistence (fishing, hunting, planting mountain rice).

The history of the Central Highlands and its people can be divided into periods marked by outside powers' interventions in the Highlands: first, the time before and during French colonization; second, the time from Vietnam's division into north and south in 1954 until the end of the Vietnam War (or Second Indochina War) in 1975 and the subsequent reunification of the country; and third, the 'Open Door' period (*thời kỳ mở cửa*) since the mid-1980s, when the Central Highlands' 'Space of Gong Culture' was included in UNESCO's Masterpiece programme.

The '*Mọi*' before French Colonization

French, American and Vietnamese ethnographers described pre-colonial Tây Nguyên (i.e. in the period before French colonization, which also means before the advent of Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century) as a more or less independent area in relation to other neighbouring powers and influences. By carefully reviewing French sources, Hickey (1982a) concludes that throughout the pre-colonial period the Highlanders kept their distance from the religious, political and cultural influences that had shaped their neighbours:

> Relatively isolated in their forested mountains, the highlanders historically remained aloof from the Chinese great tradition that molded the society of the Vietnamese and also from the Indian influences diffusing eastward that brought civilization to the Cham and Khmer (Hickey 1982a: xvi).
>
> Before the arrival of the French in the nineteenth century, these outside powers maintained connections with the Highlands through tributary and gift exchange relations. In particular, relations were fostered with two tribal chiefs whom the Chinese, Cham, Laotians and Khmer regarded as Kings of the Uplands: the 'King of Fire' and the 'King of Water'. These two 'kings' were in fact the religious leaders (shamans, or *pötao* in the Jrai language) of Jarai groups in

> the Highlands. Even though they were widely respected in the Highlands, their power and influence were actually limited to their own tribe (Hickey 1982a: 174).

Indeed, before French colonialization the Highlands consisted of various independent villages and groups. As Salemink (2003: 34) puts it, 'political life in the Central Highlands was much more "decentralized", if not fragmented,' in contrast to the view of outsiders that the Highlanders' political organization was simple because it mainly relied on the prestigious roles of old men and shamans. This situation upset the early French explorers in the early 1800s when they tried to look for 'supra-village political organizations' as a potentially comprehensive way of establishing relations in this vast forest area. Nguyễn Kinh Chi and Nguyễn Đổng Chi (2011 [1933]: 193), two Vietnamese scholars who wrote an ethnography of the Bahnar in Kontum province in 1933, claimed that, before the French colonial 'protection' 'each Bahnar village was a completely independent little kingdom that did not submit to any other dominance'. This consideration of the independent being and meaning of Highlanders' villages is also crucial to the arguments of Nguyên Ngọc, a respected writer and activist, about the collapse of the traditional Highlanders' way of life in the traditional village-forest space (which is also the 'Space of Gong Culture' as recognized by UNESCO). I will return to this argument in my treatment of the Central Highlanders' situation after the communist victory in 1975.

Even though each village lived independently, the Highlanders had very dynamic inter-ethnic relations based on their close economic and ritual exchanges with each other, and with the lowlanders. Dam Bo[19] (2003 [1950]) offers a rich ethnography of the dynamic economic and social interactions of the Highlanders. He describes the Highlanders as not only hard-working farmers but also great travellers and traders in the way they planted not only enough rice for their needs but also a surplus to exchange against other goods such as buffalos, gongs and jars. Travelling easily through their geographical landscapes, indigenous peoples, Dam Bo observed, had set up and strengthened various trade routes. Indeed, the dry season, which fell between the harvest and the next crop, was an ideal time for them to travel to visit other villages and go to the east coast to trade. As described in Dam Bo's work, the trade routes mainly ran along footpaths and rivers. For instance, a sub-tributary of the Mekong River connected the

[19] Dam Bo is one of the pen names of Jacques Dournes, who spent 25 years (1940-1970) in Vietnam. Initially a Christian evangelist, during his stay with Montagnard groups, especially the Jrai, in the Central Highlands, he became one of the most important experts on Montagnard culture. Hardy (2015) calls him a 'barefoot anthropologist', one who genuinely immersed himself the Highlanders' history and culture.

Bahnar with groups such as the Ma and Stieng, and the northwest Highlands with Cambodia and Laos. One wooden dugout canoe (*thuyền độc mộc*) could transport up to two hundred kilograms of goods. These routes became not only important trade routes but also what Dam Bo (2003 [1950]) called 'influential flows' in the way they created contacts and shaped influences. Indeed, through visits and trading interactions, the groups mixed with each other, learning about, evaluating and identifying each other.

These economic exchanges were not only performed locally among the ethnic groups and villages in the Highlands, they were also part of a larger international trading network connecting the Highlands with the coastal lowlands of Vietnam and Laos, and on to Cambodia and even Siam (Thailand) (Li Tana 1999; Salemink 2008a, 2008b), which Bennet Bronson (1977) called a 'riverine exchange network'. In this network, forest products were collected and gathered at a market upstream, then transported downstream to trading ports and from there joined the international shipping lines. Andrew Hardy (2008: 58) sees this as a segmentation of the inter-regional trade that went through the Central Highlands in an east-west direction. In this chain, each ethnic group appeared in a specific terrain:

> The Chinese in the sea and in the plains, the Vietnamese in the delta and the Midlands, each group of Montagnards in specific areas in the mountain. Each group moves between trading points on a segment of the trade route. No group operates across the entire system, thus ensuring the ethnic diversity of this system.

Such vigorous trading activities also brought sets of gongs from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and lowland Vietnam into the Highlands.

Despite their relationships with neighboring lowland powers, until late in the nineteenth century the Highlands were still very strange and mysterious to the lowland Vietnamese. In fact, during this period every highland village led by a traditional chief (*bok kara* in Bahnar or *già làng* in Vietnamese) occupied a particular territory. There were frequent conflicts and wars between villages and clans, and outsiders were considered potential enemies. Besides, although the highlanders needed salt or rice from the lowland Việt traders, there were many instances of violent robbery during which traders were killed. Thus, it was always dangerous for lowlanders to enter the Highlands. Indeed, according to Nguyễn Kinh Chi and Nguyễn Đổng Chi (2011 [1933]: 10), in 1840, under the regime of King Thiệu Trị, the Huế court set up An Khê (the district between the lowland province of Bình Định and the highland province of Kontum) as a market place where the Vietnamese could meet highland traders to exchange goods. However, lowlanders were forbidden to go past this point. It was not until 1848 that the mysterious Highlands were opened up to outsiders following the successful

establishment of Vietnamese missionaries (Fathers Bao and Do) and French Catholic priests (such as J.P. Combes, Marie Fontaine and Pierre-X. Dourisboure) in Kontum Province.[20]

The Montagnards under French Colonization (from the late 1800s to 1954)

The opening of the Kontum Mission in the mid-nineteenth century, described by Hickey (1982a: 207), shed the first light on these mysterious uplands. The penetration of French Catholic priests into the Central Highlands laid the first stones for French colonization. As Salemink (2009: 37) points out, conversion to Catholicism during the colonial period represented conversion to 'the religion of the colonizing power'.

When it set up its administration in the Central Highlands from the late nineteenth century, the French colonial authorities attempted to integrate the area into its territory within the boundaries that had just been established. Some of the French colony's efforts follow what Dournes (2013[1977]: 213) calls the 'logique du découpage' (i.e. the logic of cutting up) to attach the highland area to either Laos or Annam. Thus, the Central Highlands were first placed under the administration of Lower Laos on 1 June 1895. Then, between 1904 and 1907, the Highlands were separated from Laos, divided into provinces and officially allocated to Annam (Vietnam). This second jurisdiction marked many significant changes for the ethnic minorities in this region.

The shape of Kontum as a province within the Highlands also followed this logic. In 1904, the French established Kontum as a province (which included the two towns of Kontum and Pleiku). After some months, Kontum was separated into two parts. One part, including the town of Kontum, was attached to Annam, and another part, including the town of Pleiku, was attached to Phú Yên province. In 1912, Kontum province was enlarged and this time included Kontum, Cheoreo (now in Gia Lai province) and Buôn Ma Thuột. In 1923, Buôn Ma Thuột was separated from Kontum to become Darlac province (now Đắk Lắk province). At the end of 1932, Pleiku was again detached from Kontum, which then received its present-day geographical shape (Nguyễn Kinh Chi and Nguyễn Đổng Chi 2011 [1933]: 134-135).

[20] For a comprehensive description of the initial penetration of Catholicism into Kontum, see Dourisboure's memoir *Les Sauvages Bahnars* (1929). A Vietnamese translation of this book was published in 2008 by the Kontum Catholic Diocese under the title *Dân làng Hồ* (The People of the 'Lake' Village). In the Bahnar language, Kontum means 'lake'.

Gradually the Highland groups were put under colonial administrative and political control. The formerly independent unit of the village became subject to three levels of authority: the traditional chief, the Nguyễn mandarins, and the French administrators. In this system, problems within ethnic villages could still be redressed through their own customs (Nguyễn Kinh Chi and Nguyễn Đổng Chi 2011 [1933]: 155-156), but villagers became aware of the government's power. Nguyễn Đổng Chi and Nguyễn Kinh Chi (2011 [1933]), two Vietnamese officials who worked in the Kontum administration from 1933-1934, witnessed these changes. For instance, they found that, since the arrival of the French and Vietnamese in Kontum Province, the Bahnar had acquired new gods, such as the 'god of electric cars' (*thần xe điện*) and the 'government god' (*thần nhà nước*). Automobiles flashed their lights at night and made strange sounds on their horns, which made the Bahnar think of some sort of spirits or gods, while the increased wealth and power of the locals who worked for the government made the Bahnar believe that there must be a 'government god' supporting the administrators.

Nguyễn Đổng Chi and Nguyễn Kinh Chi also presented an account of how locals viewed the appearance of outside powers in their land. They reported that they had once asked their Bahnar friend: 'Do the Bahnar like to see the French and Vietnamese living in Kontum?' and 'Would the Bahnar be very happy if the French and Vietnamese left?'. Their friend hesitated before responding: 'When there were no French and Vietnamese living in Kontum, we lived a hard life, but we were truly happy. Since the French and the Vietnamese have arrived, life has become less hard, but we are also less happy'. It took some time before the Bahnar man could explain his statement.

As he explained it, before the French and Vietnamese arrived there were conflicts between different groups, and war frequently erupted. They also often suffered hunger. But they were completely free and did not have to pay taxes. It was a hard way of living and a hard-earned happiness. 'Today, thanks to the French and Vietnamese', said the Bahnar, 'we live peacefully. But we have to join together to build the road, to pay taxes, [and] thus lose our freedom. We paid a high price for this new kind of happiness' (ibid.: 5-6, my translation). Finally, the Bahnar friend told the two administrators that it would be best if the French and Vietnamese stayed to maintain the peace and sell rice for the Bahnar. Nguyễn Đổng Chi and Nguyễn Kinh Chi treated this opinion as positive feedback from a local person about the appearance of external powers in his land.

But the French did not always bring the comfort of a 'hard happy' feeling to the Highlanders and their homeland. At the beginning of the

French colonial regime – especially in Kontum, but also in the Central Highlands in general – the French colonial administrator Léopold Sabatier wanted to protect the Highlands from outside influences. Sabatier was extremely interested in the minorities' culture and folklore, and he tried to combine traditional customs with governance. Unfortunately, he ultimately failed to protect the Highlands from the effects of the irresistible rubber boom. After Sabatier, the French colony undertook many exploitative projects, which led to vast changes in the local landscape (Salemink 2003; also personal correspondence with Nguyên Ngọc).

By the beginning of World War I, the colonial '*pénétration*' (penetration) program had been carried out and had led to many changes in the economic, social and political landscapes, as provincial colonial administrations were established and French economic ventures were launched (Hickey 1982a: 260). The 'jungles' changed rapidly as the wild forest was replaced by coffee, tea and rubber estates. Kontum, Ban Mê Thuột and Dalat grew into market towns where the Highlanders' ways of life were 'modernized' (ibid.: 412). Moreover, colonial administrative arrangements and control destroyed the trading chains in the Central Highlands. Dam Bo (2003 [1950]) sadly describes how interruption of the seasonal trading movements caused economic and cultural impoverishment:

> [The trading chain] no longer exists today. Political events, wars that make the roads unsafe, and the fixes of the colonial regime have caused the people's immobility. In certain areas, the Central Highlanders do not dare to adventure too far. In addition, they have no time to travel on the road. The result is poverty and degradation (my translation from the Vietnamese translated publication).

Throughout the period of its colonial regime in Indochina, from the late nineteenth century to 1954, the French maintained their strategy and policy to keep the Central Highlands and its indigenous population strictly separate from lowland Vietnam and under the direct rule and influence of France's colonial regime. They did this in order to protect their economic interests in this area and to prevent the Montagnards from falling under the influence of the northern Communists. Indeed, in 1923 the governor-general of French Indochina, Pierre Pasquier, issued an order preventing the lowland Kinh from settling or establishing plantations in the Highlands (Cửu Long Giang and Toan Ánh 1974a: 133). After 1937 the 'French ethnographers and administrators started to stress the essential ethnic unity of the Montagnards' vis-à-vis the lowland population (Salemink 1995: 263).

The year 1945 marked a significant turn in the modern history of Vietnam. In August the Việt Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam), led by Hồ Chí Minh, successfully launched a revolution against

French colonial rule in Vietnam. On 2 September 1945 Hồ Chí Minh, now the president of the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam, declared Vietnam independent. From then on, the Central Highlands became a strategic military area between the French and the Việt Minh movement. The Highlanders were consequently 'plunged into a long night of international conflict' and 'found themselves "a people in between" as some joined the French and some the Viet Minh while most became unwitting victims of the war' (Hickey 1982a: xx). But the French colonial policy of 'divide and rule' could not prevent Việt Minh cadres from making contact with the indigenous peoples. Indeed, as the Việt Minh promised them autonomy after the war, many Highlanders were willing to join the nationalist communists (ibid.: 379). And thus, as Hickey (ibid.: 385) puts it, this 'was the first time that any highland people had participated in a nationalist political movement.'

To face this challenge, in 1949 the French established the so-called Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois (PMSI) (South Indochinese Montagnard Lands), which detached the Central Highlands of the Montagnards from Vietnam (Salemink 1995: 262). In 1949, the French agreed to 'return' it to the state of Vietnam, which was at that time under the control of Bảo Đại, the last Emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty. On 15 April 1950, Bảo Đại decided to organize the Central Highlands as what he called 'Hoàng Triều Cương Thổ' ('Domaine de la Couronne' in French). Under Bảo Đại, the Kinh lowlanders had only very limited access to the Central Highlands, in the sense that they were only allowed to work there on restricted contracts with French plantations, and not to migrate or settle there (Cửu Long Giang and Toan Ánh 1974a: 136).

The 'National Minorities' in the Second Indochina War (1954-1975)

Under the Geneva Agreements following the defeat of the French in 1954, Vietnam was divided into two political entities, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the Republic of Vietnam in the south. The Central Highlands officially belonged to the latter, under the rule of President Ngô Đình Diệm.

As soon as he came to power, Ngô Đình Diệm revoked Hoàng Triều Cương Thổ's policy and integrated the Central Highlands into the territory of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ibid.: 139). Ngô Đình Diệm's government introduced new minority policies in the Central Highlands that denied land ownership rights to the Highlanders; stopped supporting the traditional customary courts, restricted the teaching of Highlanders' scripts

and moved 700,000 migrants from the north into the Highlands (ibid.: 140).[21] From that moment, as Hickey (1982b: xviii) puts it, 'the Highlanders found themselves under Vietnamese rule, and contact between the two groups quickened, resulting in a dramatic new phase of ethnic nationalism that initially was political in character and then became militant'. This is the first time the Highlanders found themselves being classified as 'ethnic minorities' who needed 'to be assimilated (*đồng hóa*) into the Vietnamese cultural sphere' (Hickey 1982b: xviii).

However, this Vietnamization policy had the opposite effect and eventually failed when the 'minorities' decided to react by launching the Bajaraka protest movement in 1958, followed closely by FULRO. The Bajaraka movement was named after the four most prominent ethnic groups in the Central Highlands: Bahnar, Jrai, Rhade and Koho. The leaders of this movement made a peaceful political protest by sending letters to the embassies of France and the United States and to the United Nations to denounce the racial segregation policy of Ngô Đình Diệm's government and to demand independence for the Montagnards as part of the French colonial union.[22] Consequently, the South Vietnam government had to devise a more supportive minorities policy to deal with the Highlanders (Cửu Long Giang and Toan Ánh 1974a).

In 1964, the main Bajaraka leaders joined forces with the uprising of Cham and Khmer leaders to organize a movement called the 'Front Unifié de Lutte de la race opprimée' (The United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races), abbreviated to FULRO. Between 1964 and 1969, the FULRO movement launched many strong military offensives against the South Vietnamese government asking for independence for the Montagnards in the Central Highlands.

Similar to what had happened during the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese communists, since 1954 in the form of the Liberation Army of South Vietnam or the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam, found ways to win the Montagnards' support. The cadres and soldiers of the so-called Việt Cộng practised the '*ba cùng*' policy (meaning 'the three togethers': eat together, live together and work together with the local people) as a crucial 'guerrilla fighting tactic' (*chiến lược chiến tranh du*

[21] According to the temporary division of Vietnam under the Geneva Agreements, the two sides organized a two-way migration so that 50,000 Việt Minh members and their families who were in the south at that moment could move to the North, while nearly a million northern Vietnamese who were Roman Catholics moved to the south under slogan 'the Virgin Mary is Moving South' of the US Navy's Operation 'Passage to Freedom'.

[22] The French Union *(Union française)* was established in 1946 to replace the old French colonial system. It existed until 1958.

kích). The communists continued to promise autonomy to the Highlanders and organized the Phong trào Dân tộc Tự trị Tây Nguyên (Tây Nguyên Movement of Ethnic Autonomy) in 1960 as a counterweight to the FULRO Movement, as well as to canvass the Highlanders' support (Cửu Long Giang and Toan Ánh 1974a: 143).

The war finally came to an end in 1975. On 10 March, the communists attacked and captured Buôn Mê Thuột. A month later, soldiers of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam captured Sai Gon, the capital of the southern regime, and renamed it Hồ Chí Minh City. Although the war was now over, its destructive effects severely disrupted the Highlanders' way of life. By 1973, 'existing ethno-linguistic maps were rendered invalid. An estimated 200,000 Highlanders died during the Vietnam War, and an estimated 85 percent of the villagers were forced, one way or another, to flee as refugees' (Hickey 1982b: 290). Elderly informants in the villages of Kon Ktu, Đăk Wơk, Đăk Mế and Sar told me about their own horrible experiences of war. Indeed, many had to move out of their homelands and stay in 'strategic hamlets'.[23] Before moving, they had to bury all of their most valuable possessions, including their gongs. However, when they returned to their native villages after the war, they found that most of their gongs had been destroyed by the bombs. This led to 'the draining of gongs situation' (*tình trạng chảy máu cồng chiêng*) (see Chapter 5).

Moreover, Hickey's observations show that the war not only destroyed villages and killed people, it also devastated the Highlanders' shared view of the world. The 'cosmic harmony of man-nature-cosmos' world, as Hickey described their 'traditional' lifestyle (1982a, 1982b), had become a 'shattered world' (Hickey 1993) in which the distinctive Highlander way of life, to the extent it had not already passed away, now faced extinction.

However, the end of the war did not end the external impacts on the Highlands. Integration into socialist Vietnam brought even more critical political, economic and environmental changes. This is the reason why Nguyên Ngọc, a famous Vietnamese writer and intellectual who had been an insider of the war, having been a Việt Cộng fighting on the Tây Nguyên battlefield (Nguyên Ngọc 2013) and who loved Tây Nguyên culture with all his heart, recalled that the Central Highlands 'were still in good condition' in the pre-1975 era compared to the massive changes that followed, despite the deadly effects of the war on the Highlanders and their homeland. In the

[23] The Ngô Đình Diệm government and the United States ran the so-called Strategic Hamlet Program (*Ấp Chiến lược* in Vietnamese) from 1962 to November 1963 to combat the communist insurgency by pacifying the countryside and reducing communist influence among the rural population.

following section, I will describe the changes that took place in the Central Highlands after 1975 before revisiting Nguyên Ngọc's argument.

Plate 8. 'The victory on the north front (Kontum) of Central the Highlands.' This propaganda poster, displayed in Vietnam's National History Museum, states that the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam had defeated two thousand enemy troops and freed Kontum province completely in four days.

The Central Highlands after 1975: Into Socialism

After the communist victory in 1975, the Central Highlands were integrated into socialist Vietnam. The Highlanders found different ways of adapting to a new lifestyle and the new political circumstances, as well as finding their place within the new state system.

Before 1975, for example, Pah Bun, the current traditional chief of Kon Ktu village, and A Láo, the prestigious artist of Sar village, both served in the army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam. When the regime collapsed, Pah Bun was a soldier in Ho Chi Minh City. When he learned that the war had ended, he immediately threw his gun down and walked back to his village. The trip took him one almost a month. 'I could not think about anything at that moment but going home', he told me. His trip home produced funny stories, which people laughed about every time he served drinks at his house. Upon returning to the village, he joined the local defence

force (*dân quân địa phương*) and eventually became one of the much-respected old men of the village. Like Pah Bun, at the end of the war A Láo joined the local government office to become one of the 'ethnic indigenous intellectuals' (*trí thức dân tộc*), who, as A Láo explained, went from village to village to persuade the Highlanders to remain loyal to the Communist Party and state.

In contrast, during the last years of the war, A Thút of Đăk Wơk village was studying at the National Academy of Administration in Saigon and waiting to return to Kontum Province to take up a position in the local administration. However, the communist victory pushed his life in a completely different direction, at least at first. He returned to his parents in Kontum 'empty-handed', and life was very difficult for his family for a number of years. In the first two years after the war, A Thút's family tried to hold out in Kontum province in the poor common post-war economic conditions under socialism, which were marked by a lack of necessities, such as rice, meat and salt. Ultimately, A Thút's parents decided that the family would return to Đăk Wơk village, where they could plant rice and vegetables and raise chickens and pigs. With his gift for and love of music, especially his ability to play the guitar, A Thút joined the 'mass culture movement', then worked as one of the state's cultural cadres, and finally had an opportunity to become one of the most important artists in Kontum Province.

In the case of Đăk Mế village, the Brâu who live there used to live in a large valley along the Đăk Mế (Mế River), which is now in Cambodia. After the communist victory in 1975, the borders between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were freshly demarcated. In the Brâu area, they ran through the valley, separating the Brâu between the different national zones. At that point, Đăk Mế village was relocated in Vietnamese territory, together with the Brâu who live there, making them one of the country's smallest ethnic groups.

After the war, the government's projects in Tây Nguyên focused most significantly on exploiting natural resources to serve the goals of socialist industrialization. According to Phạm Quang Tú and Phan Đình Nhã (2012: 124), development policies in the Central Highlands from 1975 to the 1990s closely followed the policies implemented in North Vietnam before 1975. Indeed, the nationalization of forestland, the establishment of state-owned agroforestry farms and the collectivization of agricultural land were very similar to the land-use policies introduced in the north in the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, the newly implemented migration programme in the Central Highlands was based on North Vietnam's migration policies since the 1960s.

Social, economic and cultural conditions in the Highlands have changed rapidly since then. Indeed, one of the most significant changes concerns the demographic landscape. Migrations were organized to move vast numbers of workers from the lowlands into the Central Highlands (Hardy 2003: 309-311). These organized migrations, along with large numbers of 'free migrants' further changed the area's ethnic structure after 1975. The lowland Vietnamese, like many other 'ethnic minority compatriots' from the north of the country (Tày, Nùng, Thái, Mường, Yao and Hmông), quickly became the dominant population in Tây Nguyên (Hardy 2003: 310). As Nguyên Ngoc (2008: 22) indicates, the proportion of indigenous people in the Highlands in the early twentieth century was 95%. By 1975 that figure had fallen to 50%, and by the early 2000s to 15-20%. Within four decades, the ethnic minorities had become minorities even in their own land.

Regarding land use, after the war government policies required that the land that had belonged to the indigenous villagers was to be nationalized and integrated into state farms. This led to critical changes to the economic and social structures of the indigenous peoples.

To strengthen relationships between Vietnam's diverse ethnic groups, a rhetoric of intimacy was used. An image of the 'great family of all ethnic groups of Vietnam' (*đại gia đình các dân tộc Việt Nam*) was created in which ethnic relations were cast in the natural, organic terms of kin ties. In this 'family', the Vietnamese are the *anh* (older brother) and ethnic minorities the *em* (younger sibling) (Pelley 1998). This *integrative* strategy of the Vietnamese Communist Party, as mentioned in the previous section, started in the 1950s (Keyes 2002), actively aiding the communist victory over the French colonizers at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 (Salemink 1995: 261). According to this definition of the 'family', the Vietnamese, as the older brother, has the right to take the responsibility for guiding his younger brothers (the minorities). In turn, the younger brothers should follow and learn from their older brother. Moreover, as blood brothers, they must stand side-by-side and walk hand-in-hand on the path to socialism. However, despite this seemingly intimate fraternal relationship, the respective brothers do not retain their individual personalities, as happens with 'real' brothers. Indeed, McElwee (2004: 196) shows that the state's visions and policies for guiding the minorities on the path to become 'socialist' peoples is actually aimed at changing them to become like their elder brother, the Kinh/Việt people.

The Highlanders were then classified into ethnic groups. From 1973, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam conducted a large-scale ethnographic project in northern Vietnam, followed by another carried out in the south of

the newly united nation from 1975 to 1979 (Viện Dân tộc học 2013). The aim of these projects was to classify the minorities into groups according to their economic and cultural conditions and characteristics. This exercise produced a list of 53 *dân tộc thiểu số* (ethnic minorities).

Moreover, the groups were differentiated not only separately but also hierarchically. Highland groups were viewed as occupying different hierarchical stages of evolutionary development through the evolutionary model developed by Morgan from Engels' most important book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which became a handbook for socialist Vietnamese ethnographers (Hoàng Cầm 2009). According to this classification scheme, the ethnic groups living in the Central Highlands were identified as being in a 'state of disintegration of primitive society' (*phạm trù tan rã của xã hội nguyên thủy*).

According to Vietnamese state ethnographers' arguments (see Lê Sỹ Giáo et al. 1998: 144-148), the 'disintegration stage' is also the highest and last stage in the evolutionary development of 'primitive communism' (*công xã nguyên thủy*). It is in this stage that the concept of 'private property' (*tư hữu*) emerges and develops. Classified as being in the 'disintegration stage of primitivism', minorities in the Central Highlands were placed at the lowest stage of the hierarchy. Their shifting cultivation was considered the most primitive pattern of production, and their lifestyles were seen as 'backward'. Building socialism required remoulding the people into 'new socialist human beings' (*con người mới xã hội chủ nghĩa*), including the ethnic minorities. According to the Communist Party, the best way to achieve this transformation was to turn these 'poor' and 'backward' people into socialist workers in order to help them make their 'self-reliant' and 'unstable' economic lives more stable and prosperous. In order to transform culture and ideology, a programme to build a 'new way of life' (*đời sống mới*) and a 'new culture' (*văn hóa mới*) was launched by the state together with a 'Mass Culture Movement', which has been promoted in the Central Highlands since 1975. According to this programme, the minorities were to abandon their 'backward' customs and become 'new socialist human beings' (*con người mới xã hội chủ nghĩa*).[24] Accordingly, the Vietnamese state regards cultural practices such as funerary sacrifices of buffaloes and harvest feasts as wasteful, primitive and superstitious, and as thus causing poverty and preventing social progress:

[24] This campaign not only addressed the minorities, it also attempted to transform the culture and rituals of lowland Vietnamese in the north (see Malarney 2002). The campaign has been continued in policies to build a 'new lifestyle' (*xây dựng đời sống mới*) through a programme directed at 'building a new countryside' (*xây dựng nông thôn mới*), which started in 2009.

> Their [the indigenous people's] condition of poverty is partly caused by their religious rituals. They take care of life in the next world rather than in this real 'worldly' world. Their religions make them dull-witted and prevent them from being self-reliant (*tự lực*). There are also many backward customs that frustrate their efforts in the battle against nature and within society (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1986: 54, my translation).

Thus, according to these socialist discourses, in order to help the Highlanders catch up with the Kinh (i.e. Vietnamese) majority in the lowlands, it was decided that these 'backward' ethnic groups should abandon their traditional beliefs and rituals.

In order to draw the Central Highlands minorities on to the socialist path, the state's scholars, who took part in the state's efforts to set, advance and establish an agenda to integrate the Highlanders and to introduce development among them, argued that the Highlanders were in a primitive economic condition. Further, they claimed that the Highlanders needed to move out of this situation in order to catch up with their Việt (Kinh) brothers in the lowlands, as well as to contribute to building up 'a socialist economy on a national scale' (*nền kinh tế hàng hóa xã hội chủ nghĩa trên quy mô cả nước*). One of the most common arguments put forward on the basis of these opinions is that the traditional economy of the Central Highlanders was still in the pre-colonial stage (*tiền thuộc địa*) or the pre-socialist stage (*tiền xã hội chủ nghĩa*), and that the exchange of goods as one of their economic activities cannot be regarded as development but only as self-reliance (Bùi Minh Đạo 1986: 185). Bùi goes further by arguing that, in the traditional exchange activities, there were no professional merchants and thus the exchanged products had a 'non-commodity nature' (*tính phi hàng hóa*). 'The use of barter here only means the exchange of labor,' argued Bùi; 'with the traditional Tây Nguyên people, exchange was not the purpose of trade' (1986: 186-187).

Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (1986: 45) similarly argues that, in so far as what was bartered in exchanges were the products of labour (*sản phẩm lao động*), they could not be considered commodities (*hàng hóa*). Preoccupied with friendly barter exchanges, which Engels ascribed to primitive people and societies, the Central Highlands 'need to abandon their self-destructive economy (*nền kinh tế tự sản, tự tiêu*) and move on to build a socialist commodity economy on the scale of the national market' (ibid.: 65). In order to do this, the Central Highlanders needed to transform themselves into a 'new people' (*con người mới*) who suited the commodity economy:

> In the Central Highlands, it is [necessary] to educate the traditional people (*con người cổ truyền*), whose society is still in the late-primitive period *(gian đoạn mạt kỳ nguyên thủy),* [but] which has started to move on to a pre-class type of society (*manh nha có giai cấp*), yet still having [the] influence of colonialism; [they must] become a socialist people (*con người Xã hội chủ nghĩa*) with a socialist industry, a scientific way of organising society (*tổ chức xã hội khoa học*) and a complex organizational structure nationwide (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1986: 56, my translation).

Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (1984: 47; from Evans 1992: 293) then clearly distinguishes 'traditional man' (*con người cổ truyền*) from socialist man (*con người Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa*) in the following table:

Table. Comparison between Traditional Man and Socialist Man[25]

Traditional Man	**Socialist Man**
Sincere and honest, selfless. Has a sense of self-respect. Abides by the principle 'Each for everybody, everybody for each', on the scale of the village, the area, the ethnic group. Has a simple management organization, aimed at defending his own interests and those of the community.	Sincere and honest, selfless. Has a sense of self-respect. Abides by the principle 'Each for everybody, everybody for each' on the national scale and on the scale of Tây Nguyên, of which the village is an organic part. Has a sophisticated management organization and wide-ranging co-operation with many people.
Engages in collective production; adopts the slash-and-burn and crop rotation method; uses rudimentary implements. Production is unstable, non-specialized. Division of labour according to the sexes. Pays no attention to technical improvements. Wastes money on spending. Can only meet the requirements of a simple, low living standard.	Engages in large-scale collective production on the basis of sedentary life and farming. Has a high technical level and high productivity. Sets great store by talent and technical advances. Plans his spending to meet the needs of the high standard of living, both materially and spiritually, of an industrial society.

[25] Adapted from Grant Evans's translation (1992: 293).

Self-sufficient, consumes what he produces on the spot. Advocates egalitarianism in distribution. Takes no account of the individual's labour productivity. Takes no account of cost, price or time. Pays no attention to increasing production.	Produces commodities to serve national and local plans. Takes account of cost, price, time and labour productivity. Opposes egalitarianism in distribution. Advocates remuneration according to talent and work done. Accumulates funds with a view to increasing production.
Indulges in superstition, which seriously affects the people's material and spiritual lives. Is resigned to a life of want and backwardness.	Has high knowledge. Advocates co-ordination in productive labour between manpower and machinery at a high tempo and with a strict sense of labour discipline.
	Has self-confidence and confidence in the collectivity. Yearns for a life of plenty and high culture. Has a socialist style of life and thinking.

The way the Highlanders were portrayed by socialist Vietnamese ethnographers is in stark contrast to the image created by the French colonizers. Evans (1992), for instance, describes his first impression from reading Vietnamese anthropologists who supported and approved of the government's policies in the Central Highlands, such as Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, as a 'strange experience because it often gives the impression of a profound schizophrenia' (ibid.: 288). Evans explains further that on the one hand Vietnamese anthropologists, in conducting their fieldwork, had sympathetically engaged with the minorities and collected details about their way of life. On the other hand, however, the outcome of the anthropologists' documentation needed to go through an ideological filter to ensure it fitted in with and supported the Party's policies towards minorities.

Evans (1992) described the complex political and economic situation of the Central Highlands up to the early 1990s in terms of 'internal colonialism' or, in other words, the end of the Highlanders' hopes to acquire autonomy in their own homeland. Indeed, according to Evans, after the war the communist state did not offer the Highlanders the autonomy they had promised in order to gain their support during the Indochina Wars. Moreover, even though FULRO tried to continue the resistance, the huge

influx of Vietnamese immigrants since 1975 made it impossible for them to move around easily and to fight the state as before (1975).

At this point, I return to Nguyên Ngọc's argument, briefly mentioned earlier, concerning the importance of the 'village' to the Highlanders and Nguyên Ngọc's opinion that conditions in Tây Nguyên remained 'good' up until 1975. In an article discussing sustainable development in the Central Highlands, Nguyên Ngọc (2008) argues that the village and its social organization, as well as the crucial links between village and forest, make up the Highlanders' true 'village space' (*không gian làng*). That space, Nguyên Ngọc argues, is indeed what UNESCO considers to be the 'Space of Gong Culture' and therefore as heritage. The economic policies of migration and of the nationalization of forestland, according to Nguyên Ngọc, gradually destroyed the Highlanders' sustainable way of life.

The Central Highlands in the 'Open Door' Period

Since the mid-1980s, faced with the crises of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese party-state started pursuing a new strategy to strengthen its legitimacy through reform (*đổi mới*). In this economic and political context, the politics of heritage and cultural, social and political activities have gone along with a process of heritagization.

The policy of cultural diplomacy (*chính sách ngoại giao văn hóa*) became an essential strategy for the Vietnamese state in the new international situation. The claim that 'Vietnam is always willing to be the friend of every country' has been its main message. The policy of diplomacy helps define Vietnam as possessing a 'progressive culture imbued with national identity' (as created and promoted in Resolution No. 5 [1998]), one that provides an attractive bridge for establishing foreign economic and political relations. In this new international diplomacy, Vietnam's relationship with the United Nations via its institutions, such as UNESCO, is crucial. UNESCO's 'stamp of approval' is essential in providing the Vietnamese government with international legitimacy in the vacuum left by the collapse of most other socialist regimes (Salemink 2012b: 278). Domestically, UNESCO's recognition serves as a powerful instrument in implementing the state's cultural policy, as I will describe in next chapter.

In the Central Highlands, UNESCO's 'stamp of approval' has accompanied the state's efforts to 'reassert its control over the Tây Nguyên area and people' (Logan 2010: 189-190). The built-up effects of war and the state's post-war land and religious policies in Tây Nguyên produced indigenous resistance. In 2001-2004, there were violent conflicts in the Central Highlands, particularly in Đắk Lắk Province. Nonetheless, at this time 'the state also chose to embark upon a campaign to celebrate and

protect one of the most distinctive features of Tây Nguyên's intangible heritage, its gong-playing culture' (Logan 2010: 189-190). It was in this complex political and economic situation that the 'Space of Gong Culture' was promoted to UNESCO as representative of Vietnamese culture.

Chapter 4
From the Gongs to the Masterpiece 'Space of Gong Culture': Folklore and Heritage Politics in Vietnam

In the previous chapter, I offered an overview of the history of the Central Highlands from its relatively independent past to the French colonial period, when this upland area started to become involved in fierce wars. The latter part of Chapter 3 described the historical situation of the Central Highlands being integrated into a new united nation after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and it ended by introducing the subsequent *đổi mới* market reforms.

This chapter will take a close look at the specific case of gongs and the gong culture of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. I examine how, in different historical periods, folklore in Vietnam, and more specifically the gongs and gong culture of the Central Highlands, have been acknowledged by the state, as well as endowed with specific meanings that serve the state's political purposes. It was in this way, for example, that after 1975 gongs gradually came to be considered an essential symbol of Vietnamese 'national identity'. Since 2005, moreover, the 'Space of Gong Culture' has served further political purposes in being presented as 'intangible heritage' and honoured as a 'masterpiece' of human culture in need of urgent protection.

In particular, I will examine two different moments in time, the 1980s and 1990s, when the Vietnamese state took gongs into account in supporting its further purposes in respect of its cultural politics. I not only describe the state's celebrations and reassessments of the values of the gongs, but also extend the picture to explore the ideologies that inform the state's attitudes and policies towards ethnic minorities and their culture, as well as examine how the state readjusted its rhetoric and governance strategies in line with the new political circumstances. In accordance with the main analytical framework of this book, that of 'doing culture for living heritage', in this chapter I will highlight the active roles of cultural experts and cadres and describe the emergence of the 'heritage community'. More specifically, I will begin by examining Vietnamese scholars' own discourses to see how

they have contributed to the state's ways of acknowledging and using local folklore, especially in the case of gongs and gong culture. I then describe how the state works closely with UNESCO to shape its political and legal framework and to design a systematic and modern bureaucratic system to manage and support cultural heritage.

After the War and into the New Socialist Way of Life: Gongs as a Symbol of National Identity and Gong Music in Mass Culture

In the spring of 1985, on the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the south, the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum[26], together with the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, organized a double event consisting of a festival and a conference on the gongs and gong culture of the ethnic minorities in Gia Lai-Kontum province, as well as in Vietnam's Central Highlands as a whole. These two events were carried out over four days (21-24 March 1985).

According to the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai–Kontum (Sở Văn hóa và thông tin Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 9-19), this was the first time that a gong folk-music festival (liên hoan nghệ thuật dân gian cồng chiêng) had been organized in the form of a folk-art performance activity (sinh hoạt văn nghệ dân gian). Indeed, it was also the first time a musical instrument of the minorities became the central object of a folk-art event. The festival was part of an initiative launched by Gia Lai-Kontum's Department of Culture and Information to create a new custom of practicing culture (một truyền thống sinh hoạt văn hóa mới), the intention being to help selectively protect and transmit valuable local cultural heritage.

Along with the gong folk-music festival, a conference[27] entitled 'The Art of Gongs' (nghệ thuật cồng chiêng) was co-organized by the province's Department of Culture and the Institute of Musical Studies of Vietnam. According to Professor Tô Vũ, Vice Director of the Institute of Music

[26] As explained in Chapter 3, Gia Lai–Kontum was established as a single province on 20 September 1975. On 12 August 1991 it was decided to divide it into two: Kontum Province and Gia Lai Province.

[27] The conference gathered together scholars from the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, the Institute of Folklore Studies (today the Institute of Cultural Studies) and the Institute of Cultural and Information Studies. Also present were politicians, cultural cadres from the center (Vietnam Ministry of Culture and Information; Department of Mass Culture, Board of Collecting, Exploiting and Promoting Traditional Music) and provinces (Gia Lai-Kontum and Phú Khánh, now separated into Phú Yên and Khánh Hòa provinces). Contributions to the conference were collected and published in a conference proceeding entitled 'The Art of Gongs' (*Nghệ thuật Cồng chiêng*) by the Gia Lai-Kontum province Department of Culture and Information.

Studies and co-organizer of the conference, this was also the first time that the gongs and gong music of minority groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam had been brought in to be studied and discussed by music scholars (Tô Vũ 1986: 51).

One might ask why, at that specific time, gongs and gong music, among many other traditional instruments of the minorities in the Highlands, drew the particular attention of cultural cadres and scholars and why gongs took centre stage in folk-art performances? In fact, the chronicle of the Gia Lai-Kontum Department of Culture and Information had acknowledged notable appearances of other traditional instruments in folk-art performances before 1985.[28] However, as I will elaborate below, during the 1985 conference scholars (including folklorists, historians, musicians and anthropologists) and cultural cadres from the provinces of the Central Highlands gathered specifically to address and discuss the values and roles of gongs and gong music.

Connecting Lowland and Highland History

Many contributions in the conference produced 'archaeological' evidence to strongly support the hypothesis of a cultural and historical connection between Central Highlands gongs and the Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture in lowland Vietnam. This argument had been part of a larger effort by the Vietnamese state to distinguish Vietnamese from Han Chinese culture after 1945. Now it served the additional purpose of integrating Central Highlands culture and history into the unified nation of Vietnam.

The 'archeological' evidence, which was cited many times in the conference, consisted of an image on the surface of a 2,500-year-old Đông Sơn bronze drum[29] that depicts an orchestra playing seven gongs. In his 1986 article, 'From the music of gongs to the culture of the Central Highlands' (*Từ âm nhạc cồng chiêng đến văn hóa Tây Nguyên*), Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, then Vice Director of the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies in Hanoi,

[28] For instance, according to Phạm Cao Đạt (2000: 45) in 1965, Y Lôi, an artist from the Sê Đăng ethnic group, introduced the *klong put* instrument in a mass round performance (*hội diễn văn nghệ quần chúng*). Similarly, in 1978, in the first provincial Festival and Conference on Folklore of Gialai-Kontum province held in Pleiku, the *Đinh Tút* instrument of the Giẻ Triêng ethnic group won high appreciation from cultural studies scholars, cultural cadres and the audience.

[29] To be more exact, the Ngọc Lũ I bronze drum is typical type of drum in a diverse collection of Đông Sơn bronze drums. Ngọc Lũ I was named after the place where the drum was found: Ngọc Lũ village, Bình Lục district, Hà Nam province. Today the drum is stored at the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi. For more comprehensive details about Ngọc Lũ I and Đông Sơn bronze drums, see Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Hoàng Vinh 1975.

interpreted this as evidence that gongs might have been made and played by the Ancient Việt, or at least that they had had a very close relationship with the bronze drum. Based on this point, Nguyễn Tấn Đắc suggested that gongs provided a new path and method for looking at Vietnamese history. Previously, he remarked, many scholars had believed that Vietnam belonged to the culture of the Far East. They had taken China as the center of this culture because they had looked at Vietnamese culture only in relation to a particular historical period when Vietnam was under China's strong influence. Given the similarities and relationships between gongs and drums, however, Nguyễn Tấn Đắc suggested that scholars should take a new path in tracing back Vietnamese national identity. Scholars should look back into the Đông Sơn culture and explore contemporary folklore culture, as this would enable them to point out many common cultural characteristics between Vietnam and other Southeast Asia countries, the most famous example of which are gongs.

Lê Huy (1986), a Vice Director of the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies (Vietnam Ministry of Culture)[30], was more cautious in interpreting this evidence. Nonetheless, in his contribution to the conference, he wrote that, even though the appearance of gongs on the Đông Sơn bronze drum may not be convincing proof that the gongs originated in Vietnam, the evidence at least confirmed that gongs had existed there since no less than 2500 years ago, corresponding to the age of the Đông Sơn drums. Besides, Lê Huy wrote, the evidence shows that at that time gongs must have been one of the main musical instruments of the Viet people.

Like Lê Huy, Tô Vũ (1986), another Vice Director of the Vietnam Institute of Music Studies, stated in his keynote speech to the conference that the evidence of the appearance of gongs on the Đông Sơn bronze drum is absolute proof that the ancient Viet people used a set of seven gongs in the same period as the bronze drum, if not before. Thus, as Tô Vu argues, gongs are not only a particular cultural characteristic of the Central Highlands, they are also typical of the whole Viet nation (1986: 51). Continuing this 'flow of thought' (*dòng suy nghĩ*), as Tô Vũ himself put it, he also expressed the 'feeling' (*cảm tưởng*) from different types of gongs in other Southeast Asian countries (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia) that Tây Nguyên is the centre of gong culture, from which gongs spread all over Southeast Asia

[30] The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism was established on 20 August 1945 under the name of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda (Bộ Thông tin, Tuyên truyền). The Ministry was renamed the Ministry of Culture (Bộ Văn hóa) in 1955, the Ministry of Culture and Information (Bộ Văn hóa, Thông tin) in 1992 and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch) from 31 July 2007 up to the present.

(ibid.: 55). Continuing his 'flow', Tô Vũ emphasized the strategic significance and importance of researching gongs. He argued that:

> Researching gongs is not simply a matter of understanding the characteristics of a type of instrument of an ethnic group or a geographical area in Vietnam…. More significantly, it contributes to shedding light on a major issue: the formation of the regional indigenous culture, which is unique and independent from external influences (1986: 55).

By 'external influences', Tô Vũ, like Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, means cultural influences from India or the Han Chinese. Pushing his argument further, Tô Vũ states that, if Vietnamese scholars could prove the hypothesis that the Central Highlands was the 'cradle' from where gongs spread to the whole of Southeast Asia, this would be a way for the Vietnamese people to 'determine our position in the general music culture of the whole region, a position that surely each of us can be proud of' (ibid.: 56).

Even though at the time of the conference in 1985 the discussion as to whether or not the image on the surface of the Đông Sơn drum depicted gongs remained inconclusive, contributors to the 'Art of Gongs' conference regarded it as a meaningful tool with which to build up the points I have briefly described above. By arguing for a close relationship, if not the same origin, between the highland gongs and lowland bronze drums, scholars developed a meaningful narrative that emphasized Vietnam's non-Chinese cultural identity, legitimized the integration of the Central Highlands into Vietnamese national history and situated Vietnamese culture within the Southeast Asian context.

These efforts to tie together lowland and highland history supported the Vietnamese state's integrative policy of building 'unity in diversity'. In the previous chapter, I showed that the discourse of 'unity in diversity' (thống nhất trong đa dạng) of traditional Vietnamese culture was articulated by cultural scholars and supported by the state. Alongside the concept of 'one nation of many peoples' (quốc gia đa dân tộc), it has been used since the August Revolution of 1945 to include local folk cultures as an integral part of a national identity within a broader national Vietnamese culture (Pelley 2002; Meeker 2013). Vietnamese folklorists also worked hard to argue for the integration of minority folk cultures and history within a united national Vietnamese culture. Đinh Gia Khánh (1989), for instance, in his comprehensive work summarizing the initial period of folklore studies in Vietnam,[31] argued that the 'brother minorities' (*anh em các dân tộc thiểu số*)

[31] Đinh Gia Khánh is the founder of the Department of Folklore Studies, which was established in 1983 under the Commission of Social Sciences of Vietnam (now renamed the

have created very diverse and unique works of folklore, with high and sometimes very delicate (*tinh tế*) values. Thus, their culture contributes to portraying Vietnamese folk culture in its diverse beauty as a colorful flower garden (*vườn hoa nhiều màu sắc*). Furthermore, to bridge the gap between locality and nation, Đinh Gia Khánh argued that this characteristic of diversity does not lead to divisive regionalism (*chủ nghĩa địa phương*): in the long history of fighting for national independence and unity, the ethnic majority and minorities have all stood side-by-side. Thus, Đinh Gia Khánh concluded that folklore and folk culture have played significant roles in building up the national culture throughout the Viet nation's history of four thousand years (Đinh Gia Khánh 1989: 239-240). Together with the efforts of the Communist Party to incorporate the Central Highland minorities' anti-colonial struggle into its revolutionary history (as mentioned in Chapter 3), the arguments deployed in the 'Art of Gong' conference strengthened the status of the Central Highlands as an integral part of the Vietnamese nation.

In addition, the scholars' attempt in the 'Art of Gongs' conference to date the age of highland gongs back to at least 2500 BC, which corresponds to the age of the Đông Sơn bronze drum, and to claim a non-Chinese identity for the highlands significantly supported the state's efforts to distinguish Vietnamese from Chinese culture. Indeed, according to Pelley (2002), in their struggles to build their own national identity, the postcolonial Vietnamese strongly rejected the Han emperors' Sino-centric position that the Vietnamese are not a distinct people but merely come under the labels of 'Hundred Barbarians' or 'Southern Barbarians'. Vietnamese scholars also rejected the interpretations of Western scholars (especially Parmentier, Olov Janse and Victor Goloubew) of Bronze-age culture in Vietnam, which tended to support the Sino-centric position. For instance, in 1924 European scholars led by Parmentier gathered to discuss bronze artefacts, especially the Đông Sơn bronze drums found in Vietnam, and rejected the assumption that they had been produced locally (ibid.: 149). Similarly, in 1929 the Russian archaeologist Victor Goloubew stated that China had inspired the introduction of the Bronze Age in Vietnam (ibid.: 150). Critical of 'colonial scholarship' and the Sino-centric perspectives of the Han Chinese, Vietnamese scholars worked hard to trace their national origins back to 2879 BCE. In doing so, as Pelley (2002: 152) states:[32]

> Historians were able to assert the antiquity and venerability of Vietnam. Because the antiquity of Vietnam predated the antiquity of

Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). The book *On a Journey Exploring Folklore*, together with some of his other works, received the prestigious Ho Chi Minh Prize in 1996.

[32] For more detail about Vietnamese scholars' work in tracing back their national origins, see Pelley 2002: 147-161.

> China, Vietnam was recast as a truly generative power, and postcolonial scholars were able to affirm that Vietnam was not, as the French had claimed, a minor derivation of China.

As part of the same efforts, Vietnamese scholars also replaced the term 'Heger 1',[33] a category coined by Franz Heger, an Austria scholar, with the term 'Đông Sơn Drums' to affirm that this type of gong is representative of the Đông Sơn culture of the Ancient Việt (Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Hoàng Vinh 1975: 5).[34]

In their attempts to distinguish Vietnamese from Han Chinese culture, Vietnamese scholars also established 'Vietnam as a focal point of Southeast Asia rather than an insignificant periphery of East Asia' (Pelley 2002: 156). Thus, even though, in the 'Art of Gong' conference in 1985, scholars such as Nguyễn Tấn Đắc, Lê Huy and Tô Vũ developed their hypothesis by following their 'flow of thinking' or 'feeling', their arguments about the connection between gongs and bronze drums were seamlessly integrated into the national history of Vietnam that earlier scholars had attempted to construct.

Gong Music in the Mass Art Movement

Other ethnographically based papers from the 1985 conference strongly acknowledged the central roles played by gongs in festivals of local life. For instance, Tô Vũ argued that gongs are present throughout a person's life-cycle rites, from birth (the ear-blowing ceremony) until death (the funeral) and beyond (the grave-leaving ceremony). Playing gongs is also an essential practice in seasonal rites. In other words, 'looking up from the plains, lowland people can easily imagine the voice of gong music as representative of the ethnic groups in the Highlands' (Tô Vũ 1986: 52).

Moreover, folk-art activities were the most important part of local festivals in the sense that they occupied the greater part of the time in which they were held. Among these folk activities, gongs and gong music occupied the central place and were the pillars (*trụ cột*) of the festival in the sense that the sounds and rhythms of gong music linked the villagers at the festival socially and magically (Sở Văn hóa và thông tin Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 9-19).

Đỗ Kim Tấn, the Vice-Director of the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum Province, gave the most imaginative

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[33] Franz Heger, in his work published in 1902 (*Alte Metalltrommeln aus Südostasien*), classified 165 gongs he had examined in many museums all over the world into four types, called after his name: Heger 1, Heger 2, Heger 3 and Heger 4. Of these four types, Heger 1 mostly consists of gongs found in northern Vietnam.

[34] For more on the debate over the origin of bronze drum, see Xiaorong Han 2004.

description of the gongs' central role. He wrote: 'If traditional music is like a tree, then gongs are the roots, whereas singing and other instruments are just like leaves, branches, flowers and fruits' (1986: 76).

By looking at gongs and gong music in local festivals as connecting all the other folk genres and binding people into communities, attendees addressed another essential purpose of the conference, that is, exploring ways of effectively using gongs and gong music in the Mass Culture and Art Movement (phong trào văn hóa nghệ thuật quần chúng). Indeed, in his conclusion to the conference, Tô Vũ stated that gongs should be seen as 'a subject of the Mass Art Movement, not only as a subject in musical studies' (1986: 250).

The Mass Culture and Art Movement started in 1945 as a specific type of 'cultural resistance movement' aimed at 'drowning out the sound of bomb explosions with the sound of songs' ('*tiếng hát át tiếng bom*') during the Vietnam War (Trần Quốc Vượng et al. 1998: 204-205). In subsequent years, the movement became an important pillar of socialist construction.

The gongs' potential role as a powerful tool for building the Mass Art Movement in the postwar Central Highlands was justified above all by the use of gongs during the national revolutionary struggle. In his speech at the conference, the provincial politician Phạm Tu (1986) recalled how gongs accompanied the socialist struggle (công cuộc đấu tranh xã hội chủ nghĩa) by encouraging the people to fight for national salvation and protect their villages from the French and afterwards from the United States. Moreover, as Phạm Tu put it, the gong prompted thousands of young people to join the socialist army (bộ đội) and fight against the nation's enemies, encouraged soldiers during battles and celebrated their victories. He also described gongs as a special weapon with which to attack 'enemies' (i.e. Highlanders who had joined the Southern Republic of Vietnam) by reminding them about their 'home country' and calling them to return to the revolution. After the war, he said, gongs had accompanied people in reclaiming 'wasteland' (khai hoang) in mountainous areas. Moreover, Phạm added, the gong also encourages and attracts Party members to migrate to, live in and contribute to 'building' (xây dựng) the Highlands. Phạm Tu's words about the contributions of the gongs endowed them with an excellent socialist profile, and he thought they should undertake a specific mission, that is, they should assume a central role in the socialist Mass Art Movement.

As Phạm also put it, 'collecting, exploiting and promoting ethnic equality in harmony with modern art has served our mission of working, producing and fighting well, following the mission requirements of the situation' (1986: 48). In the contemporary era, the mission would continue with a new type of practical and public performance: Kontum was the first

province to initiate (*sáng kiến*) a gong music festival and to have gongs played at province-level celebrations for political events such as Hồ Chí Minh's birthday, celebrations of the founding anniversary of the Vietnam Communist Party and celebrations of the liberation of the south.

14. *Những vòng xoáy âm thanh—Cồng chiêng Tây nguyên*

Plate 9. Gong players forming a circle during a gong music performance at the 1985 festival.

Together with the 'Art of Gong' conference, the Gong Music Festival was organized in 1985 as a standard example of this initiative. Twelve gong folk-music groups from different districts of Gia Lai-Kontum province joined together with two groups from Đắk Lắk and Phú Khánh provinces. The folk artists came from very diverse ethnic groups: Ê Đê, Giarai, Bân, Xê Đăng, Giẻ Triêng and Chăm Hroai. These fourteen gong groups performed their music over two days (21-22 March 1985) (Sở Văn hóa và thông tin Gia Lai-Kontum 1986). Besides playing traditional pieces of gong music, some groups also performed socialist songs, such as 'Praise the Vietnam Communist Party' ('*Ca ngợi Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*' [Đỗ Minh]), and 'As if Uncle Ho is with us on this happy victory day' ('*Như có bác Hồ trong ngày vui đại thắng*' [Phạm Tuyên]), being highly appreciated by the organizers and the audience (Sở Văn hóa và thông tin Gia Lai-Kontum 1986: 12).

The arguments of the contributors to the 1985 'Art of Gong' conference in favour of the new role of gongs and gong music in the Mass Art Movement and the way the gong music festival was organized are part of Vietnam's reform-era cultural policy, which Salemink (2003, 2013) calls a cultural policy of 'folklorization'. As Salemink (2013: 168) puts it, cultural folklorization entails 'that particular cultural practices are decontextualized from the cultural setting in which they acquire locally specific (social, economic, ritual, religious) meanings, and re-contextualized for a different public for whom aesthetic meanings are paramount criteria'. Indeed, ever since the Department of Culture and Information of Gia Lai-Kontum province took the initiative in 1985, folk-art activities have been organized every year. In this type of festival, gong music is included as a social musical theme to which the state may add other political meanings. Gong festivals (*hội cồng chiêng*) continued to be organized in Pleiku in 1988 and 1990 in which local heroes were instrumentalized to promote 'patriotism and the tradition of fighting foreign invaders' *(yêu nước, truyền thống chống giặc ngoại xâm).* Salemink (2003: 264) describes the insights he acquired from a video documentation as follows:

> […] the *Hội cồng chiêng* minorities' music festival of 1988 celebrated the presence of the legendary hero Nup, a Bahnar who had played a much publicized role in the resistance against the French (1946-54) and later the Americans, together with Siu Alwin, who had been elected but not yet succeeded as King of Fire. Thus, the film conveys the present regime's desire to extend its genealogy of resistance to foreign rule in the Highlands by incorporating the much older genealogy of the *p'tau.*[35]

Over time, the conjunction between gongs and the Mass Art Movement produced expressions and performances of gong music similar to those effected in other types of folk music such as *Quan họ* (Meeker 2013) or *Chầu văn* (Norton 2009), which I will explain in more detail in Chapter 5.

From 1985 on, mass art events have become essential activities organized by local Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism in the form of folk performing arts festivals (*hội diễn*, *liên hoan đàn hát dân gian*, *liên hoan dân ca và nhạc cổ truyền*). It was not until the late 1990s that Vietnam started to apply for its cultural assets to be inscribed on the international lists of tangible and intangible heritage. When the notion of intangible heritage was institutionalized in the early 2000s, gongs and gong music became part of the state's new cultural strategy.

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[35] *P'tau* or *pötao* are two religious leaders of the Jrai people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, already mentioned in Chapter 3. For a comprehensive analysis of these two Jrai leaders' background, see Dournes 1977.

From Local Folklore to Masterpiece of Humanity

On 25 November 2005, the 'Space of Gong Culture' was added to the list of the World's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Now a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity', it is considered to contain 'outstanding' values. What was the process that underlay the considerable moves which transformed gongs and gong music (objects and a performance genre) into a 'cultural space', brought it out of the 'Mass Art Movement' and on to the list of human intangible heritage, and caused it to be acknowledged not only as a symbol of Vietnamese cultural identity, but also as the repository of 'outstanding' human values? There are many complex acts and relationships behind these transformations, demonstrating not only the growing evaluation of gong culture itself, but also changes in the state's diplomatic strategy, especially in dealing with the United Nations and UNESCO. It also reflects UNESCO's own 'intangible turn' with respect to culture.

Since the mid-1980s, since the collapse of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese party-state has been pursuing a new strategy to strengthen legitimacy through reform, the *đổi mới* agenda. As I explained in the last part of Chapter 3, together with the rapid economic developments that have taken place in Vietnam since *đổi mới,* the state has also enthusiastically promoted a policy of cultural diplomacy (*chính sách ngoại giao văn hóa*) with the slogan 'Vietnam is always willing to be the friend of every country' as its main message.

Vietnam's cultural policy and national image also seem to have counterparts and a real impact in political policies. For example, from a human rights point of view, Logan (2010) suggests that the state's recent policies regarding heritage and the promotion of minority cultures represent a softening towards ethnic groups. Logan acknowledges that its cultural policies help Vietnam approach current international statements regarding minority rights and predicts further likely effects:

> By promoting the gongs through UNESCO, the government can be seen to be working at the highest international level to support the local traditions and, at the same time, helping to raise living standards. This may have the effect of placating local separatist voices and of quietly drawing the Tay Nguyen minority into the mainstream through increasing their economic links to the national and international tourism industries (Logan ibid.: 204).

Thus, promoting cultural values so that they can be added to UNESCO's heritage list is a crucial strategy for Vietnam to strengthen its relations with this intergovernmental organization.

Again, Vietnamese scholars have actively participated in Vietnam's new campaign of promoting the national culture, a campaign that this time has taken place on the international stage. I managed to set up an appointment with Professor Tô Ngọc Thanh, one of the most prestigious scholars of traditional music in Vietnam. Previously he held the position of Director of the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS), which comes under the Ministry of Culture, and was in charge of preparing the heritage applications to UNESCO. Currently, he is Chairman of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists (Hội Văn Nghệ Dân Gian Việt Nam). Professor Tô Ngọc Thanh played a crucial role in promoting Vietnam's folklore to UNESCO and in securing some of it as 'heritage'. Eventually a free slot appeared in his schedule for me to conduct an interview with him.

I asked him about the context in which gongs and gong culture had been chosen for the application to UNESCO for the title of Intangible Heritage. Tô Ngọc Thanh drew me back to the 1990s, when he was attending UNESCO meetings. It was at this time, he explained, that countries from Africa had started to raise their influential voices to criticize the way UNESCO only considered 'tangible' heritage worthy of recognition and protection, giving no consideration to the 'in'-tangible culture of countries in the Global South. Tô Ngọc Thanh's observation is in line with Brumann's (2018: 22) remark in his review of UNESCO's history that, due to the lack of entries from the Global South in the UNESCO World Heritage List, 'already by the late 1980s, criticism of what appeared to become a Eurocentric affair was rising'. According to Tô Ngọc Thanh, those voices were supported by the Director of UNESCO at that time, Federico Mayor. Returning to Vietnam after these meetings, Tô Ngọc Thanh started to actively promote Vietnam's intangible culture for nomination to UNESCO's programmes. The first successful case was Nhã nhạc Cung đình Huế[36] (in 2003), and the 'Space of Gong culture' was considered in 2005.

It is doubtful whether the discussion with UNESCO about Vietnam's intangible heritage was as simple and straightforward as Tô Ngọc Thanh presented it. To begin with, none of the new terms was easily agreed upon by UNESCO itself.

Noriko Aikawa-Faure (2008) describes the long and complicated discussions within UNESCO over the proposed term 'intangible heritage' and the terms of the 2003 Convention, which brought it international currency. Federico Mayor, the director of UNESCO, was interested in creating a strategy for the international consideration of intangible heritage.

[36] *Nhã nhạc cung đình Huế* is a form of Court Music of Nguyễn Dynasty. In 2003, it became Vietnam's first intangible heritage to be included in UNESCO's list of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

However, he spent a long time campaigning for the 2003 Convention and for use of the term 'intangible heritage'. During Mayor's campaining, Denhez, a heritage lawyer, was commissioned to find a way to promote international recognition of 'cultural spaces', defined by UNESCO as 'locations where cultural activities occur, having the characteristic of shifting over time and whose existence depends on the presence of these forms of cultural expression' (UNESCO 1997: 9, cited in Aikawa-Faure 2009: 18). The term had been used earlier for the urgent protection of a Moroccan site in 1996. Thus, in the long process of arriving at the official use of the term 'intangible heritage' and the ratification of the Convention, as explained by Aikawa-Faure, the term 'cultural space' was put forward as a useful 'buffer' for a short period of time.

Denhez found that the most practical and fastest way to gain international support for the term 'intangible heritage' while waiting for the long discussions in the Convention to conclude was to introduce small-scale, prestigious prize projects honouring the 'outstanding' value of selected cultural activities. Therefore, the title of 'Masterpiece of Oral Heritage of Humanity' was created. Overall, as Aikawa-Faure describes things, the 'Masterpiece' program achieved great results:

> Experiences of the Proclamation of Masterpieces had been extremely useful from political, conceptual and operational aspects. The programme served notably as a gauge to measure the political 'temperature' of each member state vis-à-vis the issue of ICH. It also contributed to refining the definition and scope of ICH for the Convention. Although this small-scale programme was prepared rather hastily, without much conceptual elaboration, its impact among member states was much stronger than expected. The primary goal of the programme, 'raising awareness of the significance of the Intangible Cultural Heritage', had been achieved rapidly at the state's level. The proclaimed Masterpieces, of which there are now 90, will be integrated into the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity within the framework of the ICH (Aikawa-Faure 2008: 36).

When Vietnam's Institute of Culture and Arts Studies started preparing the necessary documents for applying to have gong culture inscribed into UNESCO's 'Masterpieces programme, Professor Tô Ngọc Thanh retired. Professor Nguyễn Chí Bền replaced him as the new Director of VICAS and took over the responsibility for creating a successful campaign for gong culture. 'I was a total newcomer at that time in terms of making heritage applications', Nguyễn Chí Bến told me when I approached him for an interview in February 2016. As someone who had had to start from scratch,

one of Nguyễn Chí Bền's strategies was 'to learn from international friends' (*học hỏi từ bạn bè quốc tế*). He sent a letter to the President of the World Music Council, inviting him to visit Vietnam and, of course, observe gongs and gong music. 'Why did I do that? Because I knew that he would be a member of the expert committee who examines the application', Bền told me. Even though the President declined the invitation for the very same reason, in his response he asked Professor Bền a valuable question for the application: 'Vietnam is not the only country that has gongs; many other Southeast Asia countries have gongs as well. So, what is the particular characteristic of Vietnamese gongs in comparison to other countries?' The question stayed in Nguyễn Chí Bền's mind during most of the time he led a team to write the application.

To learn more about Southeast Asia and its 'international friends', Nguyễn Chí Bền and VICAS organized an international conference entitled 'Cultural Values of Brass Percussion Instruments of Vietnam and Southeast Asia Countries'[37] in September 2004. Besides representatives from all five provinces in the Central Highlands, VICAS also invited scholars of musical studies from Cambodia, the Philippines and Japan. Nguyễn Chí Bền also managed to invite gong music groups from all five Central Highlands provinces to perform gong music in the Vietnam Ethnology Museum. Attendees at the conference were then invited to enjoy gong music during a 'conference excursion' to the museum. 'Many people called it a 'vulgar' way of lobbying', Nguyễn Chí Bền told me when he explained his strategy of organizing an international conference and asking for expert consultants. 'But it is not like that', he said; 'the document is too narrow to explain our culture to outsiders. What I tried to do was to offer outsiders a chance to see, listen to and touch our heritage'.

The conference also offered Professor Bền and his team the chance to ask for expert advice. During the conference, Nguyễn Chí Bền managed to have breakfast with a Japanese music expert and learned how to make an effective application. During the meeting, he did not forget to ask the question posed by the President of the World Music Council. The meeting was very productive. For instance, the Japanese expert advised the VICAS team to place an image of seven women from the Bih ethnic group who were depicted playing the gongs in a prominent position in the document. 'Woman playing gongs is not something normal in Southeast Asia; it represents an ancient custom and thus might help distinguish Vietnam's gongs from those of others', Nguyễn Chí Bền explained. Ultimately, a six-kilogram document was sent to UNESCO. On 25 November 2005, 'The

[37] VICAS then published the conference proceedings in a book, see Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền (2006).

Space of Gong Culture' was listed as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Thus, from playing a central role in the socialist state's Mass Art Movement, gongs were promoted to the international level. The 'Masterpiece' gong music is described as an 'ancient and rich musical tradition' with a history of more than three thousand years (Alperson et al. 2007). Gongs have never been produced in the Central Highlands; the most valuable, high-quality gongs were produced in and imported from Laos and Burma (Alperson et al. 2007: 17). But the music has been claimed as the Highlanders' masterpiece because the Highlanders 'created the gongs' soul' by playing them, creating melodies and using them as a link to the deities (Nguyên Ngọc 2013: 219).

Plate 10. Jrai female performers playing gongs at a buffalo sacrifice ritual, Chốt village.

Thus, from 1986 to 2005 there was a shift in the state's view of the role of gongs and their uses. Within the state's 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006), gongs moved out of use in the Highlanders' daily practices into a central position in the campaign of building a new socialist life, and then on to the status of human heritage. The state's increasing recognition of the positive value of gongs and gong culture shows a shift 'from a concern with post-colonial and socialist nation-building to a concern with preserving the disappearing cultural heritage in the face of rapid development and modernization' (Meeker 2013: 2). The state's invocation of the possible disappearance and death of this 'heritage' should be viewed with caution. It is also a 'terminological shift… from traditional culture (*văn hóa cổ truyền or truyền thống*) to that of cultural heritage (*di sản văn hóa*)' (Meeker 2007:

20). If in 1985 gongs were considered important for their role in strengthening historical national ties between the highlands and lowlands, thus contributing to Vietnam's culture of 'unity in diversity', at this moment gongs became an ideal representative of Vietnam's culture in the country's international diplomatic policy, which came to be crucial to the state. Or in other words, what we have is the shifting of gong culture from its uses in the struggling 'front' of culture (*mặt trận văn hóa*) to joining the cultural heritage diplomatic 'front' (*diện mạo*) of Vietnamese culture in the international sphere. This shift from 'folklore' to 'intangible heritage' also happened worldwide and has been observed in Italy, the Czech Republic (Testa 2016), Estonia (Kuutma 2016) and China (Zhang 2018).

Becoming one of many 'masterpieces' of humanity, gong culture received even more official public honours. In 2007, Vietnam hosted the First International Festival of Gong Culture (2007) in honour of the 'Space of Gong Culture' as a Masterpiece of the cultural heritage of humanity, the pride and honour of the Central Highlands' minorities' culture and of Vietnam's culture. The most prominent, conspicuous vocabulary repeated when honouring the Space of Gong Culture during this festival was 'humanity, the WTO and UNESCO' (*Ban Tuyên giáo tỉnh ủy Đắk Lắk* 2007: 36). The words of Gadi Mgomezulu, the Director of UNESCO'S Department of Cultural Heritage, were cited, characterizing the Central Highlanders' gong culture as 'contributing to the cultural diversity of humanity' (ibid.: 15). The festival was also a chance for Vietnam to reiterate its image as a united yet multi-ethnic nation, thus refining an image that had been some twenty years in the making.

In the Huế Festival[38] of 2006 observed by Salemink (2013: 171), gong performances and drum dances were made to resemble each other, literally performing the historical narrative that links the ancient Đông Sơn civilization with the Central Highlands and that makes them both antecedents of the Vietnamese nation. Thus, recalling the hypothesis put forward in the 'Art of Gong' in 1985, the allegedly intimate historical connection between the bronze drum and the gongs was presented as an image of Vietnamese 'unity in diversity' on the heritage stage.

Besides enthusiastically collecting and adding national types of folk culture to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage programmes[39], the

[38] Huế is the former capital of Vietnam. The Huế festival is a large-scale cultural festival organized to promote cultural heritage and tourism in the city.

[39] In recent years, several Vietnamese types of folk culture have been nominated by UNESCO. In 2008, *Nhã Nhạc* or Vietnamese Court Music was inscribed, followed by the *Quan họ* Bắc Ninh Folk Songs in 2009. In the same year, *Ca Trù* Folk Songs were added to the Urgent Safeguarding List. In 2010, the Gióng Festival of Phù Đổng and Sóc Temples,

Vietnamese state also reorganized its cultural institutions and set up a legal framework for the protection of intangible heritage, which I describe in the following section.

The Management of Intangible Heritage

Protectors of Intangible Heritage

To promote the safeguarding of cultural heritage in general and of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in particular, in 2001 the Vietnam National Assembly promulgated the 'Law of Culture Heritage' (Quốc Hội 2001). According to Đặng Văn Bài (2003: 8), the former Director of the Vietnam Department of Cultural Heritage, the law is the highest legal basis for the management and protection of cultural heritage in Vietnam. The law was improved in 2009 when the Vietnam National Assembly promulgated Law No. 32/2009/QH12 (Quốc Hội 2009). In 2002, three ministries, Culture, Sport and Tourism Agriculture and Rural Development; and Labour, War Invalids and Social Welfare, worked together to publish Joint Circular No. 41/2002/ TTLT/BNN-BLĐTBXH-BVHTT (Bộ Nông Nghiệp và Phát triển Nông thôn et. al. 2002) providing guidelines regarding the criteria and administrative procedures for conferring the title of 'artist', as well as introducing financial support policies for local traditional artists.

In order to reorganize the heritage institutional system, in 2008 the Vietnam National Department of Culture Heritage (Cục Di sản văn hóa) was established by Decision No. 43/2004/QĐ-BVHTT of the Ministry of Culture and Information (Bộ Văn hóa 2004). This department was meant to assist the Ministry of Culture in the management of cultural heritage. As I described in the previous section, VICAS and its experts played active roles in exploring the values of national cultural forms and prepared applications to promote the inscription of these cultural practices on to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. At the provincial level, it is the Sở Văn hóa (Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism) that takes on the tasks of organizing and managing cultural practices. Down at the district and commune levels, there are Offices of Culture and Information (Phòng Văn hóa thông tin) that work under the direction of the provincial Sở Văn hóa. All these cultural management actors are integral components of the Bộ Văn hóa in implementing the government's cultural policies.

In establishing a legal and institutional framework to safeguard ICHs, the Vietnamese state closely followed or, as Nguyễn Chí Bền put it

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followed in 2011 by the Xoan Singing of Phú Thọ Province, were inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Heritage.

(interview, February 2016), were 'in line' (gióng theo) with UNESCO's discourses and cultural policies. In the 'Law of Culture Heritage', Vietnam clarifies its understanding of and plans to protect its Intangible Cultural Heritage, which the Law defines as:

> [p]roducts of the mind/spirit with historical, cultural and educational value that are contained in memory and writing, that are passed down by oral transmission, through occupations, performance, and all other means of containing and transmission including language, writing, works of literature, arts, science, orally transmitted speech, folk performance, ways of life and lifestyle, festivals, secrets about traditional handicraft production, knowledge about traditional medicine and pharmaceuticals, about culinary culture, traditional ethnic clothing, and all other folk knowledge (Quốc Hội 2001: 1; translated by Meeker [2013: 15]).

The improved 2009 version of the 2001 'Law of Culture Heritage' includes three basic elements in the revised definition of intangible heritage, namely creative subjects (*chủ thể sáng tạo*), cultural space (*không gian văn hóa*) and the process of continuously spreading and reproducing (*quá trình lưu truyền và tái tạo không ngừng*) the heritage (Nguyễn Thế Hùng and Nguyễn Hữu Toàn 2009: 6). Both definitions of ICH, that issued in 2001 and the improvement issued in 2009, are indeed in line with UNESCO's definition of ICH, which was officially formulated in the 2003 Convention 2003.[40] It is due to the close engagements of Vietnamese scholars throughout the process that UNESCO pushed its efforts to argue for separate types of ICH.

In addition, as a signatory to the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Vietnam must show 'evidences' of its actual activities in fulfilling the Convention's requirements. These 'evidences' need to be shown in reports which each lower administrative level then has to submit to the upper level until they ultimately reach the Bộ Văn hóa. As Nguyễn Kim Dung[41] (2014) describes it, the Bộ Văn hóa ultimately has to prepare a National Report (*Báo cáo quốc gia*) for submission to UNESCO

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[40] In the 'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage', UNESCO defines the Intangible Culture Heritage as follows: 'The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity' (UNESCO 2003: 5).

[41] Nguyễn Kim Dung is the former Director of the Office of Intangible Heritage (Phòng Di sản văn hóa phi vật thể), which belongs to the National Department of Culture Heritage.

(see Bộ Văn hóa 2012). If the National Report is not successful in demonstrating the state's effectiveness in preserving a particular heritage, that heritage will be struck off the list.

To illustrate how the government's complex heritage-management system works, here I will offer my observations of a meeting that the Bộ Văn hóa organized in Kontum in March 2016 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Space of Gong Culture receiving UNESCO recognition.

It was a hot day in March 2016 when about twenty cultural heritage cadres from all five provinces in the Central Highlands and different state-management levels gathered in a large hall in Kontum's main hotel for a conference. The Ministry of Culture was represented, as was the Institute of Culture and Art Studies, and of course Kontum's Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism. The meeting only took up the morning. Although it was called a conference, it was really a meeting of state cadres 'chaired' by the Vice Minister of Culture, Sport, and Tourism. As the meeting progressed, the Vice Minister gave each of five provinces in the Central Highlands about ten minutes to report (*báo cáo*) briefly yet concretely about the actual activities they have carried out so far to protect the 'Space of Gong Culture'. After the cultural cadres from all five provinces had given their reports, it fell to the chair to summarize the situations of protecting and preserving the heritage 'Space of Gong Culture' in the Central Highlands. The Vice Minister said that all the reports would be recorded and presented to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to show how each province had fulfilled its responsibility for heritage protection. Finally, she made a strong warning that if the state's heritage-management institutions present at the meeting did not undertake effective actions to save and preserve the heritage, the UNESCO-recognized heritage title would be lost. She gave the example of a German heritage site, which lost UNESCO world heritage status as a strong warning to her audience. Consequently, as the chair put it, those who did not fulfil their task of heritage protection would have to take the responsibility for losing the title.

Plate 11. Conference for a preliminary summing-up of ten years preserving the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the 'Space of Gong Culture'.

While this somewhat tense meeting was taking place in the hall of the Indochina Hotel, local artists from the five Highland provinces were performing gong music and rituals at the Kon Klor Communal House located about two kilometres away from the conference venue. In the initial plan for the Cultural Week, the conference was meant to precede the performances and the cadres were meant to attend them. However, due to a 'lack of time', as I was told, the provincial cadres had been asked to organize both events at the same time. Consequently, there were also no community representatives from the Highland groups at the meeting. Nonetheless, I decided to attend the meeting because I had attended similar gong performances on the heritage stage many times and expected to observe discussions in the meeting. However, I knew that one director of a provincial Heritage Department did the opposite, deciding to leave the task of attending the meeting and reading the report to his vice director while joining 'his artists' in the performance. He told me that he had known in advance how boring the meeting would be. When I met some artists after the meeting had ended, they said they did not really care about the meeting but only wanted to fulfil their task (*làm nhiệm vụ của mình*) of finishing their performance on the stage. Salemink (2013: 172) also noted the absence of representatives of the minorities at the First International Conference of Gong Culture in 2009, treating this as an example of how the state appropriates local culture as part

of its heritagization policy. However, I find this ethnographic vignette useful for illustrating another aspect of how the state manages heritage protection, that is, not the dimensions of ethnic inclusion or cultural appropriation, but the link between programmatic statements and practical management.

Regarding the Vice Minister's strong warning about the risk of losing the heritage title, when I asked Nguyễn Chí Bền about this (interview February 2016) he explained that the 2003 Convention is not nearly as strong as the 1972 Convention in protecting tangible heritage and that so far UNESCO has conducted few examinations of different states' actual commitments to protecting intangible heritage compared with tangible heritage. In other words, the Vice Minister's strong words at the Kontum meeting should be seen as almost entirely a strategy internal to the state's heritage-management system. This system combines a strong commitment to UNESCO with a hierarchical administration in which activities are initiated by the centre and then taken up by more local units. In the next chapters, I will show how local cadres fulfil their management tasks by observing their responsibility to protect the Central Highland's cultural heritage on the ground. I will also show how local communities actively take part in heritage practices along with local cadres with the same aim of performing 'living' cultural heritage. This perspective avoids looking at the state through its cadres or at local communities through their cultural artists as two processes that oppose and contradict each other. Rather, I show how they co-operate to implement the international and national heritage framework and perform a 'living' image of culture. But before that, let me return to the term 'culture heritage' to show the powerful imaginative meanings that the traditional representational image of the 'Space of Gong Culture' plays in both the official heritage discourse and audiences' imagination.

Towards the 'Cultural Space'

What UNESCO considered a 'Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity' on 25 November 2005[42] is not only gong music itself, but the 'Space of Gong Culture'. The gong 'reflects the animistic, agrarian, and ancestral aspects of traditional ethnic life' and 'has connections with

[42] Even though, in the long run, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was discussed at UNESCO's General Conference (17 October 2003), it was not until 2006 that the convention was ratified by UNESCO Member States and could enter into force. Thus, in 2005, 'The Space of Gong culture' was still listed as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. And until 2008, as UNESCO converted the 'Masterpiece' title into the 'Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity', the 'Space of Gong Culture' was accordingly moved to the new list, though its official heritage name remained the same.

ritual and the sacred, as well as with the mundane' (Alperson et al. 2007: 17). A description of Vietnamese heritage on the official website is indicative of how gong music is said to play a central role in creating a sacred, social space in religious and social events:

> During the festival season, when people dance in circles around sacred fires and drink wine from jars, and the sound of gongs echoes through the surrounding hills and forests, the Central Highlands become a romantic and fanciful cultural space. The gongs thus contribute to the epics and poems that depict the Central Highlands as imbued with romantic and grandiose cultural characteristics (Published 2 April 2013; Source: disanthegioi.info, accessed 12 February 2017).

Due to the rapid and critical political, economic, religious and cultural changes that took place in the Central Highlands, this idealizing term came under criticism (e.g. Salemink 2013). However, Nguyễn Chí Bền, one of the key cultural experts I mention in this dissertation, taught me that being considered to be 'at risk and in danger of disappearing' is actually a strong advantage for a heritage to gain UNESCO recognition. He told me that, among the characteristics that led the 'Space of Gong Culture' to be nominated for the Masterpiece lists, the most important was not the Gongs' excellent values, but its situation of being 'on the edge of disappearance'. Thus, this heritage needed effective protection. Indeed, as Meeker put it when she examined *quan họ,* the concept of tradition emerges as an object in modernity only after its initial disappearance and 'lives on in discourse (as heritage) in the many representational practices which are, to varying degrees, in dialogue with that discourse' (Meeker 2007: 19). Like the case of *quan họ*, the very traditional image of the 'Space of Gong Culture', with its ensemble of gongs, gong music, rituals and traditional artists, 'lives on' as 'structural nostalgia' (Herzfeld 2016) in both heritage discourses and practices.

Besides, in interactions with UNESCO, the Vietnam Government needed to create precise plans for the protection and preservation of the 'Space of Gong Culture'. The plan was first set up in the heritage application to UNESCO (Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền 2006). In Part 6.2, 'Urgent tasks' in safeguarding the 'Space of Gong Culture' (ibid.: 59-62), the Vietnamese government emphasizes the scientific works of collecting and recording minorities' cultural practices, especially very old pieces of gong music (ibid.: 59). It is also considered urgent to protect the remaining numbers of gongs from being sold to outsiders, thus preventing their 'bleeding out' of the Central Highlands (*tình trạng chảy máu cồng chiêng*) (ibid.: 61). In addition, the application emphasizes the crucial work being

done to preserve the traditional rituals and festivals, namely agricultural and life-cycle rituals, as well as to protect the 'performing environment' (*môi trường diễn xướng*) for gongs and gong music (ibid.: 60). As intangible heritage, local traditional artists play essential roles as 'culture keepers' and 'culture carriers'. The plan stresses policies to honour and promote traditional artists (ibid.: 60) and thus to encourage them to transmit their cultural skills to the following generations (ibid.: 61). Finally, the government mentioned its plan to promote cultural heritage via media channels and cultural performances (ibid.: 62).

The plan has been deployed in actual heritage practices. For instance, the report by Sở Văn hóa Kontum (Sở Văn hóa Kontum 2016) for the meeting I mentioned above demonstrates Kontum's achievements in responding to the government's protection plan in its application regarding the 'Space of Gong' culture. It highlights the effective means the Sở Văn hóa Kontum adopted to protect the remaining gongs in local villages, collect gong ritual music, preserve 'performing environments' of gong (ritual) music, honour and support traditional artists and popularize minority cultures (*truyền bá văn hóa*) by means of provincial, national and international cultural performances. Thus, if the 'Space of Gong Culture' has an imaginative existence in heritage discourse, as well as in people's minds (as I will explain in the following chapters), real heritage practices must be aimed at the essential elements of this culture: the gongs, gong (ritual) music, the latter's 'performing environments', the traditional artists and cultural performances to popularize the values of this culture. The following chapters of this dissertation closely follow the heritage practices of elements of the 'Space of Gong Culture'. As I explained in the Introduction, this dissertation does not aim to examine, in the critical heritage studies sense, whether the various actors – the state, cultural experts, cultural cadres and local artists – in fact accomplish their tasks in preserving the heritage. Instead, I explore how these different actors produce a 'living' representation of the 'Gong Culture Space' through their active role and participation in the process of 'doing culture' or 'making culture'.

This chapter has already demonstrated the active roles of 'cultural experts' in contributing to the state's ways of acknowledging and using local folklore, especially in the case of gongs and gong culture. I have also described how the state has worked closely with UNESCO to shape its political and legal framework and to design a systematic and modern bureaucratic system to manage and support cultural heritage. In the following chapters, I will examine how various actors engage in actual heritage practices.

Chapter 5
Gong and Gong Music: Heritage Tradition on the Front and Vivid Lives on the Ground

In the previous chapter, I examined how the gongs and gong culture of the Central Highlands minorities have been used and infused with specific meanings that serve the Vietnamese state's political purposes. It was in this way that, after 1975, gongs gradually came to be considered an essential symbol of Vietnamese 'national identity'. Moreover, since 2005 the 'Space of Gong Culture' has served further political purposes in being presented as 'intangible heritage' and honoured as a 'masterpiece' of human culture in need of urgent protection.

This chapter explores the different meanings and performances of gongs and gong music in heritage practices and discourses, as well as in daily life. In doing so, the chapter illustrates the intimate interactions between the state and the minorities, as well as those between the state and the Catholic Church. All these interactions shape the vivid and flexible image of Highland culture in different political, cultural and religious contexts.

The chapter is organized into two parts, each dealing with a different aspect of the gongs. The first aspect is a tangible one, as I explore the gongs as artefacts in trading activities and under the government's heritage management. The second aspect is more intangible, as I explore the practice of gong music.

In the first part, I describe the complex relationship between the official heritage discourse and the trading activities of gong traders. As the 'fear of loss' is one of the main reasons for protecting a heritage, the official discourse, specifically concerning the gong culture, criticizes trading activities as a potential cause of cultural loss. However, as I will show in this chapter, the official attention given to gong culture has multiplied the ways in which the buying, keeping and selling of gongs can be instrumentalized to achieve status. I also show that traders of gongs not only work for their own

personal profit, they also play an active role in stimulating, developing and maintaining gong culture, thus contributing to the living gong heritage.

In the second part of the chapter, on gong music, I continue exploring the relationship between the official image of gongs in the heritage discourse and the actual existence of gongs in the daily life of local people in Kontum province through the more intangible aspect of gongs, namely gong music. I argue that, following the official heritage discourse about the ideal image of gong culture and the 'fear of loss' as important aspects of heritage, the traditional and sacred aspects of gong music became more salient. Looking in from the outside, it seems that local artists have learned very well how to perform these sacred aspects. However, in daily life, the social aspects of gong music and the Catholic Church's use of gongs in liturgical music have kept the practice of gong music alive.

Before moving to the two main parts of this chapter, I offer a general description of the Central highlanders' gongs and gong music, specifically in relation to the minorities I am focusing on in this work.

How to Play Gongs

It was nearing 7 p.m. The dark and cold had come down quickly on this November night. Fourteen men, members of A Thút's gong performance group, were gradually gathering in the dark front yard of A Thút's house. They looked tired after a long day working in the hillside fields, but A Thút had received an invitation for them to perform in Ho Chi Minh City, and they needed to practice. As the men gradually arrived to fill up his front yard, A Thút unlocked the tiny room in his house where he stores three sets of gongs and other Bahnar traditional instruments. 'This is my "store of culture" (*cái kho văn hóa*)', he had once told me, describing his treasure in serious tones. The room is about one metre square and is where he keeps all his gongs and dance group equipment (three sets of gongs, a drum, a *tinh ninh* instrument, traditional clothes and other small items). Indeed, A Thút is very proud of this store of Bahnar instruments. No other family in the village owns gongs, so they need to borrow A Thút' instruments in order to practice.

Plate 12. A Thút's 'store of culture'.

A Thút explained to me that the gongs he owns are mostly made of bronze. As such, like the bronze gongs of the Bahnar in Kon Ktu village and the Jrai in Plei Sar and most of gongs in Chốt villages, they are 'soft' enough for the artist to tune each time the sound goes wrong. However, some kinds of gongs originating from Laos are made from an alloy of bronze and iron, such as the *tha* gongs of the Brâu or the expensive *pat* gong of A Ram in the Jrai's Plei Chốt village. The alloy helps the *tha* and *pát* gongs produce particularly strong sounds, while making it difficult for the artist to change or tune the sounds they make.

A Thút brought out one set of gongs consisting of three bossed gongs, eleven flat gongs and a drum. Actually, among the Jrai and Bahnar of Kontum, traditional standard sets of gongs consist of three bossed gongs, eight flat gongs and a drum.[43] However, in my Bahnar and Jrai field sites I often found that local practitioners mix more flat gongs into their sets to

[43] The *tha* gongs of the Brâu are a special case: their set consists of only two gongs, and the gong performers play on both sides of the two gongs at once. This makes the *tha* a special case, which the scholars described in the document outlining the 'Space of Gong Culture'.

make the gong band sound ‘thicker’. A Thút gave one piece to each man according to his role in the group. It is traditional to match players and gongs in this way. Each member of the group plays only one gong at a time. The bossed gongs maintain the tempo and strengthen it, while the flat gongs create the melody. Among the flat gongs, the Number 2 and Number 4 gongs play more important roles in leading the melody.

Plate 13. Bahnar Gong players of Kon Ktu village practising for a performance.

As they took up their instruments, the men tested their sounds, producing a very messy soundscape, with fourteen bells ringing randomly all at once. Then, as they started to play, the sounds suddenly fitted nicely together into a beautiful flow of music. When I closed my eyes to follow the melody, it sounded as if there was just a single musician playing and creating this pretty music. Like blood leaving the body: gongs as property and the state’s management of gongs. ‘Is that enough?’ asked A Thút. It was not really a question, but an expression of his own feeling that their practice should end at this point. It was already nearly 9 pm. Two hours had passed, and the gong players looked pretty tired. Some of them had been yawning repeatedly. People started putting down their gongs as if to answer A Thút. Meanwhile, A Thút, quick as he usually is, brought out a bottle of rice wine together with some dried fish as a snack. This treat woke up the men, and they became refreshed, sharing the wine, taking pieces of dried fish and chatting to one another.

Plate 14. Jrai gong players of Sar village were preparing their gongs to perform in a funeral.

Just as quickly as he had brought out the food, A Thút turned to collect up his gongs, put them back into his 'store of culture' and carefully lock it. 'You see,' he told me, 'I keep the gongs, our culture, like this.' This time he was drawing my attention to the gongs as physical objects, 'culture' that was to be kept under lock and key. He continued by reminding me that after 1975 many families had sold their gongs for a low price, and that in his village he was the only one who still had any.[44] And then he reminded me about the 'bleeding' of the gongs (*tình trạng chảy máu cồng chiêng*), which I, 'as a researcher, would have heard about frequently'.

Indeed, in almost all meetings and reports regarding gongs and gong culture, there are always criticisms about gongs 'bleeding' or 'draining away'. This situation, it is said, has occurred widely and rapidly among the Highland communities, creating a lack of gongs and their disappearance from the minorities' villages. It is said, too, that gongs have been sold to buyers outside the Highlands because the Highlanders lack knowledge and

[44] In fact, before 1975, A Thút did not own any set of gongs. In 1988, he and his wife decided to buy a set of gongs from his wife's parents. They were his first set. Stories about how A Thút owned other sets of gongs will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

awareness of their value as cultural heritage. Being both poor and naïve (*ngây thơ*), as critics argued, the Highlanders sold the gongs to Việt and foreign collectors for just a small amount of money.

As early as 1985, at the Art of Gongs Conference described in Chapter 4[45], Professor Tô Vũ (1986), the Director of the Institute of Musical Studies and also one of the hosts of the conference, made strong warnings about this situation at the conclusion of the event. He said that, because gongs and sets of gongs had been disappearing rapidly from the highlands at that time, the relevant state institutions (*các cấp các ngành có liên quan*) urgently needed to protect and keep gongs, especially the 'ancient' (*cổ*) gongs. 'Beware of art dealers' (*các con buôn nghệ thuật*), warned Tô Vũ, because 'they are very keen (*thính nhạy*) to take the best quality gongs'.

Twenty years later, the draining of gongs seems to have continued unchecked. At the first International Festival of Gong Culture organized in Đắk Lắk Province in 2007, the organizers (including Đắk Lắk Province and the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism) published an announcement noting that, faced with the 'draining of gongs', one of the most important functions of the state's propaganda was to make local people aware of their responsibility to protect their gongs (Ban Tuyên giáo tỉnh ủy Đắk Lắk 2007: 27).

By 2015, counting gongs, including those that were 'missing', was an important component of discussions about the draining of gongs. 'We have 1,916 sets of gongs in Kontum': this was one of the most important pieces of information that the Director of the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Kontum announced in her report at the meeting to celebrate National Heritage Day and the ten years in which the 'Space of Gong Culture' had been nominated in the Masterpieces list (23 November 2015, Kontum). At the same meeting, the Vice-President of Kontum put the number another way: 'However, there are 300 villages which own no sets of gongs (*không có cồng chiêng, trắng cồng chiêng*)'. The Vice-President was only in the first year of his term, and furthermore had only just moved (*được điều chuyển*) from the north of the country, but he already realized how to use the numbers of gongs more dramatically by referencing the 'draining situation'.

In these ways and others, the loss and 'draining' of gongs has been marked frequently as an essential part of reports in the country's folklore heritage. Substantively, regulations have been issued to condemn and forbid

[45] As mentioned in Chapter 4, this conference, which was held in Gia Lai-Kontum Province, was the first time that the state's historical and cultural institutions, including gongs and gong culture, were officially discussed, considered, situated and integrated into the national history, cultural identity and the nation's path to socialism.

the trading in gongs, especially to outsiders to Central Highlands. Given the apparently unchanging rhetoric about the 'draining situation', cultural cadres have a complex relationship with the gong trade and traders. Both cadres and local people told me about some cases in which traders had been punished, but these cases did not stop the trade in gongs. It is a fact that trading is an integral part of gong history. According to French sources (Maitre 2008 [1912]; Dam Bo 2003 [1950]), there is a long tradition of trading in gongs among ethnic groups in the Highlands. Highlanders exchanged their buffalos and excess rice for gongs from Laos or lowland Vietnam. Also, gongs are a marker of the wealth and even the power of their owners. In interviews, I frequently asked my informants why the gongs had been sold to outsiders so rapidly after 1975. Plei Kon Ktu village was originally one of the villages that owned no set of gongs, as it had lost all its gongs during the war.[46] Pah Bưn, the traditional head of the village, told me that during the war the bombings had destroyed many of their gongs, which A Banh, an old man in Kon Ktu village, also confirmed.

Many others whom I interviewed reported similar burials and the destruction of gongs. Gong culture was further affected even when gongs were recovered. As A Banh explained:

> Gongs need to be completed as a set to play them. Once some gongs in the set had been destroyed, then we had to wait until we had enough money to buy other gongs to complete the set. If some families did wait to buy gongs, others sold their gongs cheaply. More sold their incomplete sets of gongs to Vietnamese traders in the years following the war when they were incorporated into new socialist agricultural co-operatives and the new socialist way of life.

The Bahnar in Kon Ktu owned no set of gongs until 2006. In that year, Kontum province decided to choose Kon Ktu to become a site of tourism. The priest of Kon Ktu village at that time decided to present this village with a set of three bossed and sixteen flat gongs together with one drum. The villagers have been using this set of gongs until now to perform for tourists, as well as in their own community's social activities.

In Plei Chốt village, I came across A Ram, an eighty-two-year-old Jrai villager who is a gong collector and was the owner of six sets of gongs when I visited him in April 2016. He explained to me that after 1975, the

[46] This situation lasted until 2005. In this year, the Kontum province authorities had started considering to choose Kon Ktu to be a potential tourist destination. The Catholic father of Kon Ktu church saw this of the government's attention as a chance for Bahnar villagers to, themselves, improve their living standards via tourist activities. He decided to buy the village a set of gongs. Kon Ktu gong players gathered and practiced some gong musical works, which they are playing to serve tourists today.

minorities had to adopt the government's fixed cultivation programme. Doing cultivation on a narrow area, many highland families became poor and had to sell their possessions in order to buy rice.

A Láo, a Jrai gong master in Plei Sar village, gave me another explanation. According to him, integration into the new economic system of the cooperative (see Chapter 2) pushed the local people into a confused emotional state. They were not sure what the Communist government expected of them, they were not sure what was allowed and what was not, and they felt very insecure because they no longer owned their own land and could not freely cultivate it. In this miserable condition, they were also confused about the values of their cultural possessions, such as gongs. The war was over, but conflicts continued, as members of the FULRO movement[47] were still hiding out in the forest. In this highly insecure situation, sounding gongs at night[48] was not appropriate. It was therefore out of 'worry' (*lo lắng*) that people sold gongs. He continued:

> We were worried that our overnight gong performances might disturb the government, as the local office needed things to be quiet at night so that they could control the situation and be aware of sudden attacks from FULRO. We were worried that the gongs might lose their value (*mất giá*). At that time, Việt traders came to our village to buy our wooden[49] and bronze gongs. We needed money, and we were confused about the value of our gongs, so we sold them.

In fact, the Highlanders did not play a passive role in the availability and lack of gongs in the Central Highlands, some of them even playing active roles as traders. Before 1975 gongs were prestige items, their routine trade reflecting, in part, the ongoing rises and falls of a family's fortunes. Since 1985, as described in Chapter 4, and especially since gongs and gong culture have been entered into UNESCO's Masterpieces programme, the official attention given to gong culture has also brought prestige to those who keep large numbers of gongs. In the following, I will provide different stories to illustrate how the 'heritage values' that have recently been added to gongs affect how outsiders evaluate the trade in gongs and how the Highlanders, as 'insiders', are reappropriating their own culture. The first story is about Thao

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[47] On FULRO, see Chapter 3.

[48] The Jrai, like other ethnic groups in Kontum, have a tradition of playing gongs throughout the night at particular rituals, such as funerals and buffalo sacrifices.

[49] There used to be valuable species of wood (such as ironwood, *gỗ lim*, or rosewood, *gỗ trắc*) in the Highlands forest. Before 1975, the Highlanders usually used these species of wood to build their house on stilts. However, after 1975, and especially in the 1980s, many Việt traders went to Highland villages hunting for these species.

La, who sold his valuable set of *tha* gongs. The second story is about A Thút, who collects gongs to gain 'cultural' prestige.

Plate 15. *Tha* gongs at the Kontum Museum. Above the two players is a short description of the (sacred) meanings of the *tha* and a certificate of *recognition* of the 'Space of Gong Culture' as a 'Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity'.

Thao La used to trade gongs more or less continuously before the war. He told me how he and his fellow villagers traded gongs from Kontum to Laos. Before 1975, people in his village sometimes bought bronze gongs produced by lowland Vietnamese in Gia Lai, used them for some time, and then sold them on to Laos at a profit. They kept buying and selling like that until around 1979 (according to Thao La's memory), when the supply of gongs from the lowlands became more and more scarce. But the Brâu kept selling what they could to Laos: 'gongs, as well as jars, have almost [all] gone to Laos and Thailand now', Thao La said. 'We thought gongs would be produced forever, but we were wrong'. Thao La did not know why fewer gongs were produced in the lowlands.[50]

Some years ago, Thao La sold his family's pair of *tha* gongs to the Kontum Province museum. The sale, it turned out, damaged his reputation.

[50] In addition to the decrease in the production of gongs in the lowlands, the effects of the state's policy of restricting trading activities after the war might have also played a role.

Once, while telling Lân, a cadre in the Department of Culture in Thao La's district, about my admiration for Thao La and his knowledge of *tha* gongs, I suggested that 'Thao La is an important performer who has introduced Brâu cultural heritage to outsiders'. A half-smile formed across his lips. He replied, 'Thao La is not a heritage lover! If he was, why did he sell his pair of *tha* gongs to the Kontum museum for sixty million Vietnam đồng [about €2300]? He just loves money!'

Thao La himself did not mention a love of money, but he did talk openly with me about the pleasures of trading. When he told me the story of how he had sold his family's gongs to the museum, he prefaced it by telling me that buying and selling gongs is very common among the Brâu. Moreover, he described the selling of gongs, especially *tha* gongs, as a serious ritual. Trading trips were both enjoyable and mysterious:

> To sell the *tha* gong, I could not just sell it; I had to hold a ritual. In the ritual, I killed a rooster, smeared its blood on the *tha* and explained to it why we had to sell it. I told it, 'I am sorry, but we are so poor now, and we are not able to keep you. So, please agree that we give you to another family who can treat you better'.

Normally, Thao La and his friends would have set off to sell the *tha* on the morning following this ritual. Before starting such a long trip, they would have checked for a lucky sign from the songs of the Si birds. If the birds sing on the left side first and the bird on the right replies, it is a perfect sign that the *tha* will be soon sold. If the right bird sings first, they should return home, do another ritual and start the trip again the next morning. Such rituals are no longer undertaken: 'It's been a long time since we needed to check the birds' voices in order to decide to undertake such an important trading rip like selling the *tha* gong', he said. 'Nowadays, as we go by motorbike,[51] how can we check the birds' voices?' As it turned out, Thao La had not checked for a lucky sign either:

> We did not need to check the birds' voices when we sold the *tha* gong to the Kontum museum because they came themselves to our house to buy the *tha*. We did a ritual to explain to the *tha* why we were selling it. For its part, the museum also prepared a document (*hồ so*) and a purchasing contract for our *tha*.

But why had he sold his family tha to the museum? Thao La explained:

> The museum and many researchers had come to our village many times to study our *tha*. They said that the *tha* was unique and very valuable, and that they wanted to exhibit it in the provincial museum. Our family's situation was a bit hard at that time. We

[51] In talking about going by motorbike on modern roads these days, Thao La is alluding to the loss of the forest.

> needed money. The *tha* was our family's asset, so we thought that we should sell it and share the money with our family members, too. When we start earning better money, we will buy another *tha*.

I also asked Thao La if he had been criticized for selling the *tha* because he was selling the heritage that he should keep. He answered, 'Buying and selling *tha*, let's see it as buying and selling a bicycle. You buy it when you want it and sell it when you need to. Moreover, I sold my *tha* to the museum. Isn't it heritage there?' Thao La's response to criticisms of him selling his own set of gongs clearly shows that he considered the *tha* to be his own private property and its sale a routine trading activity which reflects, in part, the alternating rises and falls in his family's fortunes. Thao La's example indicates that such attitudes have not changed, even if official discourses about gong culture insist that it should have. The divergence between Thao La's account of his trading activities and his reputation among cultural cadres further illustrates this point.

A Thút is to some extent the opposite case to Thao La's. A Thút himself became a gong trader in the 1980s. He did not seem very proud of this role because he only told me about it in two of our various conversations and was not willing to provide more details about his specific trading activities when I asked him. He had bought gongs from people who were entering the agricultural cooperatives and then sold them to remote villages of the Xê Đăng minority in Đăk Tô District. There, people still had land to cultivate and could exchange their surplus rice and cows for gongs.

As already noted, A Thút had three sets of gongs at the time of my fieldwork and was well known for having kept gongs for a long time. Yet in the 1980s, he had sold gongs. As a trader, he had learned the financial value of gongs. He had even sold his father's set of gongs to a tourist company for thirty million Vietnam *đồng*. But as gongs became heritage, he turned to 'keeping' them. He organized a performance group that became very famous. In newspaper interviews, he told very lively stories about how, upon establishing the group, he had soon become aware of the value of gongs as a unique Highland tradition.

In interviews with journalists, as with myself, he described how he was keeping his sets of gongs as a way to preserve the Highlanders' heritage. Yet gongs also became powerful tools in domains other than heritage for A Thút. He used his ownership of gongs to help 'arrange' the members of his group and to strengthen his own political position as Vice-Chairman of the Đăk Wơk People's Committee. As the only villager who still keeps gongs, A Thút has the exclusive role of arranging cultural activities in the village. 'When the commune office and the church want gong music, they have to ask me', A Thút said, explaining his importance to me. Indeed, the chairman

of Đăk Wơk commune called A Thút 'the old man of Đăk Wơk commune (*già xã*)' when he explained A Thút's position in the community to me. Furthermore, I once witnessed A Thút expel a member of his gong group because this man had not attended some of the team's practice sessions. Thus, by gradually collecting and appropriating gongs, A Thút set up and strengthened his own prestige.

At the conclusion of Chapter 4, I described how the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism strongly warned cadres at all levels that Vietnam's ICH title for the 'Space of Gong Culture' was at risk. She insisted on the need for 'precise and practical actions' (*hành động thiết thực và hiệu quả*) if the title was to be retained. In 2017, as a response to this and similar warnings, Kontum initiated some 'actions. One of these was meant to address the 'draining situation' directly by giving gongs to and training gong musicians in villages, which had no sets of gongs. The gongs to be 'given', however, first had to be acquired. The heritage cadres decided to ask for help from 'local experts' and turned to including traders in the 'heritage community'. Like A Thút and Thao La, many traders are well integrated into the heritage community in their other roles as collectors and performers. A Ram and A Biu,[52] two 'collectors', were invited to take part in the project. When I visited and interviewed them in their villages in March 2017, they told me that they were to work as middlemen to find sets of gongs. As the Vietnamese provincial cultural cadres do not have the skills to choose appropriate gongs, evaluate their quality or tune them, A Ram and A Biu, together with A Thút, were invited to take on these tasks. While A Thút acted as the general evaluator for the whole project, A Biu and A Ram played more active roles in looking for gongs and buying them on behalf of the Kontum heritage department so that they could be given as a present (*tặng quà*) to the gong-free villages (*làng/xã trắng cồng chiêng*).

Everyone who knew about the project assumed that A Ram and A Biu earned some profit from these transactions, but no one said that their work involved 'trading' the gongs. The heritage cadres only regarded the two men as 'local experts' able to evaluate the quality of the gongs, tune them and advise gong-free villages how to play them and how to revive their gong traditions.

The stories I related above demonstrate the complex relationship between official heritage discourses with traders and the practice of trading in gongs. As 'fear of loss' is one of the most important aspects of the official

[52] A Biu is a Bahnar gong trader as well as gong expert in Kontum city. I met him during my visit trips in January 2018 to my field sites in Kontum. I stayed five days in his place to explore the trading of gongs and only include his case here in the discussion about gongs traders.

heritage discourse, specifically regarding gong culture, trading in gongs was considered to be risking the loss of gong culture. Thus, the official focus on the gongs as objects themselves involves praise of the gong keepers. This attitude ignores the fact that the latter are also gong traders who, through their trading activities, are acting against the state's insistence that these practices should be abandoned. Besides, even though traders have not been publicly acknowledged for their contributions to stimulating, developing and maintaining gong culture, they actively carry out their activities both for their own pecuniary advantage and to contribute to the living gong heritage.

The music of gongs: composing social meaning under the cover of 'tradition'

In this section, I focus on different types of gong music from the point of view of sacred ritual and social exchange. I do not aim to conduct a typical music studies-type of exploration of the recording and transcribing of gong music, as, for example, carried out by Đào Huy Quyền (1993) and especially Bùi Trọng Hiền (2005, 2011, 2012).[53] Instead, I look at how gong music has been collected and performed by actors in the 'heritage community', especially from the minorities' points of view. I see this as relevant in order to bring the notion of 'salience' or 'salient identity' into the discussion. Talking about national identity-making projects, Alexander Motyl (2001, cited in Cash 2011: 49) emphasizes the importance of exploring why certain kinds of identities are more (or less) salient than others. Here, I apply this question not to projects of identity making, but to the specific case of gong music, and more specifically to the intertwining of the 'heritage' image of the gongs and their use in daily life.

Composing Tradition: The Vivid Life of Gong Music on the Ground

At the practice sessions by A Thút's group, each time they finished a piece, I could not wait to ask the group members about its name and meaning. 'Ask A Thút,' was the response I usually got. When I redirected the question to A Thút, he always used the notion of tradition (*bài truyền thống*) to describe and explain the piece's meaning. He would say the work was 'traditional' and then explain its content or use. One song described a couple's love for each other, another was typical ritual music for buffalo sacrifices, and so on. After a month, as I engaged more and more with his group, some members informed me that some of the songs had actually been composed by A Thút

[53] The detailed data in Bùi Trọng Hiền's works actually originate from VICAS's large-scale project to prepare the UNESCO application for recognition of the 'Space of Gong Culture'.

himself. Even in cases of ritual songs, A Thút 'edited' them to fit within the limited amount of time allowed for a performance, especially for performances abroad. The way A Thút had somehow hidden his role in composing the music played by his group linked up with a question, which I always kept in my mind during the fieldwork: where does gong music come from? It seems an important yet already answered question within the 'heritage community'. Indeed, from the perspectives of folklore and heritage, gong music is sacred ritual music, which has been passed down from generation to generation and is thus traditional. As such, gong music was described (to UNESCO) as an 'ancient and rich musical tradition' with a history of more than three thousand years of practice by the Highlanders. And, '[w]hat we see and hear today are the distillation and accretion of these thousands-year-old practices' (Alperson et al., 2007: 1).

Between individual composition and anonymous reproduction are various engagements with gong music. Delving more deeply into the life of gong music in the Bahnar and Jrai communities, for example, I found exciting relations between their beautiful gong music and the 'response songs' (*những bài hát đối đáp*), such as the *tre* of the Jrai and the *h'nhong* of the Bahnar, which they often sing to one another during the long nights of sacrificial rituals. On some days of such rituals, sacred music pieces are played at fixed stages in the ritual, while some small groups of people stay awake at night, mainly family members, friends and villagers who love to chat and sing. During these nights, they enjoy and exchange songs. Sometimes they create a new melody, but sometimes they only create new content for a borrowed rhythm. Currently these songs are accompanied by guitar, but in the past, they were sometimes accompanied by gongs.

If it happens that a *zu chinh cheng* (gong master of a village) loves the melody of a particular song created during one of these nights, he can put it into the repertoire of his gong band and train his group to play it. These types of folksongs are actually among the roots of Jrai and Bahnar gong music. According to A Thút, this source contributes to the diversity of melodies one finds in Jrai and Bahnar gong music compared to that of other groups in the Highlands. In particular, A Thút thinks that Jrai folksongs and gong music are even more vivid than those of the Bahnar. Indeed, during my fieldwork, I found that *tre* songs had spread widely among the Jrai. For instance, once when a Jrai woman in her fifties saw how so much I enjoyed these 'response songs' on one night of a sacrificial ritual, she showed me a long list of *tre* musical pieces on her mobile phone that had been recorded by some amateur Jrai singers in Gia Lai province singing while simply strumming a guitar. The Jrai woman loves listening to these songs while working, and 'especially when she is drunk,' her husband explained.

Although local people still compose music, and although some of these works become gong music, the heritage discourse somehow hides this creative activity. In other words, in the heritage discourse on gong music, the 'tradition' aspect is more salient than new compositions. Even famous artists like A Thút like to hide their role as composers, a process of dissimulation that has been underway for quite some time. Nearly forty years ago, Trần Văn Khê (1979) observed that contemporary folklore performers were composing less than those of the past. He wrote that in the past, 'the performer was almost always a creator of music' (Trần Văn Khê 1979: 5), though today creative activity 'has completely disappeared in several traditional musical genres in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia' (ibid: 11). Having explored the vivid appearance of gong music and Jrai and Bahnar response songs, however, I would argue differently. As I have already shown, the heritage discourses of authenticity and the protection of tradition have led artists such as A Thút to hide their creative role under the mask of tradition. Though he might acknowledge 'editing' traditional music, he claims to have done so only as a necessary requirement for stage performances, rather than as an intrinsically creative aspect of the performance itself.

Social Meanings behind the Sacred Aspects of Gong Ritual Music

One of the gong music pieces that A Thút was most proud to explain to me during his group's practices was the ritual music for a buffalo sacrifice. 'This piece', he said, 'represents the very traditional Bahnar gong music, as it is used in the buffalo sacrifice ritual, a sacred custom for us.' This statement might not seem to explain very much, but it combines 'traditional' with 'sacred', and it is this combination that matters. A similar example comes from Kon Ktu village. When performing gong music to tourists, the performances repeatedly consisted of two ritual songs connected with sacrifice ceremonies to celebrate the newly harvested mountain rice (*xô hơk xã bà nao*) or a newly built communal *rong* house (*et tok rông nao*), as well as to appreciate and welcome (*mơnê kơ*) distinguished guests (in this case tourists). It was following discussion with and the advice of the Kontum cultural cadres, A Banh and A Bên explained to me, that they collected and performed age-old ritual songs to introduce Bahnar traditional culture to tourists.

In the explanations for the characters and values of the 'Space of Gong Culture', sacredness (*tính thiêng*) is normally mentioned as the most important and salient aspect. As Trần Cảnh Đào, then Vice-Director of the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Lâm Đồng Province, put it, 'Gongs are the sacred artifacts, which used to transfer the sacredness' in the

Highlanders' ritual life (2004: 80). The feeling of sacredness conveyed by gongs in their ritual context has been described in a more imaginary and impressive way by Nguyễn Thị Kim Vân, a researcher in the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Gia Lai province: gongs and gong music, he writes, are the 'incense-smoke in the ritual of the Vietnamese which helps people connect with gods and ancestors' (2007: 33). In the state-organized gong music performances, I attended in Kontum and Hanoi, gong music was usually contextualized and explained with reference to agricultural rituals, such as those to choose land for new crops or village festivals to celebrate a good harvest. These gong music rituals are performed as ideal illustrations of the 'Space of Gong Culture' for outside audiences. Although the agricultural rituals are rapidly disappearing[54], it is those that are considered to constitute the sacredness of Highland space.

In fact, I found that in the Highlands gong music is still played at other rituals, for example, at funerals. Funeral gong performances especially pertain to the Jrai villages.[55] One day, when I came back home after a long day talking with gong owners in the village, my host A Láo smiled at me with twinkling eyes and told me, 'Lucky you – a villager died today. They (the villagers) are going to play gongs. For weeks, staying in A Láo's place, I had learned a lot about Jrai gongs and gong music; how he had learned to play and compose gong music, and then become the most important gong music expert in his village; and how he had become engaged with heritage gong performances. During our conversations, I had asked repeatedly when I could attend a 'real' gong music ritual performance by the villagers. Today, I would finally attend such a ritual performance.

That evening, after dinner, I went along to the funeral with A Láo. While we were groping our way along the dark village road, A Láo made me aware that they would be playing music all night. If I became tired, he said, I could just return home. I told him that I had been waiting for this for a long time and was looking forward to staying and enjoying the whole gong music performance. A Láo then proudly told me, 'You will see how I lead the gong band, arrange the players and teach them how to play my music.'[56]

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[54] Highlanders think that no God resides in the new imported wet rice, therefore they did not create agricultural rituals for wet rice crops. This is similar to the Bru-Vân Kiều case which Vargyas (2004) describes.

[55] During my fieldwork in Kontum, there was no funeral in the Catholic Bahnar villages of Kon Ktu and Đắk Wơk. However, villagers in those villages explained to me that, as with the Jrai, the Catholic Bahnar also play gong music and dance *xoang* overnight to share their sorrow with the dead person's family. A Banh's family showed pictures of the villagers playing gongs at the funeral of a Catholic sister of Kontum Church.

[56] Unlike A Thút, A Láo did not hide his role in composing gong music from me. On the contrary, he even seemed proud about it. The reason for this, I would argue, is that A Láo is

It was around 8 pm and very dark on this March evening, but I could feel that we were getting closer to the funeral as the sound of gong music became clearer. 'Can you hear the gong music?' A Láo asked me. He said that 'Young groups are playing. It is their music, not mine'. Finally, we arrived. The Jrai funeral appeared to me, as an outsider, to be a performance animated by gong music. People were sitting everywhere across the front yards of the houses neighbouring that of the dead man. 'All the villagers have to come', A Láo explained; 'To show their appearance at a funeral like this is to show that they have fulfilled their duty to share the sorrow with the family of the deceased.' A Láo continued, 'If you do not come, people will avoid going to your house when there is a funeral there.' At the centre of the crowd, young gong performers were playing gongs and going around a tent containing the dead man's coffin, accompanied by dancers making a lively circle. His family were sitting around the coffin and crying for him. The funky rhythm of the music drowned out their cries. I did not know how to respond: this atmosphere was entirely different from the sombre northern Vietnamese funerals I had attended. Seemingly reading my impression, A Láo and another villager explained that the lively gong music and dancing were meant to comfort the dead man's family and to get them through their grief. If they do not succeed in this, the members of the dead man's family might become too distressed and commit suicide, as had happened in some cases in the past.

The gong and dance performance was absolutely joyful. Players discussed which song they would perform after finishing each previous one. The leader of the band taught others to play 'his music' the right way. Dancers called to their friends who were still sitting in the crowd to join them; a man tried to interrupt the line of dancers to hold a girl's hand. A man next to me noticed and commented, 'It is such a good opportunity to hold a girl's hand. The funeral is when the village gathers together, and people from other villages come as well. Thus, it is an ideal opportunity for youngsters to get to know each other and find an ideal partner'. Several times during the night, he encouraged me to join the line as well and take a chance at holding a Jrai girl's hand. 'Come, make a try, take your chance, come,' he urged me.

During the nightlong funeral, I initially sat with the 'old group' of gong players, most of whom are over forty years old. In fact, many of them are over sixty and even seventy. The youngest member, who plays the

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well known among the 'heritage community' not as a gong musician but as an important artist with excellent skills in carving traditional Jrai wooden statues. Interestingly, however, A Láo told me about his work with wooden statues at the beginning of my engagement with him in a similar way to A Thút when he first told me about his very 'traditional' gong music pieces.

biggest gong, is 45. They differentiate themselves from the 'young group' of players in their twenties. The young group plays a funky kind of music with very lively and strong rhythms of the sort we heard first, while the 'old group' plays an older 'traditional' style with a very smooth rhythm. A Láo explained to me that youngsters prefer the music played by the young group, this having been inspired by another Jrai group in Gia Lai Province through ritual exchanges. The young group had added more bossed gongs to the standard eight-gong set to make their rhythms louder and stronger.

The 'old group' let the 'young group' play until the middle of the night, when they got tired; in any case, they needed to sleep, as many of the young group's members had to go rubber-tapping in the morning. A Láo's old group started at around 1 a.m. 'This is the time for A Láo's music', a member of his group quickly told me before joining the line of players.

Many of the pieces played by A Láo and his gong players that night stemmed from the beautiful *tre* songs mentioned above. But A Láo was also open about his own creativity: 'I have hundreds of songs in my head, innumerable ones', he explained. His compositions, he said, come about gradually: 'I sing the melody while I'm walking or working. I even dream about the melody'. When I talked with some members of A Láo's gong group, they acknowledged A Láo's role as an important *zu chinh chêng* in the village. But rather than acknowledging his ability to compose gong music, they emphasized his talent for memorizing it. 'It is like a skill for "stealing" things from others' minds', A Phan, a member of A Láo's group, explained to me. 'He (A Láo) only needs to listen once to the gong music pieces of other groups to memorize them and teach them to our group when we play together.'

Even though the young and old groups have different styles of gong music, their melodies have a similar function: they help share the sorrow of the dead person's passing with the latter's whole family. These social aspects of ritual gong music are hardly mentioned and usually remain cloaked under the rubric of 'sacred ritual gong music' in heritage performance explanations and discourse. In the funerals, I attended in Jrai villages, however, whether the family was Catholic, Buddhist or 'traditional', the gong music was always similar and fulfilled the function of sharing the sorrow with the family of the deceased. There are thus two different images of gong ritual music that co-exist and play important roles in different settings or circumstances for the 'living'. In the official heritage discourse and explanation, the rapidly disappearing agricultural rituals (such as ritual gong music for buffalo sacrifices) were and are usually regarded as the more salient aspects of gong music and are performed on the heritage stage. As a crucial aspect of heritage, the 'fear of loss', through heritage

practice essentializes this image of gong culture. Conversely, where gong music at a funeral is concerned[57] music for the dead man is created and played vividly, having a role the daily lives of local people.

Gong Music and Minority Cultures between State and Church

As has already been made clear, A Thút is one of the most famous and prestigious artists in Kontum Province and beyond, with multiple roles in the heritage community. Yet he is also a Christian Bahnar. However, the Bahnar have traditionally performed many sacrificial rituals, despite their being forbidden by the Catholic Church, which A Thút is proud to perform in their 'real' form. Besides, the Catholic village of Kon Ktu was said by Sở Văn hóa Kontum and tourist guides to be a place where tourists can still find a very traditional Bahnar culture. A further study of A Thút's activities thus opens up interesting questions about the position of Christian artists as people in between the state and the Church.

Interestingly, an 'inculturation turn' within the Catholic Church in Kontum recognized local culture and attempted to integrate minority cultures into religious practices. This in turn helps explain why gong music is played even in church services in Kontum.

The 'inculturation turn' within Catholicism initially started with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It marked a dramatic turn in the Church's view of the non-Catholic world and foreign cultures. In Kontum, evangelization and cultural preservation have proceeded hand in hand as a duty and a responsibility of the Church since Vatican II (Phaolô H'neng and Micae Ya Phu 2014). The Council legalized many local innovations for missionary activities, and in the course of evangelization, missionaries realized that the simple and sincere faith of indigenous peoples in their traditional gods was actually an ideal soil in which to plant the 'seeds of Christ's words' (*hạt giống lời chúa*) (Gioakim Nguyễn Hoàng Sơn 2014). By seizing the essence of minorities' religious cosmologies as constituted by several natural gods (*Yang*), the Catholic missionaries gave them a new *Yang*: that is, Christ was introduced as the highest *Yang* – *Bă Yang* (God of Heaven) – above all other traditional *Yang*. This method was considered key to the success of evangelization (Phaolô H'neng and Micae Ya Phu 2014).

Many of the most important inculturation activities were undertaken by minority catechists (Yao phu), young men who undertake three years of catechism study in the main church and had then returned to their villages.

[57] In the document applying for gongs to be recognized as heritage by UNESCO, gong music at funerals is described as 'ritual music'. However, during fieldwork I found that the social aspect is much more important than the ritual one.

One major result of their work was the publication of Hlabar Khop (Bahnar songs), a collection of songs, Biblical excerpts, prayers and ritual instructions that was first published in 1977 and is now used in all minority villages within the Kontum diocese.

Interestingly, *Hlabar Khop* also contains prayers for all the traditional planting activities: there are prayers for choosing land for cultivation (*rơih teh*); prayers to be said before cutting trees (*kăl long*), burning trees (*xoh muih*) or planting (*choi*); prayers for rain (*khop apinh dak mi*) and to stop rain (*khop apinh kơ prăng*); prayers to make a new rice store (*xum nao*) and at harvest (*kech ba*). In this way, 'inculturation' did not seek to eradicate the traditional rituals centered on the agricultural cycle, it merely Christianized them.

Hlabar Khop is divided into several sections. One section, *Hat Xoi (Hri Bahnar)*, contains the official ritual songs for the Kontum Diocese. After Vatican II, there was a movement in the school of *Yao phu* to learn how to play the gongs (*Tôh Ching Ching*) and to compose Catholic songs using traditional ethnic melodies. Nghip and Hun, two Bahnar *Yao Phu*, composed many such songs, including all those which have been sung in church rituals within the Kontum diocese since 1967, and they too are included in the *Hat Xoi*. Because these ritual songs are based on traditional melodies, they can be accompanied nicely by gong music, as they are even during church services.

This integration of Bahnar traditional music, especially gongs, into church activities 'flavors' the church with traditional culture, which it helps to preserve, much as Rappoport (2004) describes for Toraja Christianity, in which the composition of new Christian music has also been an important component of church activities.

Far from being antagonistic towards local traditions, therefore, since Vatican II the Church has promoted them; indeed, the Church itself organizes gong music festivals. The Church's festivals are aimed at entertaining people and conserving cultural identities, as well as at Evangelism. They are meant to 'bring people to Bă Yang' according to the 'seeds of God words' discourse (ibid.). The Church also curates a museum, the 'Traditional Room', in the Bishopric of Kontum. It houses an incredible collection of original objects illustrating the economic, social and traditional beliefs and lifeways of the local ethnic groups. Newly made wooden statues in the ethnic style of art tell fascinating stories about the history of evangelization in Kontum.

Plate 16. Indigenous visitors from a Catholic village in Kontum visiting the 'traditional room' of the Kontum seminary.

One might argue that local people have only made sporadic use of traditional culture following their conversion to Catholicism.[58] However, the above examples indicate that local believers and the Church have created a type of syncretism between Catholicism and ethnic traditions. It is how to describe the combination that is unclear: is there a sub-culture of Catholic Bahnar traditions that can be distinguished from both Roman Catholic culture and traditional Bahnar culture, or has the Catholic Bahnar community become 'not deficient Christians but simply distinctive ones', as has been said about Christian Central Sulawesi highlanders (Aragon 2000: 9).

[58] Talk with Professor Nguyễn Văn Chính (Vietnam National University), 15 December 2015.

Plate 17. Gong music accompanying Catholic ritual songs in Kon Ktu village.

Finally, the Church's attention to traditional culture, especially gong music, raises a question about the relationship between Church and state. In practical terms, it is clear that the Church has created a cultural space for its religious mission, not unlike the socialist state. And although there is a major difference between the missionary goals of the Church and the state's governmental functions, there are also similarities in the two institutions' experiences, discourses and policies regarding local people, tradition and culture. The way in which the 'inculturation turn' led to an appreciation of the diversity of local culture is similar to the socialist state's policy of 'progressive culture imbued with national identity'. Through such programmatic statements, both Church and state build up their prestige, legitimacy and power on the basis of local culture and tradition by treasuring and appropriating them. In their very different ways, both Church and state are trying to have an impact on the social and ritual lives of local people.

One possible result of this is that the latter feel the pressure of being 'between' the Catholic Church and the socialist state. Interestingly, it seems that this is not the case. Many of the most prestigious artists in Kontum, though honored by the state, are Christians. In other words, the Catholicized elements of 'tradition' in gong music often pass unremarked on government stages, while 'socialist' influences go unremarked by the Church. Far from either influence destroying gong music, both contribute to its dynamic life.

Chapter 6
Rituals and Festivals in the 'Space of Gong Culture': Performing Agricultural Tradition, Sacrificing the Savage

'It was a real sacrifice, you know. We offered one buffalo, one goat, and accordingly one pig and one chicken. All the offered animals were prepared systematically following the truly authentic and standard buffalo- offering rituals of the Bahnar people'. A Thút was telling me enthusiastically about the trip that he and his group of gong players from Đăk Wơk village had made to the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism (VNVECT) in Hanoi. They had performed a buffalo sacrifice ritual, and he specifically emphasized the details of the animals that had been offered to make a stronger impression of the ritual's authenticity. He wanted me to understand that it had been a real sacrifice, even though it was a cultural performance.

The sacrificial rituals of Highland communities have been a longstanding bone of contention in valuations of Highland culture, despite the latter being regarded as positive overall. During high socialism, lowland Communist leaders considered them 'backward' and highly 'wasteful'. More recently, and particularly in the heritage context of the Space of Gong Culture, they have been portrayed as characteristic of the Highland minorities' culture and been situated in the public domain in order to represent the latter's beautiful aspects. Again, however, this has provoked discussion and public criticism of the allegedly 'savage' aspect of these rituals. This chapter examines how the protective voices in favor of the minorities' sacrificial rituals actually contribute to the essentialization of the very traditional image of minority culture.

Minorities' Rituals: Performing the Heritage of the 'Space of Gong Culture'

It was the second evening of the three-day Culture and Sports Festival for the Youth of Ethnic Groups (*Ngày hội Văn hóa Thể thao Tuổi trẻ các dân tộc tỉnh Kon Tum)*, held in Kontum City in 2015 (already mentioned in the first part of Chapter 2). Everyone was excited because the most important event was about to start soon: a competition between young artistic groups from eight districts of Kontum Province.

The stage had been set up in the large front yard of the main building of the Cultural Center for Youth (*Trung tâm văn hóa thanh thiếu niên*). On this dark March evening, the stage was strikingly impressive, with its colorful backdrops, bright spotlights and loud Highlands pop-rock music blasting out from loudspeakers to attract people's attention. The first group to appear on stage came from the Xê Đăng ethnic group of Tu Ma Rông District, who performed the ceremony of celebrating a good harvest (*lễ hội mừng lúa mới).* As the performance started, the stage spotlight was dimmed to convey a sacred space. A smooth female voice blared out from the loudspeaker, explaining the meanings of the ritual that was starting off the festival:

> It is held in October every year. The rice on the hilly fields is ripe, and the Xê Đăng people in Tu Ma Rông District, as usual, start harvesting. When they realize that the rice is ripe, the head of the household leads the members of his family to the rice field. After marking the ripest rice in the field, the headman starts his prayers to the God: 'God of rice (*Yang*), today, please let me, on behalf of my family members, take this first handful of rice. Please allow us to invite the spirit of the new rice into our home to grant us a well-fed year'.

While the narrator's voice was explaining away, the Xê Đăng artists were coming on to the stage. One looked like an old man, the head of the family. He appeared first and was followed by his wife, sons and daughters. They were all beautifully dressed in Xê Đăng traditional clothes, the men in loincloths, the women in richly embroidered Xê Đăng skirts and blouses. They acted out the narration as if going to the hilly rice field, checking the rice and saying the prayers. The narrator's voice continued:

> It was an excellent harvest for A Huynh's family. They collected a hundred bags of grain. This is the third year in a row A Huynh's family has had such a bumper harvest. He decided to organize a buffalo sacrifice to thank the Xê Đăng gods (*Yang*) and ask for another plentiful harvest the coming year.

A beautifully decorated ritual pillar was set up in the middle of the stage, surrounded by the members of A Huynh's family and some villagers. A stage-prop buffalo was tied to the ritual pillar. Then, following the narration, the head of the family conducted the sacrifice. Standing beside the ritual pillar, he said prayers to mourn for the buffalo and thank the deities. A band of gong players played a ritual song while walking around the buffalo. Then, two strong young men holding shields and spears in their hands danced around the buffalo and finally made stabbing movements towards it.

After the two rituals had been conducted, the rest of the performance conveyed the harvest festival. Gong players and dancers walked around the ritual pillar before coming off the stage to dance in the direction of the audience and judges, pulling many to join the dancing line. Loud gong music came out of the loudspeakers. The performance seemed to have been successful in representing a festival environment on the stage. Then, the narrator's voice ended the seven-minute performance, saying that this was a compressed version of a buffalo sacrifice to celebrate a bumper harvest among the Xê Đăng people, and that this custom was a part of the 'Space of Gong Culture' ICH that has been recognized by UNESCO.

Other performances that evening provided typical examples of how the various minorities' cultures and ritual gong music are performed on stage. The Bahnar group gave an illustration of the ritual for selecting new land for sowing. The Giẻ Triêng artists sang traditional songs accompanied by gongs. The Rơ Mâm group also carried out a buffalo sacrifice, but for the construction of a new communal Rong house. And so on.

While I was filming the performances, Tâm, a young cadre of the Cultural Center for the Youth, approached me. We had met before when we both attended a gong music rehearsal by a young group in Kontum city. He asked me how I liked the show. I replied that I was very impressed. He told me that this was only a small festival. The performance of the sacrifice, he said, would be much more impressive and authentic if it were presented as a 'real' buffalo sacrifice, with a real live buffalo, as had been done at the Buffalo Offering Festival (*lễ hội ăn trâu*) performed in the VNVECT, described in the introduction to this chapter.

This ethnographic vignette of a government-sponsored festival makes three main points about how the image of minority Highland cultures has been introduced, showcased and performed in the heritage context. First, rituals usually appear on the heritage stage in conjunction with the portrayal of festivals (*lễ hội*). Secondly, the agricultural tradition, with its sacred rituals, is usually portrayed as the one of the most salient aspects of the minority cultures, together with life-cycle rituals, while healing rituals are left aside. This leads to the third representational characteristic of minority

rituals in heritage practices and performances, namely buffalo sacrifices to celebrate traditional agricultural events. In fact, offering a buffalo during healing rituals is still very common in the current daily lives of the local people, but this is not officially mentioned in heritage programs.

To be performed in heritage events, certain rituals are usually combined with the Vietnamese term *lễ hội* (festival). The performances described at the beginning of this chapter are typical examples. In order to understand how the government uses the minorities' rituals in heritage events called '*lễ hội*', it is useful to look back at the initiative of organizing gong festivals, at both the provincial and village levels, as a crucial part of the mass culture movement, as described in Chapter 4. The initiative of the Kontum Department of Culture was in line with the broader discussion among Vietnamese scholars at that time that treated traditional ritual festivals as a beautiful and worthy 'communal cultural activity' (*sinh hoạt văn hóa cộng đồng*) contributing to a sense of national identity (Endres 2002).

The ascription of agriculture as the most important aspect of Highland culture is nearly ubiquitious, even when other elements of culture are mentioned. In the submission to UNESCO's Masterpieces programme, for example, ritual gong music was explained as a typical accompaniment of life-cycle rituals and seasonal agricultural rituals (Viện Văn hóa và Thông tin 2006)[59]. However, healing rituals are omitted when the 'Space of Gong Culture' is described on the UNESCO website: 'Closely linked to daily life and the cycle of the seasons, [Highlanders'] belief systems form a mystical world where the gongs produce a privileged language between men, divinities and the supernatural world' (UNESCO, no date).

In other sources, the same thing happens. The agricultural image of ritual life is portrayed as more salient than all the other aspects. For instance, Professor Tô Ngọc Thanh, one of central figures in the submission process, appears on the website of the Department of Cultural Heritage (*Cục di sản văn hóa)* as the author of a broad overview of heritage in this cultural space. In his overview, the minorities are described as 'traditional agricultural farmers' who adhere to the tradition of holding many kinds of rituals, such as life-cycle rituals (childbirth ceremonies, weddings, funerals), agricultural rituals, rituals to celebrate the construction of a new communal Rong house, etc. During these rituals, he notes, gongs were played to help local people communicate with the deities. The Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Kontum Province offers a general description of the cultural

[59] The Institute of Culture and Information was established in 1971 as part of the Vietnam Ministry of Culture and Information. In 2013, the Institute was renamed the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies.

practices that constitute the intangible culture of the minorities in the province: folk sports, folk music, arts, folk literature, etc. Tellingly, it is not enough to draw up such a list; the description continues to specify that all these practices 'reflect the typical lifestyle of indigenous agricultural residents' (Sở Văn hóa Kontum 2011: 47).

However, traditional agricultural rituals that are typically performed on stage to illustrate the 'Space of Gong Culture' are quickly disappearing from both 'traditional' villages and Catholic ones. As Salemink (2012: 132) points out in detail, the rapid multi-dimensional changes that are taking place in Tây Nguyên, caused by the shift from swiddens to cash crops, the resettlement of villages, the migration of lowland Vietnamese to the Highlands and the mass conversion of members of the minorities to Christianity, are causing the traditional ritual context of gong music to disappear.

In Catholic villages such as my two field sites, Kon Ktu and Đăk Wăk, which were converted at the beginning of the twentieth century, villagers have abandoned their traditional agricultural deities and rituals step-by-step, generation by generation. Even in 'traditional' villages, like the Brâu village of Đăk Mế, for example, almost all agricultural rituals were abandoned after 1975, when the villagers moved to their current settlement, abandoned their customary practice of shifting cultivation and entered the state's fixed cultivation scheme (*định canh định cư*). A similar process of transformation has taken place in the Jrai village of Sar, Ia Chim commune. Thus, the minorities only perform their 'traditional agricultural rituals' at state-sponsored cultural events. Indeed, as Thao La, a Brâu artist in Đăk Mế village told me, 'Since then almost all of the agricultural rituals have gone. We only perform these when the government opens its pocket and invests money for us to hold certain rituals as cultural events in this village or as performances in Hanoi. That's it. If we were still doing shifting cultivation on our former hillside fields, there would still be seasonal agricultural rituals'.

The following vignette further illustrates the salience of seasonal agriculture in heritage practices. In March 2016, I followed artists from two villages in Kontum to join the March Festival (*Ngày hội tháng Ba Tây Nguyên*)[60] of the Central Highlands at the VNVECT. In the village, at the

[60] Actually, the indigenous people in the Central Highlands do not have the month of March, whether following the lunar or the solar calendar. Traditionally they did not count time in a year by 'months' in the modern sense but according to the agricultural rhythm. In this traditional rhythm, there was a particular time after the planting and before harvest time, a time for resting, visiting relatives in far-off villages, exchanging goods and performing rituals. In the Bahnar language, this time is called ning nơng. The ning nơng might coincide with the

center of the main stage, was a huge, beautifully decorated board explaining the meaning of the March Festival with a quote from an article by Nguyễn Thị Kim Vân (2007), a historian and folklore researcher, and Director of the Museum of Gia Lai province. According to the quote, March is when the rice harvest is complete, and the indigenous people are free to enjoy a festival. During this festival season, the minorities perform rituals to thank the deities, play their gongs, sing their songs and perform their culture. The contrast with the mood in the villages was great: in the villages, people were worried about their coffee crop. There had been no rain for a long time, and if the coffee plants were not watered enough they would die. When I asked a fifty-year-old artist from the Giẻ group whether the March festivals were still held in his village, he responded jovially: 'Now, March is the month to go performing (*đi biểu diễn*)'.

Thus, it seems that the beautiful image of the traditional Central Highlands as imbued with seasonal agricultural ritual is sponsored by the government to showcase how lively its heritage culture is, especially with a view to retaining UNESCO's recognition. To protect the Space of Gong Culture and promote this heritage in both the national and international spheres, the government has organized many gong performances and competitions. These performances present gong music almost exclusively in a ritual context, the rituals performed on stage mostly being agricultural rituals. This image of the culture of the minorities might be called a 'heritage culture', to differentiate it from other practices that actually happen in the daily lives of local people. The message of heritage policies is that 'heritage culture' needs to be taken care of by the state to appear in heritage practices. Indeed, in an article on how to 'give strength' (*tiếp sức*) to the 'Space of Gong Culture', Văn Hiển (2011) quotes the following statement from an interview with Phan Văn Hoàng, the Deputy Director of the Kontum Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism: 'The state needs to invest more funds in the restoration and preservation of the traditional culture of ethnic minority groups' (Văn Hiển 2011: 137).

While the government has been investing much effort into performing the 'Space of Gong Culture' through rituals which are otherwise rapidly disappearing, other rituals that remain deeply anchored in the daily lives of local people are somehow absent from heritage practices. The rituals that continue to be held among contemporary Jrai and Brâu are mainly related to

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solar month of March, but it generally lasted for more than one or two months. Since the minorities have stop practising shifting cultivation, they no longer have the ning nơng. However, in artistic work and heritage practices, the ning nơng (in the name of 'tháng Ba Tây Nguyên') has been recognized and is performed as a lively and beautiful image of the Highlanders' culture.

curing practices, such as sacrifices to treat illnesses. In these rituals, gong music has an important place. I will return to this absence of curing rituals below after visiting the third type of minorities' rituals in heritage practices, namely buffalo sacrifices.

Of all the rituals in the Highlanders' repertoire, lowlanders consider buffalo sacrifices as among the most typical activities and symbols of Central Highlands culture. One can easily find pictures of the buffalo sacrifices in photo-books, on festival panoramas, or in tourist handouts. Nguyễn Thị Kim Vân, a researcher in the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Gia Lai Province, provides an example in a passage that otherwise draws attention to the importance of festivals as representative of the Space of Gong Culture:

> One could say [that] traditional festivals in the Central Highlands, especially the festivals containing the buffalo sacrifice ritual, are the only context in which all of the salient elements of minorities' tangible and intangible culture are vividly expressed. In this context, we listen to ritual music from the most ancient sets of gongs; watch beautiful women dancing to the music in a circle; witness beautiful costumes, etc (Nguyễn Thị Kim Vân 2007: 338-339).

More interestingly, in practices and campaigns of heritagization, buffalo sacrifices were recorded and archived by the principal actors, in support of the 'Space of Gong Culture' being accepted into the Masterpiece ICH list, as a highly exclusive and authentic characteristic illustrating the sacred ritual meaning of the gong culture. Indeed, sacrificial rituals were included in the submission to UNESCO and performed when the Masterpiece title was awarded, as well as being represented in other heritage performances.

'When we were writing the application, I thought about putting in images of buffalo acrifices,' said Nguyễn Chí Bền, former Director of the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies. As mentioned in Chapter 4, it was his institution that had taken the responsibility for writing up the applications to UNESCO. Explaining how the application had taken shape, he noted:

> Some scholars and colleagues advised me to leave out these sacrificial rituals. They had their own right arguments. They were worried [that drawing attention to] the 'backward' (*lạc hậu*) and 'savage' (*dã man*) would make the application offensive (*phản cảm*), [and] thus have a negative effect on the values of [gong] culture, as well as on the strength of the application. I initially agreed with them at that moment. However, then I took some time to think about it. Ultimately, I decided to keep these images. You know why? It was

> because I guessed that Condominas[61] must be one of the committee members. As we all know, he has a deep understanding of the Highland minorities' culture. How can we show him an application explaining the salient values of gong culture without mentioning the buffalo sacrifice? He would, I thought, think that the application was not truthful or authentic (*trung thực*).

When the 'Space of Gong Culture' was ultimately proclaimed a masterpiece, a picture showing Georges Condominas answering questions in an interview was included in a publication by the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Art Studies (Tô Ngọc Thanh and Nguyễn Chí Bền 2006: 378). Even though the VICAS publication does not provide any further information about the content of the interview, the picture may show Nguyễn Chí Bền's 'good feelings' in thinking of Condominas while wondering whether or not he and VICAS should include the buffalo sacrifice in submitting the 'Space of Gong Culture' to UNESCO.

During the 2009 gong festival organized in Gia Lai province, a mock buffalo sacrifice ritual was performed as the central activity to illustrate what gong music sounds like in its ritual space. Besides, since winning UNESCO recognition, buffalo sacrifice rituals have been conducted in staged performances with increasing frequency. They seem particularly apt for conveying a powerful image of the Space of Gong Culture and have become the most famous of the rituals performed in the VNVECT. They are used to demonstrate how diversified and unique the Highlanders' culture is, and to attract the attention of Kinh tourists from the lowlands. Phan Thanh Bàng (2011: 142-144), the director of VNVECT, proudly described how the buffalo sacrifice ritual of the Brâu people from Kontum Province was performed 'authentically' in the village on the Cultural Day of Minorities in 2011. According to his description, the ritual was performed over a full four days, with all the authentic steps of a 'real' buffalo sacrifice: setting up the ritual pillar, crying for the buffalo, sacrificing it, etc. It attracted considerable attention from the thousands of visitors present, as well as the mass media.

Why, then, has the state continued to strengthen an imaginary of seasonal agricultural rituals, despite the fact that these have mostly disappeared? Why did the image of Tây Nguyên as a whole remain in the government's discourse, as well as in the imagination of many Viet in the lowlands, and perhaps also in the Highlanders' imagination? As outlined in

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[61] Georges Condominas (1921-2011) was one of the first French anthropologists (together with Jacques Dournes) to conduct fieldwork among local ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. His most famous work is *Nous avons mangé la forêt* ('We have eaten the forest') (1957), an ethnography of the Mnông Gar group in Sar Luk village, Đắk Lắk province (Condominas 1994).

Chapter 1, Erik Harms' insights (2011b) into Vietnamese ways of 'myth-making' and 'officializing ideologies' may make it easier to answer these questions.

Even though, in the current situation, the original ritual context for performances of Tây Nguyên gong music is rapidly disappearing, Vietnamese scholars and cultural cadres have made an effort to describe and essentialize gong culture as being closely associated with the seasonal agricultural and life cycle rituals of the local people. Besides, by quickly adopting the term 'cultural space', as I explained in Chapter 3, Vietnam successfully promoted its 'Space of Gong Culture' for inclusion into the UNESCO list of 'Masterpieces of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Consequently the image and heritage of the 'Space of Gong Culture' officially became representative of Vietnamese culture, a link with which Vietnam could strengthen its international relations, and a way of bolstering the country's socialist legitimacy (Salemink 2012: 274).

The absence of healing rituals (which, like agricultural and life cycle rituals, may include a buffalo sacrifice) from heritage descriptions reveals another aspect of Vietnam's culture and heritage policies and practices. In the state's eyes, since the introduction of modern medical treatments, the minorities' curing rituals have been considered 'backward' (*lạc hậu*) and 'wasteful' (*lãng phí*) practices. It is due to Vietnam's politics of 'selective preservation' (as described by Evans 1985 and Salemink 2000) that certain 'beautiful traditions' were chosen, distinguished from superstitious practices and 'singled out for preservation and presentation' (Salemink 2000: 141). This also applies to the assessment of popular rituals in Vietnam, some of which were dismissed as 'wasteful superstition', while others were classified as 'beautiful traditions.' As Endres argues:

> Whereas certain ritual practices have effectively been 'heritagised' by yielding to socialist conceptions of virtue and heroism, others remain unlikely to be fully incorporated into the treasury of cultural heritage that informs the larger narrative of Vietnamese national identity (Endres 2011a: 247).

Moreover, Salemink (2003: 278) points out that, in Vietnam's cultural policies, selective preservation goes 'hand in hand' with the folklorization of culture (which later becomes the heritagization of culture) as a way of the state emphasizing 'the expressive and aesthetic aspects of culture while denying the related cognitive and ethical aspects' (ibid.: 278). Salemink calls this a 'paradoxical situation' that the Highlanders find themselves in. However, this cultural policy challenges not only the Highlanders but also the state. Indeed, as Subotic and Zarakol (2012) point out, in international relations it is a challenge for the state to maintain a positive image when

facing international criticism. In the following parts of the chapter, I will therefore examine the case of buffalo sacrifice further. As mentioned previously, Nguyễn Chí Bền included the buffalo sacrifice in the UNESCO application to illustrate the sacred and authentic meaning of the minorities' gong culture. However, the re-evaluation of buffalo sacrifice rituals in heritage practices as emblematic of the sacred dimensions of Highland culture has not removed the earlier negative associations of these rituals. Criticisms that they are 'backward' (*lạc hậu*), 'savage' (*dã man*) and 'wasteful' (*lãng phí*) have recently re-emerged. Moreover, criticisms of Highlanders' buffalo sacrifices have been joined by criticisms of pig sacrifices in Vietnam's northern lowlands.

Sacrifice Rituals: Festivals Faced with Public Criticism

In 2015, a considerable controversy arose concerning the 'brutal', 'savage' and 'uncivilized' aspects of sacrificial rituals and festivals. It started when the Animals Asia Foundation, an international NGO that engages in animal protection, launched a campaign to ask the authorities in Bắc Ninh, a northern province, to ban the traditional pig-slaughtering ritual performed in the village of Ném Thượng. This was a reference to a particular ritual at the time of the Lunar New Year Festival in Ném Thượng in which two pigs are paraded around the village, then brought to the front yard of the village temple, where they are publicly slaughtered. Villagers and outside visitors dip their money in the sacrificed pigs' blood to wish for good luck and fortune in the new year. The Animals Asia Foundation strongly criticized this festival, stating that 'Cutting the animals while they are still alive and healthy is cruel,' and 'Witnessing and carrying out such activities will harden human emotions and feelings. Those [negative emotional feelings] will especially affect children, who are still in stages of psychological development' (Nguyễn Hằng 2015). In Vietnam, the e-newspaper vnexpress.vn ran an online survey (Quỳnh Trang and Hoàng Phương 2015) to assess people's attitudes to this discussion. The question was: 'What do you think about the pig-killing custom?' Respondents could choose from three answers:

1. Should be banned
2. Keep organizing it, but in a more private place
3. Keep the custom as it was originally

The results were 34,008 (79%) of voters choosing the first option, to stop the ritual altogether; 2,831 (7%) choosing the second; and 6,221 (14%) believing that the ritual should be retained in its original form. Many negative criticisms were posted in the survey's comment space, describing the custom as 'merciless' (*tàn nhẫn*), a 'backward custom' (*hủ tục*), and so

on. Facing criticism from international actors, Vietnam's Minister of Culture, Hoàng Tuấn Anh, raised his voice to protect the 'nation's front'. He stated in a newspaper interview:

> In a country with such rich traditions, we cannot have the image of a pig taken to the center of a village to have its head cut off and blood spilling all over the floor. It is not suitable for a peaceful and hospitable country like Vietnam (Sỹ Liêm 2015).

Despite the fact that animal cruelty had previously been criticized both internationally and nationally, the Ném Thượng villagers proceeded to hold their pig-killing ritual in 2015, claiming that they were protecting the ritual's sacred nature. However, in 2016, after much negative feedback and criticism, the villagers and Bắc Ninh Province leaders negotiated until they came to the decision to hold the ritual in a private place and not in public.

The Highlanders' buffalo sacrifice was immediately brought into the controversy as an example of another backward and violent practice that should be banned by the government and abandoned by the villagers. Newspapers and on online forums posted many critical questions regarding the buffalo sacrifice. They asked, for example, if it were not a savage practice (*hoang dã, độc ác*) to tie a poor buffalo to a ritual pillar and kill it, if it were not savage to carry out the killing publicly in front of women and children, and if it were not backward and wasteful to kill a buffalo when the Highlanders are still so poor (*nghèo*)? The criticisms usually concluded that this is not the kind of 'culture' (*văn hóa*) that we should maintain or promote as part of civilized life (*đời sống văn minh*).

Criticism was levelled not only at the sacrifices themselves, but also at the Heritage Law, which was seen as having a role in controlling these 'savage customs'. For instance, on the BBC website a Vietnamese lawyer criticized the sacrifices by citing the state's Heritage Law and stated further that sacrificial rituals, with their violence, are detrimental to the community and are therefore bad. Moreover, he drew attention to the fact that Article 25 of the Heritage Law opposed promoting and commercializing such bad customs in festivals (*lễ hội*) and stated that these backward customs should be abandoned.

However, there were not only criticisms. Many voices, mainly from scholars, advocated protecting these sacrificial rituals and suggested looking at things from the insiders' (i.e. the minorities') point of view. They argued that the buffalo sacrifices were being misunderstood because they were seen in the wrong context. They pointed out that traditionally there is no public buffalo sacrifice (*lễ hội đâm trâu*), but only private sacrificial rituals which are held within the village community to thank the deities and to feed the ancestors' spirits. Moreover, the killing should not be seen as a savage

activity, but rather understood within its ritual context. For instance, Professor Trần Lâm Biền, a folklore scholar, responded to a question about his opinion of the criticism with another question:

> I, myself, want to ask a question: how many people among those against the rituals have ever spent time and efforts seeking for the rituals' origin and meanings, or just take a leaf out of somebody's book and look things through vulgar eyes? (Vietnamnet 2014).

Other scholars differentiated between the 'cultures' and 'rituals' of animal sacrifice. For instance, Professor Ngô Đức Thịnh called upon people to be more aware of the fundamental difference between 'real' ritual in the everyday lives of the minorities and what he called 'fake' rituals performed for touristic purposes and shown on television. By 'real', Ngô Đức Thịnh was referring to the 'true' sacred meanings of ritual offerings in the original context of the minorities' lives. What Ngô Đức Thịnh seems to be arguing is that, from the perspective of cultural relativism, outsiders are in no position to judge the minorities' ritual offerings as 'savage' practices.

Nguyễn Quang Tuệ, a folklorist in Gia Lai Province, posted a status on his personal Facebook page citing a criticism of how uncivilized the sacrifice rituals were and calling for an open discussion. Many of his Jrai contacts had raised their voices to state how much they loved their culture and wanted to protect it. I met Nguyễn Quang Tuệ in Kontum Province more than once, in both March 2016 and January 2018. During these meetings, he eagerly shared stories regarding the buffalo sacrifice. Criticizing the outsiders' prejudice once again in 2018, Tuệ told me that he was preparing to conduct 'standard research' on buffalo rituals. Specifically, he planned to conduct a very detailed ethnography to provide answers to the question of why people do what they do in their rituals. He wanted to make outsiders understand the sacrificial rituals and to offer a typical example of a 'real' buffalo sacrifice to help outsiders distinguish it from the 'fake' customs they were criticizing. Tuệ emphasized to me that no one, not even French anthropologists like Condominas, had done this kind of research.

Together with the decision to force the Ném Thượng villagers to perform what came to be called a 'chopping ritual' in a private area, the authorities also made similar arrangements for a buffalo sacrifice festival to be put on for tourists. For instance, it was decided that from 2016, in the famous tourist festival of Đôn village in Đăk Lắk province, the killing of the buffalo during the ritual held for the village's elephants should take place privately.[62]

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[62] Đôn village of is a famous touristic destination in Đắk Lắk province. The ÊĐê and Mông people in this village are skillful at hunting and taming elephants. Every year, the villagers

In March 2016, during a cultural week to honor the tenth anniversary of the 'Space of Gong Culture', there was no buffalo sacrifice ritual. When I interviewed the event's organizers and asked them about this 'lack', Phan Văn Hoàng, Vice Director of Kontum's Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, reminded me about the state's new Circular No. 15/2015/TT-BVHTTDL (Bộ Văn hóa 2015), which that provides guidelines for eliminating the 'violent' (*bạo lực*) aspects from rituals performed during festivals.

I also interviewed Huynh, a famous tour guide, who runs a tourist company in Kontum Province. I asked him his opinion of the state's decision to stop performing rituals with violent characteristics at commercial festivals or those put on for touristic purposes. Taking the elephant festival of Đôn village as an example, Huynh explained to me that it was the government that had created and promoted the elephant festival. 'So', Huynh concluded, 'the government is prohibiting itself'.

Indeed, the state's decision did not stop the minorities performing buffalo sacrifices in their own areas. When I asked cultural cadres in Kontum Province whether the Kontum authorities had ever prohibited sacrificial rituals in indigenous villages, they gave me similar answers, such as this answer I received from Lân, a cadre in Ngọc Hồi District who works closely with the Brâu community: 'We only campaign against these rituals, we do not prohibit them.' 'Moreover', Lân added, 'it is their culture'. Indeed, as Huynh had observed, it seems that, given the recent decision to stop public buffalo sacrifice rituals at government-sponsored festivals, the government had followed international recommendations and reacted to public outrage by adapting its previous decision to the new circumstances. At the village level, local cadres now campaign against these rituals as part of their efforts to 'build a new countryside' (*xây dựng nông thôn mới*), but the rituals themselves are not strictly prohibited.

As the cadres described their work in the villages, it occurred to me that the local situation is similar to what Sprenger (2006) describes concerning Laos's approach to the ritual life of the Rmeet people from around 1975 to the end of the 1980s. Government agents were disheartened by this Highland group's healing rituals, which involved expensive animal sacrifices. They did not prohibit the rituals but chose a pragmatic way to convince local people that they should be more economical and practical. They should, that is, use medicines instead of killing animals. As Sprenger (2006: 57) describes it, the approach gives 'people a chance to decide for or against the sacrifices'. The community's ritual system changed as a matter of

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organize a buffalo sacrifice to pray for the good health of their elephants. In recent years, this ritual has become a cultural event that draws many tourists.

course as personal attitudes changed. In Vietnam's Central Highlands too, it seems that the government's criticisms, as well as attitudes within the community, focus on the wasteful aspect of such sacrifices and also question their efficacy, especially when the sacrifices are made for healing purposes. In the following section, I explore how villagers think about their sacrificial rituals, especially those performed on heritage stages, as well as others' sacrificial acts.

The Buffalo Sacrifice Ritual on the Ground

It was 6 a.m. on a hot day in April when I woke up. My host, A Láo, was preparing the coffee as usual. He smiled with his trademark twinkling eyes and said, 'Last night, I dreamt of a buffalo.' He paused for a minute and continued: 'They are always true, my dreams. A Phan's family is going to "eat" a buffalo today.' To 'eat' is the term the Jrai and other groups use to imply that a buffalo is going to be sacrificed as part of a ritual. I could not wait to run to A Phan's place because I knew that local people usually prepare the ritual very early in the morning.

When I arrived, a group of people, A Phan's relatives, had already gathered at A Phan's house. A Phan was sitting on a plastic mat in the living room while his relatives were busily preparing for the ritual. A forty-kilogram pig had been slaughtered to provide food for those who had come to visit, help with preparations for the ritual and play gongs overnight.

Some men were butchering the pig and preparing the ritual pillar, while the women had started preparing other foods. I entered the house and greeted A Phan. He was a thin man aged 54. He looked pretty tired. His right foot was wrapped up in white tape. He recognized me, as he had seen me several times attending funeral rituals and overnight gong performances. Thus, it did not take much time to introduce myself. When I asked about the reason for the performance of this ritual, A Phan told me that he had been suffering from leg pain for a long time. He had received treatment in the Kontum provincial hospital, but his condition had not improved and in fact had got worse. Two weeks ago, he even lost his big toe. He decided to go to the village sorcerer (*Bajau*) to ask why he had to suffer this pain. The sorcerer assumed that Phan owed his ancestor's ghost a buffalo and advised him to perform a sacrificial ritual to regain his health.

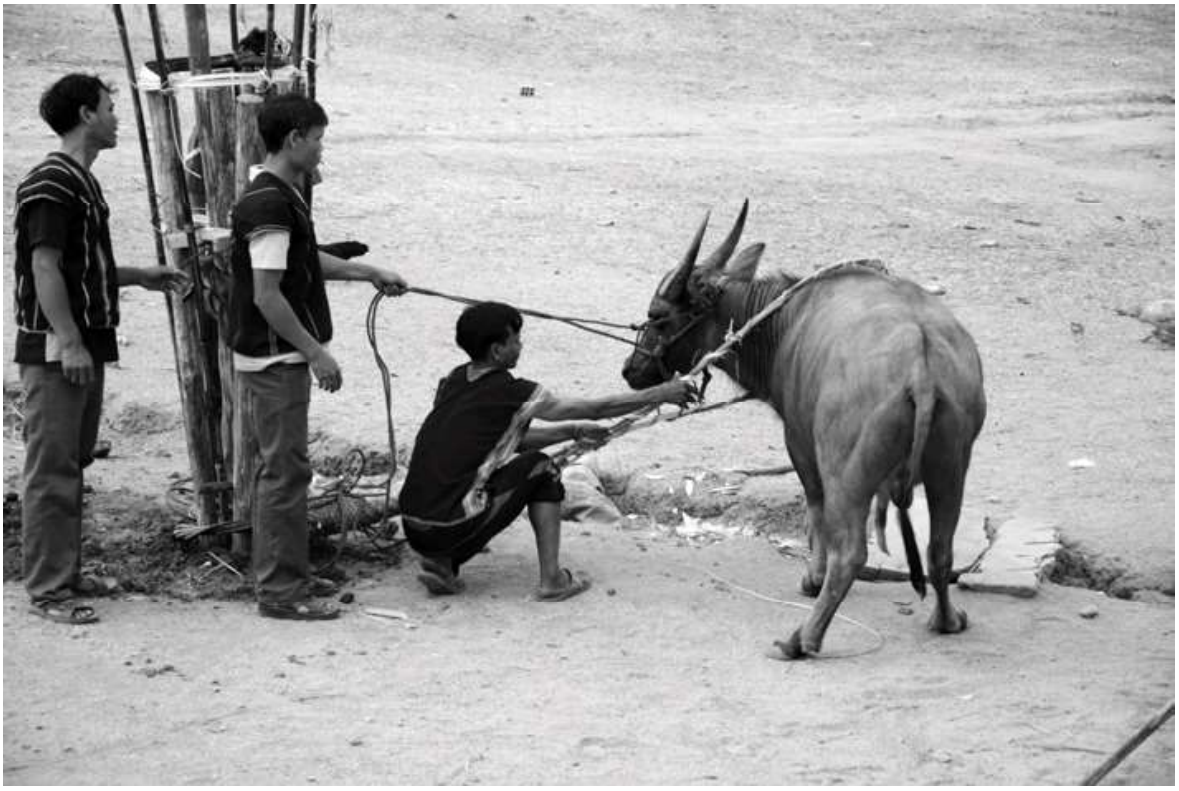

Plate 18. Tying the buffalo to the ritual post in Plei Sar village.

In the afternoon, the buffalo was tied to the ritual pillar (see Plate 18). Meanwhile, relatives and villagers were gradually arriving at the house. Women went to the backyard to prepare rice soup and meat for the long night ahead. Some men were sitting around in groups. Many of them would join in playing the gongs that night, when a youth group would play them marching round A Phan's house to expel bad luck and illness, and also walking around the buffalo and the ritual pillar. The ritual was divided into different parts, and after each part, relatives of the host came to offer the gong players rice soup, meat and wine.

At 5 am, the ritual songs were played on the gongs again. Gong players walked around the buffalo while playing once more before the time came to offer the buffalo. When the music ended, some of the stronger men went up to the ritual pillar. Using their skill and strength, in just a few minutes the buffalo's legs had been tightly bound. A young man then took a big log in his hands and repeatedly banged the buffalo's head vigorously. When the buffalo fell down, some young men came to tie the buffalo's four legs even tighter. A Lu, A Phan's nephew, finally approached the sacrificial animal with a sharp knife in his hand, cutting off the buffalo's head and placing it on the ritual pillar.

After this, the buffalo was rapidly sliced into pieces. Some other small steps in the ritual were performed inside the house to give strength to the spirits of A Phan's family members. Meanwhile, many of A Phan's family

and friends who had come to attend and give a hand in organizing the rite sat grouped around A Phan's house to enjoy the buffalo meat that was being shared among them.

Plate 19. The feast in Plei Sar village.

During the two-day feast (one day for the sacrifice and the other day for eating the sacrificed buffalo's head), I joined some of the groups and asked them about the ritual's meaning. At the start of these conversations, people would often ask me jokingly: 'Hey, is it strange to you?'; 'Hey, is this ritual backward?' and so on. However, as time passed and drinks were passed around, the conversations became more intimate, and more interesting information came out. One man whispered to me that he had visited A Phan in hospital and that A Phan had diabetes. I asked if this ritual could help such an illness, and the man, together with another, younger man, responded with a nuanced answer. Villagers these days, they said, usually go to hospital when they get ill. People only ask for this ritual if, after a long time, the hospital treatment does not cure the illness. Furthermore, this kind of buffalo ritual works surprisingly well in some cases, primarily in cases of critical illness.

This response is very similar to ones I received in the Brâu village, where performing a buffalo sacrifice to cure an illness is still very popular. Anyone walking around a Brâu village for the first time is likely to be impressed by the ritual pillars. Most of the families in Đăk Mế village have a ritual pillar in front of their houses, some new, while others are clearly older. The post is a sign that the family has carried out a buffalo sacrifice to

appease the ancestors' ghosts and to heal the sick or bring good fortune. Besides the buffalo sacrifice, the Brâu also hold smaller sacrifices to offer a chicken and a jar of wine, which are used to treat certain lighter illnesses.

I also collected accounts of sacrificial rituals in Đăk Mế. For example, I learned that two years previously Thao La's wife had fallen ill. Over a month's treatment in the hospital had not yielded any positive results. Thao La's wife was approaching a critical condition, being unable to eat almost anything. Thao La decided to ask a fortuneteller for advice. After a minor ritual involving a chicken egg to check what was happening to the woman, the fortuneteller said that her illness was due to Thao La's father's spirit. He wanted to 'eat' a buffalo, said the fortuneteller.

A buffalo sacrifice was then held four days later. Many of Thao La's relatives-in-law and friends from remoter places, such as Mô Rai commune (Sơn Tây district, Kontum province) or Đăk Xú (Ngọc Hồi district, Kontum province), came to attend. Holding the ritual cost Thao La approximately 25 million VND (€900), but it was effective. He commented:

> You know, in the ritual, just when we brought the buffalo home, even when we had not offered it yet, my wife could sit up and ask for rice soup. She is fine now since the ritual, as you can see, right?

I asked Thao La what he thought of the criticisms by the state and other outsiders that their rituals, especially buffalo sacrifices, are unscientific and wasteful. He replied:

> I know what outsiders say. It is a modern time now (*thời buổi hiện đại rồi*), and our rituals might disturb the government. However, first of all, one must understand that we never perform rituals randomly. There must be a reason to perform rituals, for instance, to heal sicknesses or to ask for good luck. The case of my wife is one example. I had taken her to the district and provincial hospitals, but she could not be healed. In this situation, a ritual must be performed even if it would cost 10-20 million VND (380-760€). It means that you have tried everything to help the sick person.

I asked him what would happen if the ritual did not cure the sick person. Thao La responded:

> It is also something normal, like being treated in hospital. One family may have paid 100-200 million VND (3.800 to €7.600) treating an ill family member in a good hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, but the patient may die ultimately. It's fate! Doing rituals is like processing treatments. When we have done everything, but the patient still dies in the end, at least we have tried all the options.

Regarding the buffalo sacrifice at A Phan's house in the Jrai village, not all villagers approved of the tradition. Late in the afternoon of the second day,

as people were still enjoying drinking and making jokes, A Liu, an old man aged 67, asked if I wanted to go to his house. I was a bit surprised because he had just arrived. But I agreed. He wanted to give me his opinion about the practice of buffalo sacrifice.

In the villagers' eyes, A Liu is a rich man, the owner of four buffaloes, seven cows and many goats. Some also consider him a stingy person because he hardly ever holds an animal sacrifice. Over our drinks at his house, A Liu told me that he is, of course, aware that people think he is stingy. Besides, he did not deny that he owes a debt to the ancestral ghosts (*nợ ma*, 'having debts with ghosts'). He told me about his terrible experience some ten years earlier. By tradition, a Jrai person should offer the ancestors the very first cow or buffalo he or she raises. Thus, in a Jrai person's life, the first cow or buffalo belongs to the ancestors' spirits. 'It was a late afternoon when I was sitting just here [in the front yard where we were sitting]', he said; 'I was thinking of what I should do with my first cow. I thought myself that I did not want to perform an offering ritual. Suddenly, a flash of lightning struck one of my big pigs, which was lying not so far from me at that moment. The pig was killed. You see, even when I had not yet said out loud what I was thinking, the ancestors already knew and sent a flash of lightning.'

Although he had had this threatening experience, A Liu decided not to offer his first cow. 'I just couldn't do it', he said. 'Offer your cow, then people come to your house with just a small plastic bag of wine to enjoy a feast of some days? I didn't want to do that. It's too wasteful'.

The morning after the feast ended, I talked to A Phan's neighbor, a 57-year-old Bahnar Catholic woman. With a gentle face, she looked younger than her age. With a smooth and clear voice, she also dismissed the custom, but from a different direction: 'This kind of ritual is very backward [*lạc hậu*]; this is not culture at all'. For her, 'culture' was organized, like the events organized by the Catholic Church in her native village during which the villagers performed gong music.

In this section examining the minorities' complex attitudes toward buffalo sacrifices, I have shown that in the 'traditional' villages of the Jrai and Brâu, although there are exceptions like the Jrai who avoids offering rituals to his ancestors' ghosts, healing rituals are still carried out and effectively cure 'hard to believe' cases. Interestingly, among the criticisms I found on the ground was the voice of the Catholic woman. The interesting point here is that the Catholic artists of both Kon Ktu and Đăk Wơk village have on some occasions joined the state's cultural events of performing sacred sacrificial rituals. Besides, in certain performances, the Catholics joined hands with the 'traditional' villagers. In the next section, I will examine the different experiences of 'traditional' villagers and Catholics

regarding the sacredness of buffalo sacrifices when they engage in performing this type of ritual.

'Traditional' and Catholic Artists' Attitudes towards the Sacredness of Buffalo Sacrifice Rituals in Heritage Performances

I found that, compared to 'traditional' indigenous people, members of the minorities who are Catholics seemed more comfortable in performing sacred sacrificial rituals at public heritage events. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 when conducting interviews with some of the gong players at this ritual, I learned that once, in April 2014, the artists of Chốt village were invited to perform a buffalo sacrifice ritual for a festival at the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism (Hanoi). A Thút's gong group also held an animal offering rite at this cultural event. The different reflections and experiences of 'traditional' Jrai and Catholic Bahnar towards the sacredness of sacrificial rituals while performing at these sorts of ceremony are interesting from a comparative point of view.

When I attended a buffalo sacrifice for an ill man in Plei Chốt village, one of the men playing gongs on the eve of the sacrifice told me that in 2007 they had performed such a ritual in the VNVECT to celebrate a good harvest. He told me how, at the beginning of the trip and during the performance, they were all worried. 'There must be a reason for one to hold an offering ritual: for instance, your family has gathered in a good harvest, or you are ill, and your ancestors' spirits are asking for a buffalo.' He continued to explain why the performers were worried: 'To perform the ritual in Hanoi and offer a buffalo, we were worried that we might show the spirits and ghosts that we really wanted to "eat" a buffalo. As a result, the ghosts would in reality ask for a buffalo when we returned home'. A Thút remembered the Jrai group's 2007 performance:

> I felt so sorry for the Jrai. They were worried about ghosts while performing. Many youngsters in my group came to help them slaughter the sacrificed buffalo. We are not afraid of the ghosts like them because it is our culture.

As usual, A Thút emphasized his pride in performing 'our culture'. Here, pride in culture was to be taken to be reason enough to be unafraid of ghosts. And, as usual, A Thút's explanation hid an important detail. The members of his group were not afraid of ghosts because they were Catholics: they could perform rituals as 'culture' without fear of the actual repercussions. Many times he affirmed to me that they still hold the rituals (e.g. sacrifices to expel bad luck and rituals for the community's water source) they perform at the heritage events.

However, A Thút never talked about how Catholicism influences his relationship with his culture or his heritage practices. He talked only of 'keeping culture', without explaining why he and the members of his group were comfortable performing the original forms of the buffalo sacrifice, while some traditional Jrai dared not do so. A Thút's group's trip to perform in the Vietnamese Ethnology Museum provides yet another example. In order to prepare for such performances, the VEM organizes a meeting between the artists, the managers and the MCs. In the meeting before his group's performance, A Thút had shown the managers and MCs a paper in which he described in great detail every step of the ritual, its meaning, the names of the gods to be addressed (of wind, rain, etc.) and the traditional prayers to be uttered. He also instructed the MCs in the right way of explaining Bahnar rituals to the audience during the performance. When the meeting ended and we were talking privately, A Thút again proudly showed me the paper he had prepared: 'I have to do [it] this way,' he said; 'I have to show people how carefully we keep our culture' (*mình giữ văn hóa đến cỡ đó*).

Another Catholic experience of the sacredness of offering rituals comes from Kon Ktu village. In 2013, a group of reporters from the television channel VTV5 came to Kon Ktu accompanied by some Japanese reporters. They asked the Kon Ktu villagers to perform a pig sacrifice so they could record it and edit it for a documentary film about Bahnar traditional culture. The Catholic villagers in Kon Ktu agreed to perform as requested. In the performance, an old female villager, Mẹ Xoi, acted as an ill woman, while Pah Náy played the role of the traditional shaman (*pơ jâu*). I have not seen the documentary, but over some drinks at Mẹ Xoi's home, at which Pah Náy was also present, people made jokes about this performance. Someone would mimic Mẹ Xoi performing the poor, ill woman, while others made fun of the *pơ jâu* reciting the prayers. After each act of mimicry, people burst out laughing. This happened several times, as Kon Ktu's villagers never got bored with these jokes. I asked them if they were afraid of the traditional ghosts or if they had to confess to their priest. They told me that it was a job for VTV5, and they therefore had no reason to be afraid or feel the need to confess. This shows that local artists, especially the Catholics among them, have developed a clear idea of the value of 'heritage culture' and of how they are supposed to perform and act in specific cases.

As I have shown in this chapter, despite the fact that agricultural rituals have almost disappeared from both 'traditional' and Catholic villages, on the heritage stage the image of a ritual space for gongs is still present and imbued with its traditional agricultural characteristics. This beautiful image of the Central Highlands is sponsored by the government to showcase its

lively heritage culture, to justify its title as a Masterpiece and to promote the tourist economy.

Rituals, and in particular sacrificial rituals, are usually described as specific to the culture of the minorities, especially the cultural heritage of the gong cultural area. In this chapter, I first showed how the traditional image of the Space of Gong Culture in the Central Highlands is drawn through heritage rituals and festival performances. I then reviewed recent debates over the allegedly 'primitive' and 'wild' aspects of public buffalo sacrifices that are listed by the government for tourism and political purposes. The chapter shows that current popular notions of modernity, especially with regard to civilized ways of living, pose great challenges to certain aspects of 'tradition,' especially in the case of these sacrificial rituals. However, this is also a moment when 'lovers' of minority culture (experts, cultural cadres, the minorities themselves) are drawing attention to what they feel is the truly original, 'pure' meaning of these sacrificial rituals. These efforts thus contribute to the further essentialization of the very traditional image of minority Highland cultures.

Chapter 7
On Being *Nghệ Nhân*: The Arts of Becoming Heritage Representatives

It was a fresh, sunny day in Kontum in the middle of March 2015, the most pleasant month in the Highlands in terms of weather. It was also my pre-field trip, and I was going with Hùng, the cultural cadre of the Ia Chim commune, to meet some *nghệ nhân* (folk artists) who might become my future informants. We briefly visited A Láo, who would become one of my key informants, and then went for a coffee before going off to other places. Just when the coffee had been served, Hùng received a call. It was A Láo. He had forgotten one important point and wanted to ask Hùng something. After replying and hanging up, Hùng mixed the coffee with lots of ice and condensed milk and told me what A Láo had wanted to ask. In accordance with the Vietnamese government's policy of honouring folk artists with the title of 'excellent artist' (*nghệ nhân ưu tú*), every commune had prepared a list of proposed artists, including a series of documents (*hồ sơ*) from each of them, and forwarded the package up the administrative hierarchy, from the commune level to the district and then to the provincial level. A Láo had prepared his documents and handed them over to Hùng, who had passed them on to the District Office of Culture and Information in Kontum City (*Phòng Văn hóa Thông tin thành phố Kontum*). From there, the artists' documents would be forwarded to the provincial Department of Heritage for inclusion in the list. That had been some months ago, and A Láo had called Hùng to ask about the result. Hùng had to disappoint A Láo, because he had not learned anything about the decision from the provincial Department of Heritage.

The term *nghệ nhân* is aptly explained by Meeker (2013: 70) 'as amateur artisans or folk performers who have reached a high level of expertise in a craft or folk performance genre and who are also actively

involved in passing on this skill to subsequent generations.'[63] Use of the term pre-dates Vietnam's engagement with UNESCO, having been mentioned in government documents since at least the post-revolutionary (1945) period (Meeker 2013: 70), and it seems that the Vietnamese are 'accustomed to calling these people *nghệ nhân*' (Tô Ngọc Thanh 2007: 18; cited by Meeker ibid.). Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 3, along with UNESCO's 'intangible turn', folk artists have been considered crucial cultural actors as 'cultural carriers' and have been honoured as 'living human treasures'.

Rapidly acknowledging and building on UNESCO's view of folk artists, the Vietnamese state has promoted policies to honour and 'protect' its 'living treasures', including by awarding them the title of 'excellent artists'. Nguyễn Kim Dung, the head of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Division of the Department of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, addressed government efforts in this respect at an international workshop on intangible heritage. According to Nguyễn Kim Dung (2010), honouring and awarding 'excellent artists' is one of the most important changes the Vietnamese government has introduced to improve gaps in the Law on Cultural Heritage of 2001. The changes entered into force on 1 January 2010. The Law on Cultural Heritage describes the *nghệ nhân* as 'living human treasures' because they are particular individuals who are custodians of the treasury of intangible heritage. Thus, as UNESCO and Vietnamese government definitions now assign the *nghệ nhân* a crucial role at the heart of intangible heritage, according to Meeker, the *nghệ nhân* are said to 'quite literally embody the intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam' (2013: 70).

For their crucial role in maintaining and representing the nation's cultural heritage, the *nghệ nhân* require appropriate care from the state. Under the 'excellent artists' policy, this means that artists in receipt of the title are provided with many benefits, including a payment of 10 million VND. Artists who are in difficult economic situations may even receive a monthly payment of 300,000 VND (about €11) for life.

As the Vietnamese government followed UNESCO's revised criteria for recognizing intangible heritage, the folk artists, especially those from the minorities, suddenly found themselves in the spotlight of the universal heritage stage. However, not all folk artists would receive the title of

[63] Meeker notes that the term can be translated into English as 'cultural expert'. In my research, I prefer to use the term 'folk artists' to differentiate them from other cultural experts within the 'heritage community', such as the state's cultural cadres, folklorists, anthropologists, researchers and museum experts. Each of these types of expert plays a specific role within the 'heritage community'.

'excellent artist' for both administrative reasons and issues to do with how works were selected. In March 2016, when the final decision was made, many important artists in Kontum City did not receive the title because their cultural cadres had not completed the requisite documentation in time. A Láo, the artist in Sar village, Ia Chim commune, who was waiting for news of the title when I met him, did not receive an award because the Department of Culture of Kontum City had not submitted his document to the provincial Department of Heritage in time.[64] Meanwhile, A Thút in Đăk Wơk village, who actively prepared the document for both himself and his father, did receive the title. However, other folk artists in A Thút's village and other villages did not have a chance even to apply for the title. The process was a selective one meant to recognize only the most elite artists. But how were the decisions actually made? The process went in a top-down direction, as cadres travelled around picking certain artists to put on the lists. However, it also worked in a bottom-up direction, as some artists actively engaged with the 'heritage community' to ensure their position as 'living treasures'.

It is this engagement I turn to in this chapter. I will show that many folk artists appear in heritage documents as 'holders of culture' or 'living treasures' who embody and present a certain tradition, and some have even gained the title of 'excellent artist'. However, behind the title there are complex maneuvers on the ground, as local artists engage with heritage practices. Furthermore, as carriers of culture, their skills in performing culture actually create lively versions of culture in interactions with audiences.

On Being *Nghệ Nhân:* Acknowledging 'Our Culture'

'Do you know why he became famous like that? What makes him that successful?' During my first weeks conducting fieldwork in A Thút's village, some informants asked me these questions concerning A Thút's success as a famous Bahnar artist when I approached them for interviews. Such questions came up even when I was asking other questions about the history of the village or local rituals, for example. Many of A Thút's fellow villagers assumed that the main reason I had chosen to study in their village was that A Thút and his famous gong group was there. This is partly true, as

[64] A cadre in the Department of Heritage of Kontum province told me that the problem was caused by an 'internal issue' (*vấn đề nội bộ*) among members of the Department of Culture and Information of Kontum City. She did not provide more concrete details on this issue, but when I visit Kontum in February 2018, I noticed the head of the Department of Culture and Information in Kontum City had been moved to another position and that the office was still vacant.

A Thút's presence was indeed among the most important reasons I had chosen their village.

However, what surprised me were the ways in which informants asked me and then answered questions about A Thút. Just a few seconds after posing such questions, giving me some time to reflect, they gave me answers. Often, the answers mentioned the role of A Bek, A Thút's father, in his son's success. Certainly, according to interpretations I received, A Thút had learnt a lot from A Bek because his father was the traditional chief of the village and knew a lot about Bahnar customs and traditional epics (*sử thi*). Besides this, the villagers added explanations from their own point of view. For instance, Tuân, an official in the Cultural Department of Hơ Moong Commune, added: 'Because he [A Thút] was for years the Vice-Chairman[65] in charge of cultural and social affairs (*Phó chủ tịch xã phụ trách Văn hóa Xã hội*) for Hơ Moong Commune'. As Tuân explained further, this exclusive position enabled A Thút to establish relations and keep in touch with 'outsiders' such as cultural cadres, reporters and cultural experts who came to study folklore in Đăk Wơk village. A Lanh, A Thút's second son, gave me his perspective on his father's efforts in respect of cultural works: 'He also worked very hard to protect culture... That was what I have learned from my father.' During the time I was conducting my fieldwork in 2016, A Lanh replaced his father as Vice Chairman in charge of social and cultural affairs in Hơ Moong Commune.[66]

These brief replies should not conceal the fact that my informants' attitudes were not at all simple. The feeling I had from conversations and the ways informants themselves offered their interpretations of A Thút's success as a folk artist addressed his advantages and efforts in performing cultural work. In addition, their responses might also be understood as efforts to explain why folk culture or, to be more specific, gongs and gong music could become so valuable. How could gong music have given A Thút such prestige? How could it have taken his group travelling practically around the world?

In UNESCO's and the state's heritage documents, folk artists are usually described as 'cultural carriers' who embody, and thus naturally represent, a certain traditional cultural identity. However, in examining the way in which one becomes an 'excellent folk artist', I argue that earning this title requires a lot of 'doing culture'. Indeed, my case study shows that the

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[65] In recent years, approaching retirement, A Thút has become chairman of the Hơ Moong commune Fatherland Front.

[66] In February 2018, when I made a visit to Hơ Moong commune, the above-mentioned Tuân replaced A Lanh as Vice Chairman of Hơ Moong Commune in charge of cultural and social affairs.

identity is not inherent in the artist. To become a representative of Bahnar culture, an 'excellent folk artist', A Thút had to undertake many efforts at 'doing culture': building up his group, learning how the 'heritage community' works, learning how to perform culture and distinguishing himself from other artists.

A Thút was excited to tell me his life story in order to explain his experience of being a folk artist. He was born in Đăk Wơk village in 1957, at a time when the Central Highlands were still part of South Vietnam. 'I grew up like other children in the village', began A Thút, as he explained how his success had been shaped:

> Luckily, I was a dutiful boy at that time, eager to learn. *The Bok Khop* (local priest) was interested in me and asked me to become one of his ritual assistants. Then he sent me to a Catholic church in Vũng Tàu Province to have a better school and Catholic education. The priest in that church was very much interested in the Central Highlands culture. He asked me to assist him to make a *Rơ Ngao* (English dictionary), which might then be useful for the church's missionaries.

In 1974, A Thút was accepted to study in the National Academy of Administration of Saigon.[67] However, just some months before he was due to graduate and return to Kontum Province to take a position in the local government office, on 30 April 1975, as mentioned in Chapter 3, South Vietnam was overrun by the northern socialists. As the Southern regime had collapsed, A Thút returned to Kontum with his family, 'empty-handed'. Life was difficult for years after the war; A Thút's parents decided to return to Đăk Wơk village, Hơ Moong commune, to plant rice and vegetables, and raise chickens and pigs.

Returning to the village at the age of 19-20, the smart youngster A Thút found other choices in life. 'I'd loved singing since I was a student. I played guitar and sang very well, so the villagers loved me a lot', A Thút said. With his artistic ability, he soon joined the 'mass culture movement'[68] in Hơ Moong commune. As an active member of the movement, he then became a cultural cadre and gradually became the commune's Vice Chairman in charge of cultural and social affairs. His life would continue

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[67] The National Academy of Administration (*Học viện quốc gia hành chính*) was one of the most important and prestigious universities in Saigon. It was created in 1952 to train high-ranking administrators in South Vietnam's government. A Thút studied in the *Tham sự* program, a special two-year program offered to students from minority groups. The graduates would then return to work in local government offices in their home provinces.

[68] See Chapter 4 for further explanations of the Mass Culture Movement.

like that of normal cadres until 2001: 'Suddenly, the chance came', as he put it, when he described to me the vital change to his becoming a folk artist.

In 2001, the Vietnamese government sponsored the Institute of Cultural Studies to conduct a vast project to collect, publish and translate into Vietnamese the traditional epics (*sử thi*) of all the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands. The budget for this project was eighteen billion VND (about €680,000). A Thút's father, A Bek, was one of the old men in Kontum who remembered and provided the collectors with many Bahnar epics. When the project ended, A Bek was one of two folk artists[69] in Kontum Province who were awarded a certificate of merit (*bằng khen*) by the Institute of Cultural Studies for their important contribution in preserving traditional Bahnar epics. Accordingly, A Bek became one of the most eminent folk artists in Kontum.

Having been collected, the traditional epics now needed to be translated into Vietnamese for publication. A Thút, who at that time was already the Vice Chairman of Hơ Moong Commune, proposed himself as someone who knew both Bahnar and Vietnamese well enough to translate the epics told by his father. A Thút had the double advantage of being the son of a *sử thi* folk expert and holding a position in the commune administration as Vice Chairman of Cultural and Social Affairs. He was accepted as a translator, and was surprised to find that he could earn a lot of money from cultural work (*công tác văn hóa*). 'I worked so hard during that time to translate *sử thi*. I worked many nights in the poor light of an oil lamp to keep up the pace', he said. Though A Thút did not tell me how much money he received for his work, it was enough for him to build a spacious house, the best in his village.

Before the project to collect the epics had ended, and thanks to its massive budget, Ngô Đức Thịnh, then Director of the Institute of Cultural Studies, decided to give meaningful presents to some of the main villages that had contributed to the success of the project. A Thút had a good relationship with the Institute of Culture Studies, and he was successful when he requested a fund to create and organize gong groups in his village.[70] 'At that moment, I could not help but think of No. 5 Resolution of 1995 on building a progressive culture imbued with national identity', he explained to me:

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[69] Together with the folk-artist A Lưu in Kon Klor II, Đăk RoWa commune, Kontum City.

[70] Even though I sometimes tried to ask how much this fund was, A Thút drew me to other stories. He did not give me any concrete figure. Nor did members of his groups know how much.

> The Resolution is so true. I was aware that, Oh, if we keep following modern music (guitar and pop music), how can we catch up and be equal with our smart Vietnamese brothers? We need to return to the traditional culture of our ancestors. That is definitely the right way.

Plate 20. A Thút enjoying jar-wine with foreign experts during his training class to improve folklorists' skills in collecting and translating the Highlanders' traditional epics.[71]

In 2006, he gathered together a group, which consisted mostly of his relatives: siblings, cousins, sons and nephews. A Thút invited his cousin A Nhur, one of the best gong players in the village, to train the young group in under a year. A Nhur reminisced about that time:

> We did not know clearly why or how we should really have a group. A Thút is always very clever. He knew that I like coffee. Every evening he brought me good coffee, offered us cigarettes and encouraged us to practice on the gongs in order to keep up our cultural tradition. I became a coffee addict from then on.[72]

After a year, A Thút's group was well trained. They were able to play well some of the main musical pieces that they still play in heritage performances.

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[71] The artist A Thút allowed me to take and use this picture in my dissertation.

[72] A Nhur also mentioned that his addiction to coffee now disturbs him because, with his very poor income, he does not have enough money to drink coffee every day.

A Thút had prepared his group just in time. Another big chance came in 2007, when his gong music and *xoang* dance group were invited to perform in Washington D.C. at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival entitled 'Mekong River: Connecting Cultures'. At this festival, besides gong music, people from A Thút's village also performed other traditional craft skills, such as weaving and making wooden boats.

Participation in the Smithsonian festival was hailed as among Vietnam's most significant heritage practices, and the trip A Thút's village made to the United States was listed as one of the ten most important cultural events of Kontum province in 2007 (Sở Văn hóa Kontum 2007: 36). Nguyễn Kim Dung (2014), the head of Vietnam's Intangible Cultural Heritage Division, praised this trip as an effective activity undertaken to preserve the 'Space of Gong Culture'. This heritage performance, according to Nguyễn Kim Dung (2014), has strengthened national pride, helped to raise awareness among the minorities and reinforced their commitment to preserving the nation's cultural heritage.

This first trip abroad also stimulated noteworthy changes in the Đăk Wớk artists' 'awareness' and 'commitment' to their cultural heritage, especially for A Thút. He told me how the trip to Washington was a huge step for his group, one that significantly changed its members' minds. He made me aware of how much it was an eye-opener for them: 'Imagine, it was our first time going out of our poor village. We travelled halfway around the earth, staying for one month in the United States, the country which just a few decades ago used to be our enemy, to perform our culture'. In fact, it was not A Thút's first time away from his village, as he had spent some years studying in Saigon before and had actively travelled to other villages as a trader after 1975, as described in previous chapters. Besides, the United States was not an 'enemy' as such for his side, at least before 1975. However, with his words A Thút skillfully conjured up the image of what a huge turning point it was for local artists from a 'poor' village to step on to the world heritage stage and for a nation to shake hands with its former enemy. Moreover, all this happened thanks to the practice of performing culture.

Many reflections came into A Thút's mind during this first performance abroad. He told me about a moment when he thought about his life and career of being a folk artist when he was in the United States:

> It was a very late night. Everyone else in the group was sleeping peacefully after a long day of performing. I somehow could not sleep. It might be because of the jet lag or because of my emotions at the moment. I did not know. I was craving for a cigarette, but smoking inside was not allowed. So I went down to the hotel lobby,

> where was a zone for smokers. I lit a cigarette and, while smoking, I looked up at the sky. Even though it was late at night, the sky still seemed bright. Maybe it was the reflection of the city lights. The sky is not as dark as in our village. I thought of our trip and my life. Some questions came back again and again into my mind. 'What has given us the chance to travel around, to contemplate the world, to observe the good and bad things of this big world? It must be our culture.'

A Thút then explained to me that the 'culture of gongs' had been promoted thanks to UNESCO's recognition of the 'Space of Gong Culture' as an intangible world heritage. 'It was a chance for ordinary farmers like us who live in the fields to go out and showcase ourselves, thanks to the gongs (*khoe mình nhờ nhạc cụ cồng chiêng*)', he said.

It is important to note that A Thút's village was relocated midway between the sites of the collection of epics in 2001 and the formation of his gong group in 2006. In 2003, villagers had to move out of the fertile valley of the Đăk Krông River, surrounded by woods, to its current location forty kilometers northwest of Kontum City because of the Plei Krong hydroelectric project. A Thút reminded me about the critical situation his village faced because of this move. Leaving their traditional wooden houses at the former site, they had gone to live in simple Kinh-style houses built by the project. The shape of a traditional Rơ Ngao village was immediately lost. It was A Thút's work with 'intangible heritage' that successfully placed his village on the heritage map of the Central Highlands and within the Space of Gond Culture.

In another conversation, while enthusiastically describing for me various trips to perform, A Thút interrupted his narrative to ask: 'If Bahnar traditional culture has gone and has no value, why was it able to bring us to travel so far like that?' A Thút's sense of wonder as he asked this question was not unlike that of other villagers when they asked me about A Thút's own success. It also seemed strange to him that gong music could be linked to such success, which he had not expected. The difference is that he did not look for other answers but simply affirmed the existence and value of Bahnar culture.

A Thút's awareness of the value of Bahnar culture also appears in the way he thought of the term *nghệ nhân*. In an interview for a local journal, he describes how elated the folk artists in a small village were when they were preparing for a big trip to the United States. A Thút said that 'the number of *nghệ nhân* here [in his village] is even more than the number of households in the village'. When I once asked A Thút about this published statement, he told me that it might be a fanciful way to put it, but that it is also true. He

explained to me further that what they had performed at the Smithsonian festival were the entirely normal and daily practices of farmers. However, since they had been invited to perform these activities as *nghệ nhân*, it meant that other villagers who practice and perform these activities could also be considered *nghệ nhân*.

In her study of *Quan họ* folk music, Meeker (2014) draws attention to the fact that the ordinary *quan họ* singers she met at a *quan họ* festival did not consider themselves *nghệ nhân* but reserved this 'official' term for singers with long experience of performing at cultural events. From this observation, Meeker asks, 'Why [is it that] the ordinary laborer who is also a singer [and] is trained by *nghệ nhân* is not a *nghệ nhân* him or herself?' (Meeker 2014: 70). In her explanation, it seems that 'official recognition' only gives the title of *nghệ nhân* to certain people. In my case study, for instance, the way in which A Thút told a reporter that the amount of *nghệ nhân* is even greater than that of the 'roof tops' (*nóc nhà*) in his village shows how he understood the term. That is, whoever has folk skills, whether to sing traditional songs, play gongs or make traditional wooden boats, could become a *nghệ nhân*. As they came to engage with certain heritage practices, members of A Thút's or other villages' groups were called *nghệ nhân* and received a certification of participation addressing them with this term. Whenever I entered the house of a *nghệ nhân* I would see a collection of the certificates they had received from previous cultural events they had attended. Thus, the local use and understanding of the term *nghệ nhân* among the minority artists in my study is more general than in Meeker's case. However, the selective recognition implied in Meeker's observation applies to those who stand out more than other *nghệ nhân,* for example, those who have a clear position as leader in their group or who have been awarded the title of 'excellent artist'. It is clear that it is not necessarily the person with the best knowledge of 'authentic' culture who assumes these salient roles, but the person who can communicate it best and explain the culture to outsiders. In addition, this representative should also be actively engaged in and act in heritage practices to be recognized.

The prestige which the US trip had given A Thút's group opened up other chances for them as well. Thus, they were invited to perform gong music not only at national cultural events, but also in France and Korea. A Thút became one of the most famous artists, a significant representative of Highland culture in Kontum and the Central Highlands. And being famous, he frequently appears in newspaper interviews talking on the topic of Bahnar culture. He has been invited to teach gong music in many places.

On Being 'Excellent': The Art of Becoming Representative

Even though A Thút has undeniably become one of the most famous artists in Kontum and a prestigious representative of Bahnar gong music, he is not even the best player within his own group. In terms of musical skills on the gongs, it is A Nhur who is the best in the group. He can play all the gongs and corrects the others' playing. As A Nhur and other members told me, A Thút only knows how to play gongs number 2 and 4, but a master – someone who can lead a group of gongs – must know how to play every bossed and flat gong in the set. 'It is crucial because, by knowing how to play every gong, you are then able to guide every member when playing together. Besides, while the group is playing, you know exactly who is playing wrongly [so that you can] fix him', A Nhur explained. A Nhur did not mince his words regarding the value of his skills and role: if he were to die, the gong music of Đăk Wơk village would die too because no one else could teach the others how to play the gongs. If that is indeed the case, and the other members in A Thút's gong group confirmed to me that it was, then why has A Nhur not become a representative artist and as famous as A Thút?

A Thút says that he has had a lot of luck. And he talks of the uncomfortable aspects of dealing with issues inside the group. He has had to keep strengthening his voice within the group and within his village. He is aware that, having long worked in the commune as a high-ranking cadre, he knows well how to build up his prestige through heritage activities and how to use heritage performances as a political tool. He has strategies to build up his prestige in the village to consolidate the gong and *xoang* performing groups and to persuade more people to join his gong group. He describes his way simply as: 'to show villagers how I can lead my team, to show how far we can go thanks to Bahnar tradition'.

For his part, A Nhur explained to me that, although he might know a lot, he does not know how to explain things to others and outside audiences, especially in Vietnamese. 'But', he said, 'A Thút knows very well. He has been working as a cadre since 1975. He has been in many places and met many people. He knows how to communicate, how to speak out. That stuff is difficult for me. My Vietnamese is not good enough.' Indeed, as I noticed, A Thút is not shy of journalists, scholars or different audiences, and he is quick to describe his own crucial role in hard yet creative attempts to 'rediscover' the values of Bahnar tradition and culture. As the Vice Chairman in charge of cultural and social affairs and the spokesman for the group, A Thút frequently talked with reporters. He has been described on media as a 'multi-talented folk-artist' who is keeping the spirit of Bahnar culture alive (Phạm Thọ 2011).

What neither A Thút nor A Nhur admit, however, in all of his 'meeting up' and 'speaking out', is that A Thút has not only distinguished himself as the highest representative of culture within the gong group, he has also defined the term *nghệ nhân* in a way that renders him an excellent example of one. Importantly, he differentiates between 'old-time' (*nghệ nhân ngày xưa*) and 'contemporary' (*nghệ nhân ngày nay*) artists. The 'old-time' folk artists, he explained to me, are like his father: 'They might know a lot about traditional culture, but they mainly keep [it] to themselves and hardly show their knowledge to others'. In contrast, he said, the 'contemporary' artists are like himself: they speak out and explain folk culture to outsiders. Using this distinction, A Thút renders his 'soft skills' in speaking, leadership and managing social relations as central to his role as a folk artist, rather than being merely subsidiary skills that give him an advantage over his more musical cousin.

A Thút's differentiation of folk artists into 'old' and 'new' is applicable to other villages as well. For instance, Thao La, the representative of Brâu folk artists, told me that in the early 1990s, when Đăk Mế village began to receive invitations to perform heritage, it was initially old men like his father who were invited. The older men who were invited are experts who perform Tha perfectly. 'Our skills in playing the *tha* are nothing compared to theirs', said Thao La. However, his father soon got bored with heritage performances, and in particular, he felt very uncomfortable following the guidance of the cultural cadres and sitting on the stage:

> An old man like him is really confused going to the stage. No matter how hard the cultural cadres would have taught him, he was very uncomfortable. The cadres complained that he was too slow in moving on and off the stage so as to fit with the programme, while he complained that he hated to be pressed to do this and that. My father avoided the performances, and I then replaced him. Performing on stage is not very hard for me. Just go out, sit down and play, which actually means perform, because the gong music has been pre-recorded, and then it is played over the loudspeaker while we are on stage. Easy![73]

As I mentioned above, A Thút received the title of 'excellent artist' in March 2016 due to the fact that he had prepared the document for both himself and his father as soon as he had learned of the government's policy. As a result, they had both received the title. A Nhur, conversely, was not given the title – indeed, how could he get it, since he knew nothing about the government's

[73] In the next chapter, I will explain how heritage performances on stage are prepared and carried out. In most cases in provincial heritage activities, the music is recorded beforehand so that it can be played over the loudspeakers during the festival.

announcement, he told me when I asked him about it. He also added that, even if he had known about the government policy to honor 'excellent artists', how could he prepare the application document?

When I asked A Thút about this, he told me that the title is for artists who have given courses in folk skills at government heritage events. Indeed, A Thút had taught on many courses training the skills of playing the gongs and singing *sử thi* in Kontum and other provinces. A Thút's explanation was thus partly correct.

The following example of two 'culture bearers' in Chốt village unpacks the problem of having to choose between artists in the same village when conferring the title of 'excellent artist' on just one of them. The first culture bearer, A Huynh, is a young man of only 37 years old, but already a famous face among hundreds of indigenous artists in Kontum. He is known for having created a lithophone (*đàn đá*) consisting of eight slabs of stone that imitate a set of gongs. Even though his lithophone has only recently been invented, his work is significant because the lithophone is thought to have been one of the origins of gongs in the Central Highland. The second important figure, A Ram, is a very old man aged 82. He is famous less for music and more for his ritual skills. Among other things, he is known for making secret medicines and certain curing rituals, which have made him a rich man in the village. He is controversial: there is a rumour that he owns *thư*, a very special poison that can kill people. He is also famous for his rich collection of gongs and jars. The Kontum Heritage Department and television station have made some documentaries in which they interview A Ram and film his collections to illustrate the richness of Kontum's minorities' cultural heritage.

A Ram is also a famous gong collector in Kontum; in the buffalo sacrifice I attended in his village, I saw him lend his gongs to the family who were conducting the ritual. Moreover, during the gong performances around the ritual pillar, I observed him teaching his skills to other gong players. I asked A Huynh why A Ram did not receive the title of 'excellent artist', and A Huynh replied that it was because A Ram never joined the government's heritage performances and therefore was never given a certification of participation. Thus, his 'heritage profile' is non-existent, and he will find it impossible to make an application for the title, as there are no heritage performances in his profile. The case of these two artists in Plei Chốt village therefore shows that, even though the official discourse of intangible heritage emphasizes the roles of traditional folk artists in transmitting cultural knowledge, A Ram in Plei Chốt village, like A Nhur in Đăk Wớk village, is not sufficiently involved in the 'heritage community'. This shows

how important the role of 'doing culture' is in gaining official recognition in the 'heritage community'.

However, A Thút's statement does not explain why he kept silent about A Nhur's significant role in training the gong group in Đăk Wơk. It also needs to be made clear that A Thút even included A Nhur in the list of his 'students' in the application document. The case of A Thút therefore shows that a local artist who engages with the state's heritage practices, who has familiarized himself well with the government heritage system and who knows how to speak the national and bureaucratic language is able to obtain many more advantages from the state's heritage policy.

In talking about the power relations that arise out of cultural events (Notting Hill Carnival in Parkin's case study), Parkin (1996) borrows Cohen's (1969) concept of power. According to Parkin, Cohen proposed 'a concept of power as being not only immanent and comprising economic and political directives, but also presentable to people in such a way that they would gladly submit themselves to social rules and authorities to the extent even of regarding them as desirable' (Parkin 1996: xv-xvi). This concept is relevant in exploring agency-structure relations in the way an individual can integrate him- or herself into the heritage management structure and gain advantages by participating actively in heritage practices and the heritage community. A Thút and his experience of engaging with heritage practices and the 'heritage community' is a good example of how this relationship between agency and structure may work.

Besides, the situation of the *nghệ nhân* can be paralleled with other aspects of social life in contemporary Vietnam. That is, successful 'contemporary' folk artists are similar to Vietnamese who find themselves on the physical boundaries between cities and rural areas. Erik Harms (2011a) shows that, when rural people are faced with urban expansion:

> Successful people are able to straddle both time orientations, whereas socially marginalized people remain symbolically and physically relegated to one time or the other. Ultimately, the power of spatiotemporal oscillation depends not so much on expressing a distinctly rural or urban time orientation but on the ability to move, according to contingent social circumstances, between states (Harms 2011a: 124).

Compared to other members of his group, A Thút resembles the more 'successful people' described by Harms, who can readily adapt to different circumstances and who, as in A Thút's case, move between different states. Indeed, in engaging with heritage practices, A Thút moved easily between his Catholic religious background in the village and his village's impoverished landscape since moving from the original Đắc Krông river

valley to his present village, and presenting an ideal image of Bahnar traditional culture in public performance. However, I would not call A Nhur 'marginalized' in Harms' sense, though he has certainly been less successful than A Thút.

Understanding outsiders' expectations, A Thút also knows very well how to showcase different cultural performances in different contexts. As a Catholic, he adjusts his performances so that they suit many religious, political, social and cultural circumstances. For instance, A Thút devised two different arrangements to perform a specific gong music work called 'National Festival' (*ngày hội non sông*). At a state event to which his group was invited to play, he wrote a speech about how authentic and traditional their gong music was and how the socialist revolution had brought a better life to local people. During the Christmas party held in the village church, however, he emphasized how backward local ways of life used to be before their conversion to Catholicism.

Harms borrows the concept of 'social oscillation' to analyze an example of one of his informants, a woman who lives on the city's edge and who commutes between the inside and the outside of the city by motorbike on a daily basis.

Similarly, I argue that in the Central Highlands a successful artist is one with a deep understanding of the 'heritage language' and 'heritage regime', one who is able to move easily between different circumstances. Indeed, A Thút and his group had to deal with the fact that, having moved to a new location, their village had lost most of its 'traditional cultural' items: its houses, traditional artefacts and landscape. Moreover, the group are Catholics, who, from the heritage point of view, have lost their very traditional way of life, that is, the way of life that is represented in the idea of the 'Space of Gong Culture'. However, thanks to his ability to seize his opportunities and his unique skills as a performer, he and his group have been able to adapt their performances to any cultural or political circumstances.

In the next chapter, I will open up the picture to examine artists in their interactions with other actors in the 'heritage community' (cultural cadres, cultural experts, event managers), as well as their creative interactions in their performances with audiences. Taking the Festival in the Vietnam Ethnology Museum as a case study, I will show how, at every step of preparation for the performance and showcasing culture, cultural identities are conceived, defined and created.

Chapter 8
Folk Artists, the 'Heritage Community' and Cultural Heritage Performances

Staged performances of Highland culture have become increasingly common. As explained in Chapter 4, cultural events that stage heritage performances are significant in promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage. As I described in the opening ethnographic vignette to the introductory chapter, in January 2016, experts from the Vietnam Ethnology Museum (VEM) in Hanoi made a business trip to Kontum Province to choose artists to perform Central Highlands culture, especially gong culture, during the Spring Festival to be held in the VEM. The Spring Festival is held every year to mark the beginning of the new lunar year and has become a trademark of the Museum. Each year the VEM invites certain ethnic groups to entertain and introduce people in the capital to Vietnam's highly diverse culture. In 2016 Kontum Province was chosen, in large part to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 'Space of Gong Culture' being named a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' and thus recognized by UNESCO.

During my research, I not only witnessed the performances in the VEM but also followed all the steps, from the preparations for the festival performance to the actual event, as Schechner (2013) has suggested. This approach also helps to explore both the 'backstage' and 'front stage' of the interactions between artists and cultural experts and of the cultural performances.

The Festival is an ideal case study demonstrating how folk artists interact with other actors in the 'heritage community' both off and on the heritage stage. I will show how each actor plays a specific role within the 'heritage community'. The folk artists are considered 'holders of culture' who embody cultural heritage. For their part, folklorists and anthropologists, based on their long-term study of local culture, are important voices in questioning and discussing the authenticity of certain heritage performances. They also play the roles of advisers and judges for cultural heritage

performances and competitions. Museum experts have the roles of both cultural experts, as many of them are folklorists, anthropologists and cultural researchers, and cultural events organizers. All of these actors simultaneously contribute their voices, opinions and work to the long process of preparing and performing cultural heritage. Their co-operation and disputes over performances, which I will describe and analyze in this chapter, unpack complex relationships within the 'heritage community', show off many versions of 'authenticity' and shape the specific image of the culture that is performed to the audiences.

The Heritage Community: Cooperation, Discussion and Disputes

Collecting Groups, Artists, and Cultural Works

Before going to the villages to 'examine' potential candidates, experts from the VEM held a meeting with the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Kontum to discuss the main content of the performance and the VEM's ideas for organizing the cultural event. In the first part of the meeting, Linh, a young employee of the Department of Tourism Management (Phòng Quản lý Du lịch) of the Kontum Sở Văn hóa, made a presentation introducing experts from the VEM to certain specific traditional foods of Kontum province, including grilled chicken, grilled pork, wild honey and wild ginseng from Ngọc Linh mountain. This was because the VEM also provides space to introduce and sell local products during the festival. This activity, as I will mention in the next section of this chapter, drew more attention from of the Kontum cultural cadres than their task of taking care of their artists in the festival.

In the main part of the meeting, three villages were listed as potential candidates: Đắk Wơk, a Rơ Ngao village (the home village of our excellent artist A Thút), Đắk Mế, a Brâu village (Thao La's village), and a Xê Đăng village in Tu Mơ Rông district.[74] The list was created based on the Kontum heritage cadres' suggestions of their famous representatives, which also seemingly matched the Museum group's knowledge and expectations. Two experts in the Museum group already knew Đắk Wơk and Đắk Mế and the artists there well. Dr Võ Quang Trọng, the current director of the VEM, conducted many fieldwork trips to Kontum to collect the traditional epics (*sử*

[74] During fieldwork I chose to focus on the villages of Đắk Wơk and Đắk Mế and to follow their preparations for the festival. This was because of the limited time I had to conduct multisited fieldwork and, more importantly, because of the sheer variety of potential case studies. First, Đắk Wơk had been my field site since beginning of the fieldwork. Secondly, like Đắk Wơk, the Xê Đăng village in Tu Mơ Rông district is also a Catholic village, while Đắk Mế has to a large extent remained 'traditional'.

thi) of the minorities when he took part in the huge project to collect *sử thi*, mentioned in Chapter 7, all over the Central Highlands. His trips were very successful, as he was able to collect many epics, especially from A Thút's father. He had also worked closely with A Thút during the process of translating the Bahnar Rơ Ngao epic, which had been told by A Thút's father, A Bek. Another important member of the museum group, the ethnographer Dr Vũ, in fact comes from Kontum, or to be more specific from the Kontum Sở văn hóa. After taking his first university degree, he worked at the Department of Culture in Kontum for some years before deciding to pursue a PhD in Anthropology in Hanoi. After finishing his PhD on marriage and family structure among the Brâu in Kontum, he went to work in the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in Hanoi. In the Museum group, Dr Vũ has acted as an adviser in choosing suitable groups to perform in Hanoi from among the villages and artists' groups in Kontum. During the trip, the two experts drew on their previous knowledge of the two listed villages to answer questions, provide criticism and offer suggestions. The experts' visit to the chosen villages then seemed less like an 'examining trip' to choose certain artists from among the potential candidates, that one during which experts like Dr Võ Quang Trọng and Dr Vũ comment on artists' works, especially regarding their authenticity. Moreover, during the visit, the festival's organizer, Mrs. Tú, and the accountant, Mrs Lan, commented on the financial aspect of organizing the event. I will describe their comments in the experts' discussions below.

As mentioned in the Introduction, when the expert group arrived, A Thút had still not managed to gather the whole gong group together, only seven players out of twelve being present. However, the trial performance took place anyway. Amidst a number of rhetorical flourishes, including complaining about the cadres' organization of the practice session, for which too little notice had been given, he did not neglect to mention his group's performances abroad. He did this to persuade the experts that the group would perform perfectly when they were complete and that Dr Trọng certainly knew this because the gong group from Đắk Wơk village had already performed in the VEM some years ago.

Plate 21. A Thút being interviewed by experts from the Vietnam Ethnology Museum.

During and after the trial performance, the experts questioned A Thút on some aspects of the sacred and traditional meanings of the rituals accompanying the gong music. For example, Dr Vũ stopped the group while they were performing a buffalo sacrifice ritual to ask why A Thút was dancing next to a drum and striking its wooden barrel with two bamboo sticks about a meter long. He wondered if this was an original part of the performance of the sacrifice or just a newly added element. A Thút responded that the dance beside the drum is crucial because it shows the deities that people are honoring them. Dr Vũ then asked about the different steps in the buffalo sacrifice ritual, apparently drawing on his previous knowledge about his type of ritual. Meanwhile, Mrs. Tú collected information from A Thút with which to write an introduction for the festival.

Plate 22. A Thút in discussion with experts from the Vietnam Ethnology Museum.

The experts mostly agreed with A Thút's responses regarding the meanings of the dancing and gestures A Thút performed, as well as his explanations of the rituals. However, there were two things the experts strongly criticized and asked A Thút to abandon if the group were to perform at the VEM. The first problem was pointed out by Mrs. Tú, the festival organizer. She noticed that images of flowers had been embroidered on the artists' costumes. Because of her familiarity with the Bahnar costumes in the Museum's collection, she considered that these were not authentic and said the flowers must be very new. The two experts agreed on this point, as did A Thút. Thus, the experts concluded that the artists must find a way to remove the flowers while performing in the museum. More importantly, all the experts criticized how A Thút's group ended its performance. At the end of any piece of gong music, A Thút's group typically walks in a line around the imagined stage and then stops in front of an imagined audience; still playing, they then bow. 'This is not the traditional way. It is a very "staged" (*sân khấu hóa*), "mass cultural" (*văn hóa quần chúng*) style', observed Mrs. Tú and Dr Vũ. This was an aspect of his group's performance of which A Thút had been very proud. He had told me that he had learned about taking a bow as a way to show appreciation to the audience, along with ways of accompanying the performance with an explanation of the ritual, from what he had witnessed in Vietnam and Malaysia. He had introduced the bowing and reading to

professionalize his group, and the group members, not even A Nhur, had not minded. However, the experts advised A Thút that their performance at the VEM must be in a completely different style. The crucial idea behind the organization of the performances in the Museum was to offer an urban audience the chance to experience the minorities' original culture (*văn hóa gốc*). Thus, they said, A Thút must seriously consider retaining the traditional ways of performing Bahnar culture and leave aside all 'external' elements. A Thút accepted these criticisms with a smile and even added humorously that it was very good to have experts who understood the minority cultures to give artists like himself meaningful advice about how to perform 'correctly' (*biểu diễn sao cho đúng*). Overall, the interactions seemed fine. The experts listened to A Thút's explanations of some of the sacred details of the sacrificial ritual, and A Thút acknowledged their criticisms regarding inauthentic elements in the costumes and the group's performance style. He openly defended only the 'sacred' details in his performance of the ritual, while humorously agreeing with the experts' criticisms. Finally, Mrs. Tú and Mrs. Lan agreed with A Thút that eighteen artists – twelve gong players and six dancers – would perform in Hanoi. The accountant also gave A Thút a generous 7.5 million Vietnamese dong to make a traditional ritual pillar for the performance of the buffalo sacrifice ritual in the VEM.

Plate 23. Thao La (in the white hat) and Thao Mưu playing the *tha* for the experts.

Leaving A Thút's village, the museum group headed to Đắk Mế village. When the group arrived, many of the Brâu artists had gathered outside the communal *Rong* house in the heart of the village. However, there were not yet enough people for the trial performance to begin. The village head told the experts to wait. Angrily, she called over the loudspeaker for the artists to act responsibly and gather in time, announcing that the experts from the Museum had already arrived. Lân, the district cultural cadre, ran into the village to find the artists, whom he knew very well, in their houses. While the village chief and Lân were busy summoning the artists, Dr Vũ, who also had many close acquaintances among them, greeted those who had come.

Plate 24. Brâu women playing a bamboo instrument for the experts.

After a while, most of the artists had gathered together. The examination proceeded like that held in A Thút's village, as the village's artists performed some of their best artistic works, while the experts made comments, and the organizer recorded the meanings of the performance in order to write an introduction to the festival. As explained in Chapter 5, the *tha* gongs, the most famous artefact of Brâu cultural heritage, were brought out first. Thao La, the head of the Brâu artists' group, played together with Thao Mưu. Thao La also explained the meanings of the *tha* gongs and rituals to Mrs. Tú. Unlike in A Thút's village, the experts did not question the authenticity of the performance, not even objecting to the flute and traditional singing repertoire of Thao Lư, a 37-year-old artist whose

performance followed that of the two *tha* players. However, a discussion started when a group of five women began to play a musical piece on a bamboo instrument. Acknowledging the interesting aspect of the music, Dr Vũ, based on his in-depth knowledge of Brâu culture, nevertheless criticized the fact that the dresses the women were wearing were not traditional Brâu female costumes, which he suggested they wear when performing in the Ethnology Museum. The women admitted that they had bought their dresses from Laotian peddlers, who frequently bring goods, including clothes, to Đắk Mế. The Brâu women also added that these were their daily dresses, so they did not think that this should be a problem. Mrs Thủy, Director of the Kontum Museum, made a supportive suggestion. She said that the Kontum Museum had collected some original Brâu female dresses and that she would be willing to lend them out to the women.

Dr Vũ raised another point regarding the authenticity of the *tha* performance. He had noticed that, when Thao La and Thao Mưu were playing the *tha*, the women joined the dance accompanying the loud yet lively sounds and rhythms of the *tha* gong music. Dr Vũ objected to the dancing, saying that, in his knowledge of Brâu culture, people never dance to *tha* gong music because the *tha* were only played at sacred rituals during which dancing was not allowed. However, Thao La and the women immediately responded that they do actually dance to *tha* gong music.

The discussion did not come to a clear conclusion, as the Brâu women did not seem interested in borrowing costumes from the museum, and the experts did not push the point further. Instead, Mrs Tú and Mrs Lan took a head-count of the artists to ensure that the event program could be balanced by the budget, as they had also done in A Thút's village.

The discussions with the artists commenting on their performances, and more specifically their authenticity, shows how typical backstage discussions about the program and the budget were in respect of how such cultural events are prepared and organized. Importantly, the budget played an integral role in shaping the performances, and the accountant had a significant part to play in the Museum group. There was, after all, only a limited amount of money for organizing the event, which is why the accountant was usually involved in the process of selecting particular participants and cultural performances.

The fieldwork I conducted with the experts from the Ethnology Museum revealed one of the typical ways in which a heritage-performing event is arranged. The process starts by collecting together the representatives. At this stage, experts offer criticism and advice on staging 'authentic' performances. On the one hand, the experts' attention to the visual aspects, such as the performers' traditional clothes, underline a point

made by Jackson and Kidd (2011) and Ritterband (2018). The latter argues that 'Clothes are relevant markers for ethnicity, identity and social participation and are essential for the identification with performed roles in front of tourists' (2018: 189). On the other hand, to a certain extent the experts' criticisms demonstrate the understandings and uses of 'authenticity' in actual intangible heritage practices and preservation. That is, even though UNESCO has excluded 'tangible' ways of understanding 'authenticity' from its range of permitted explanations of intangible heritage, instead emphasizing the 'process', on the ground there still seems to be an obsession with material authenticity, as this particular case shows.

These interactions between folk artists and experts partly illustrate how the 'heritage community' works. In the discussions about 'authentic' elements in performances, the artists acknowledge the experts' arguments, though they may defend themselves against certain criticisms by referring to their present-day ethnic identities. The relationship between the local artists and the state's heritage managers appeared to become even livelier and more controversial when the groups were preparing for their performances at the Ethnology Museum. The ways in which A Thút, Thao La and the Brâu women responded to the experts' criticisms in humorous and intimate ways are similar to Herzfeld's descriptions (2016) of how minorities deal with what he calls the 'encompassing society' in intimate relations of 'cultural engagement' by 'finding common ground with the encompassing society' (Herzfeld 2016: 7). Compared to the Brau artists, A Thút seemed more skillful in responding to the experts, and their discussions ended well. The artists, especially those in A Thút's group, responded to the criticisms in a way that satisfied the experts and gave them the impression that they had fulfilled their roles in the 'heritage community'. At the same time, the local artists avoided creating any tensions and did everything they could to keep up good relations with the experts. This 'engagement' between the local artists and the experts reminds me of the ways in which actors fulfill their 'roles' on the 'front stage' of a social interaction in order to put on a successful or positive performance of the sort that Goffman (1956) describes in his theory of performances.

Preparations: Controversies Backstage over Economic Benefits and Respect

The process of preparing for the performances was an ideal chance for me to observe the actual and at times lively interactions between different actors in the 'heritage community'. In the previous section, I described the confrontations between the cultural experts and folk artists over how to

perform Highland culture authentically. In responding to the experts in these discussions, the performance group leaders, A Thút and Thao La, played the role of representatives of their respective groups. In this section, I look more closely at the role of these representatives as middlemen who have to deal with both internal problems, including those with group members, and external challenges from local cultural cadres. The visit for 'examining' purposes had been completed, and the choice of Đăk Wơk and Đăk Mế villages for the Spring Festival in the Ethnology Museum had been confirmed. The local artists had no more than a month to prepare for the event. After saying goodbye to the Museum experts, I remained in Kontum and, within a few days, began to return to the chosen villages to observe how they were preparing for the performances. The disputes I then observed were mainly over economic issues.

Preparations were going smoothly in A Thút's village. He had managed to gather the members of his group together to practice on weekdays. He was able to use his power as the group's leader and as a cadre to exclude one member who did not display the required discipline. For example, after some practice sessions, I noticed that A Thoan, one of A Thút's cousins and a 'senior' member of the group, was behaving strangely. He sometimes attended the practices while tipsy, and then he did not hold his normal small flat gong but sat alone in a corner making occasional jokes. After a while, he stopped coming. When I asked about A Thoan, A Thút told me, 'I hate people who love drinking but do not keep the discipline of the group'. A Thút could afford to exclude even a 'senior' member, as others were eager to become more active, like 37-year-old A Hùng, the village head (*trưởng thôn*), and 39-year-old A Toan from the village police (*công an viên*). Both men were A Thút's nephews and had joined the group less than a year previously. Both hoped for a chance to travel abroad with the group, and at least A Hùng also had a genuine interest in gong music. Often at the practices, I saw him recording the pieces on his mobile phone. While replaying one of the recordings to me, he explained: 'It is so enjoyable to listen to gong music at night. I record to listen to gong music before going to sleep. It is also a way for me to learn the melody'. As new members, Hùng and Toan were just able to play the simplest instruments in the band, Hùng the drum, and Toan the largest bossed gong. These two instruments maintain the rhythm of the band, while the flat gongs work together, each playing just one note, to create the melody. Slowly but surely, they were gradually being integrated into the band under A Nhur's musical guidance, while A Thút provided encouragement, proudly mentioning them as examples of people he could rely on to preserve the traditional culture.

Meanwhile, in Đăk Mế village things seemed much more complicated. Thao La, as the leading artist, took the responsibility for organizing and preparing for the performance in Hanoi. However, he had not won quite so much prestige and power as A Thút. He complained that some members of his group did not want to perform in Hanoi. Among them was Thao Lư, a young flute-maker and player who had impressed Lân the cadre so much that the cadre had referred to him as my 'new discovery' (*phát hiện mới*) and had told me that he would train (*đào tạo*) Lư 'to be my artist' (*thành nghệ nhân của em).* Thao Lư had hidden himself for a week in his mountain field after the experts' visit, and Thao La found it difficult to summon him back to practice. But why did some people, like Lu, not want to go? As Thao La explained to me, and as I mentioned previously, some folk artists, like his own father, felt uncomfortable on stage. A second reason for some people's avoidance was financial. Thao La explained:

> Going to perform (*đi biểu diễn*) is no different from going to work (*đi lao động),* right? Going to perform, for instance, this trip to Hanoi. They let us stay in a certain hotel, which is much better and cleaner than our house in the village. That's very good. On the following day, we have a typical routine: eating, going to perform, taking a rest, performing the next work, etc. It is as hard as working (*lao động*). It is like working too in that we earn money. [Our] daily wages [are calculated] by the government's standard amount of 120,000 VND per day, no more. Compare that with the current daily wage for agricultural work, [which] is at least 300,000 VND. Especially in the coffee harvest, a worker can earn a million VND a day. That is the reason why many people, after some trips, and knowing about performing outside [the village], then avoid going. It's understandable.

This problem arises for other groups in Kontum too. Even A Thút told me that he often gets nervous when he receives invitations to perform during the coffee harvest. His fellow villagers too would definitely prefer to go to Đăk Hà District, the coffee-growing center in Kontum Province, to earn money than go performing. However, A Thút manages to persuade his group members to perform by referring to the prestige and power they would acquire, the lure of international performances and finally the importance of family relationships.

As for Thao La, I asked how he dealt with such situations. How could his group perform if its members avoided doing so? He too had to convince his group members. 'I had to talk to them politically (*nói chính trị với họ*)', Thao La explained:

> I asked the others, what will happen if we do not join performances? The government will definitely forget us. We are already the smallest group in this nation. If people forget about us, then we'll just disappear (*biến mất luôn*). So I told the members of my group to consider that responsibility.

This story demonstrates a complex aspect of heritage practices for local people. On the one hand, some of them, especially the group leaders, see heritage performances as a chance to gain further advantages for their group. On the other hand, many others compare the amount of money they could earn by staying at home with what they are offered to perform. In both cases, as Thao La stated, 'Going to perform (*đi biểu diễn*) is no different from going to work (*đi lao động*)'. The question is about the kinds of rewards people expect for their work. Thao La's words show him trying to convince his co-villagers that recognition by the state is as important as financial gain.

In short, not only do artists differ in their skills and attitudes towards heritage practices, they also consider the economic benefits of performance differently. Logan (2010), in his article on human rights issues in protecting gong culture in the Central Highlands, sees one major difficulty in combining the preservation of tradition with minorities' economic interests: if minority groups are 'forced' to maintain their traditional ways of life, he suggests, they might not be able to pursue their right to 'catch up' with modern lifestyles. In my case study, however, the economic conflict over heritage activities is different from what Logan is suggesting. That is, the minorities in Kontum do not object to doing heritage 'work' as such, they just expect reasonable payment for it.

Artists also expect other benefits for performing, which their leaders have to negotiate. One such example arose in the case of *tha* gongs. One of the reasons the experts wanted the Đăk Mế villagers to perform at the Spring Festival was because this group possessed a pair of *tha* gongs. However, as already mentioned *tha* gongs must be 'fed' before they can be played, and this could generate tension.

Some days after the experts' trip, cadre Lân started to complain to me about the rituals to 'invite *tha* to eat' and 'invite *tha* to speak'. They bored him, he said, and he thought they were absurd: 'Do you know why they keep asking to perform that ritual? Do you know what that ritual means?' Lân asked. And then he told me:

> It's just about drinking. They want a chicken and a jar of wine to enjoy drinking; thus, they ask for a ritual. They ask us [the Department of Culture] to pay for the ritual. It is challenging for me to put money for a chicken and a jar of wine in the budget report. Nothing is sacred in that ritual. I will stop it. I will do that seriously.

> They have to obey (*nghe theo*). In fact, when I ask them to do something, they always do it. You'll see.

What I did see, however, is that Lân did not talk directly to the Brâu villagers about this matter but instead pretended not to know that the ritual must be performed before the *tha* are taken out of the village.

The Brâu villagers seemed to understand the situation. Sometimes, Thao La complained to me that the 'current cultural cadre' (i.e. Lân) is not as good as the previous one, who was a folklore researcher with an excellent knowledge of Brâu customs who had known how to behave with the group when he invited local artists to perform outside the village:

> Every time he wanted to invite us to play the *tha* outside, he himself prepared things for the ritual in advance. We did not need to inform him, to ask him for anything; he knew because he understood Brâu culture. But Lân does not have that understanding.

I asked Thao La if he planned to tell Lân this directly. He answered:

> Why do we have to ask for a ritual? Begging for things to eat and drink? We will not do that. But the ritual must be done. No Brâu person dares to bring the *tha* out of the village without fulfilling the ritual. And if they (the Department of Culture) want the *tha*, they must do that task.

Thao Mưu, Thao La's partner in playing the *tha*, and Thao Lợi, the head of Đăk Mế village, confirmed to me the necessity of performing the ritual. In their view, as Thao La explained, this is a traditional requirement. In his explanation, Thao Mưu mentioned an instance demonstrating the fearful power of the god who dwells in the *tha* gongs. As he told the story to me, there used to be a pair of tha in Đắk Mế with the power to kill certain people they hated. In his conversation with me, Thao Lợi added yet more information. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Thao La had sold his pair of *tha* gongs some years previously. Thus, to play the *tha* outside the village, Thao La had to borrow others from another family in the village. Thus, for Thao La, the ritual had become even more urgent.

Silence was maintained between Thao La and Lân until one day when I returned to Thao La's house after a short trip across the border to Laos with Lân. When Lân and I entered the house I was staying in, we saw Thao La, who seemed to have had some wine and was a bit drunk. Lân said hello in a friendly way and asked how Thao La was doing and how they were preparing for the trip to Hanoi. Thao La made some jokes with Lân and sang a traditional Brâu song to show that he was ready for the trip. Then he suddenly addressed Lân and said, 'Hey, but to bring the *tha* out of the village, you must perform the ritual. Without the ritual, no one will dare to go – you'll see. Ask anyone in this village about this'. After some other

simple greetings, Lân, evidently feeling embarrassed, said goodbye. When Lân had gone, Thao La told me: 'You see, they have to hold the ritual'. Ultimately, some days before the trip, Tiền, a cadre from the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism of Kontum, did come to the village to hold the ritual to invite the *tha*. When we met again at the Vietnam Ethnology Museum, Thao La seemed pleased, as he told me about the ritual.

Once again, an important conflict was almost never voiced, and then it was resolved almost silently. Although both Thao La and Lân knew that the cadre wanted to avoid sponsoring the ritual, neither spoke of it directly with the other for quite some time. Thao La had been lucky to gain the upper hand: because he was a bit drunk during Lân's visit to his house, he could make a condition and obtain an official response. This confrontation nicely illustrates Herzfeld's idea of 'cultural intimacy', as both actors made 'uses of cultural form as a cover for social action' (Herzfeld 2016: 6). The state official displayed 'ignorance' of local custom, and the Brâu artist made his demands as a 'drunk'. Both men behaved true to the other's stereotype, even though Thao La's stories about the previous cadre make clear that other types of relationship could have been possible.

What I want to show here is that the relationship between the Vietnamese state and local communities in respect of heritage ideologies and practices is not simply about 'cultural appropriation' (Salemink 2013). These are not simply poles of opposition between the state and local communities. In fact, as in practice, the 'heritage community' conceals complex negotiations taking place between artists and experts.

Among the folk artists, the artist group's leaders play roles as representatives in dealing with both inside and outside challenges. Meanwhile, they enter into forms of 'cultural engagement' with cultural experts and cadres in heritage practices when they negotiate what performances of cultural heritage should be like. This 'cultural engagement' between actors in the 'heritage community' over how to shape images of cultural heritage appeared even livelier during the actual performance, as I will describe and analyze in following part.

Performance: 'Cultures' as Explained, Performed, Experienced and Interacted

Ultimately, the performance must take place. Leaving behind the complex discussions backstage, once on the heritage performance stage, the folk artists create emotional moments in which to perform their culture, interact with their audiences and express their identities.

The Bahnar and Brâu folk artists from Kontum arrived in Hanoi at 4 a.m. on 12 February 2016, the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, prepared to perform for the next four days. Forty-two artists, together with five cultural cadres, arrived in two large buses.

The trip had started at 5 a.m. the previous day. The cultural cadres of Kontum Province were the first to embark on the rented buses in Kontum City. Their next stop was Đăk Wơk village, where they picked up A Thút and his group. The journey then went on to Đăk Mế village to pick up Thao La and the *tha* gong artists. The trip took nearly 23 hours along some 1,054 kilometers of national highway. The Ethnology Museum had arranged for the artists to stay in a hotel 2.5 kilometers from the museum, and this is where the buses now stopped. I met the artists at 8 a.m. in the hotel. They looked tired after the long trip, but A Thút told me, 'We've got used to this'. Thao La had taken a bath upon arrival and also looked relaxed when I met him in his room. He lay on the white mattress and jokingly observed, 'Staying in a hotel for some days, again'.

Preparing for the trip had been a long process for the artists, especially for the group leaders, and there were still important things to do before they could walk on to the stage officially. In the late morning of the same day, the artists had a meeting with the Museum's experts. In the afternoon, they met the MCs (Masters of Ceremonies) who would accompany them during the four days of performances. The MCs, as I will show, play an important role in helping to connect the minority folk artists with their urban audiences.

Mrs Tú chaired the meeting with the museum experts. She explained the routine for the four days of performing in the museum carefully and in detail. One of the most important points that Mrs Tú strongly emphasized in the meeting, and which had come up during the 'examining' trip, and had been clearly noted in A Thút' notebook, was that 'performing in the VEM is different from performing in other places and on other stages'. By 'other places', Mrs. Tú meant both provincial-level heritage and 'mass cultural' performances during which the artists typically perform on a real, high stage. She also drew a distinction between the style of performances in the VEM and the stage-to-festival style of the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism (see Chapter 3). The stages in these venues, she said, were good for video recording, but the museum aimed to give 'cultural subjects' (*chủ thể văn hóa*) the chance to talk to their audiences and explain their culture to them. The audience was supposed to be as close to the artists as possible and should be given the chance to touch the gongs, talk with the artists and really experience Highland culture. During the performances, the members of the museum and the MCs would actively become the bridge connecting the artists with their audiences. 'It is a really nice arrangement,'

said A Thút; 'it is the way to do culture' (*làm văn hóa phải làm như thế*). This, of course, was a general statement that he had made many times when explaining to me how to evaluate suitable ways of practicing and preserving their cultural heritage.

The artists met the MCs in the hotel at 2 p.m. the same day. The MCs are university students in Hanoi. In recent years, along with the boom in Vietnam's media industry, MC-ing has become a hot trend among young people, and the VEM could draw its MCs for the Spring Festival, as well as for other events, from among the many university-based MC clubs. Students were drawn to participate because it was an ideal chance to practice what they had learned, plus, as some of them explained to me, this was a prestigious cultural festival.[75] The successful candidates had had to take part in a special training session in order to be able to work at the festival. Because the MCs were to become a 'cultural bridge', it was crucial for them to meet the artists in advance. During the meeting, the MCs were to learn about minority culture from the artists themselves and begin to prepare the words they would use to connect the audience with the performers' experiences.

As the MCs arrived, they were separated into small groups of four. Each group of MCs was paired with a group of artists. Mrs Tú was there too. She introduced the MCs to the artists, reminded the former of their tasks and what they should ask the artists, and then left.

I stayed first with A Thút to observe the interaction between him and the MCs. The MCs started by asking A Thút if they could present what they had prepared to introduce his group. A Thút agreed. A couple of MCs started by introducing the ritual of kicking bad luck out of the village.

After their short introduction, A Thút asked where they had found their information. 'We found it on the internet', one quickly responded. Smiling generously, A Thút told the MCs that he would provide them with more authentic information about Bahnar rituals. Carefully, he took a roll of documents out of his bag where he had written down details about all the rituals and performances that his group was going to perform in the festival.

The four MCs looked at A Thút with surprise in their eyes. Then they thanked him for providing them with such an excellent way to prepare for their introduction. Leaving the MCs to read his notes, A Thút went out for a smoke. I joined him. In another room, we saw Thao La responding to his group of MCs about Brâu traditional culture and how they would perform within the festival program. Enjoying his cigarette, A Thút told me that he

[75] As the Vietnam Ethnology Museum's festivals had become more and more famous among other cultural festivals in Hanoi, employing the MCs was a competitive move.

felt sorry for Thao La and the MCs who were questioning him because 'He does not know, like me, how to explain the culture.

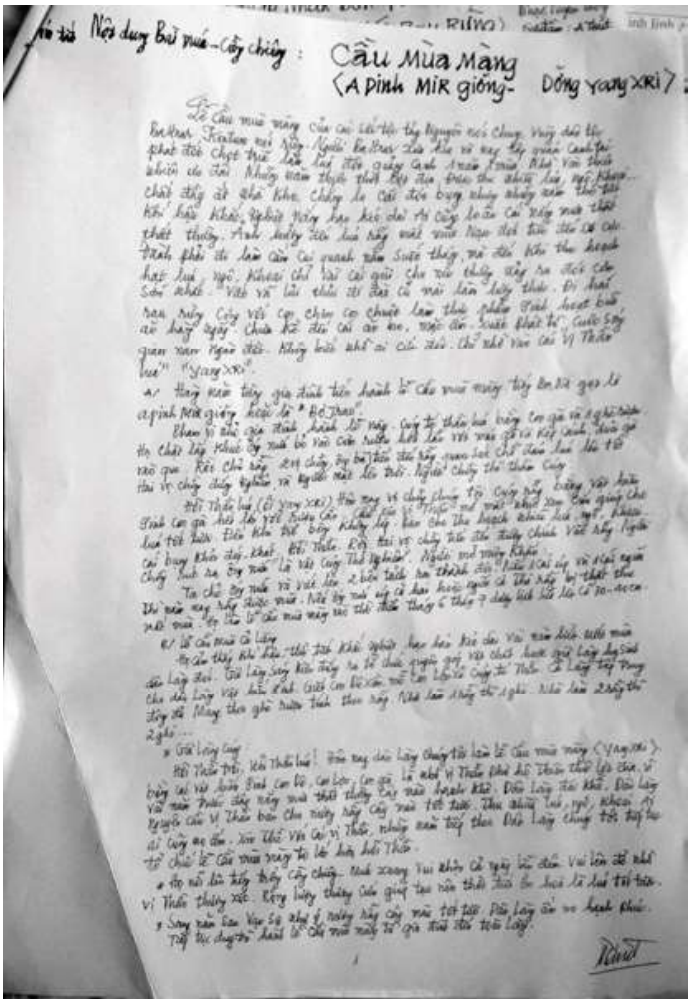
Nội dung bài nói - Cây chày : Cầu Mùa Màng
(A pinh MIR giống- Dông Yang XRI)

Plate 25. One of A Thút's descriptions of rituals.

It is a pity for the MCs as well, because, from the information which Thao La offers, it will be difficult for them to prepare the introductions'. I met Thao La later and asked him how he felt responding to the MCs' question. 'Just normal!' (*Bình thường thôi!),* he replied, and said that he just told the MCs what he knew about Brâu culture. He was relaxed when working with the MCs and did not feel the need to prepare carefully in advance – he just calmly stepped up on the stage to replace his father. From Goffman's (1956) perspective, compared to Thao La, A Thút invested much more effort into 'backstage' preparations to ensure a positive performance on the 'front stage'. And at that moment, it was a real stage for the performance of cultural heritage.

The following day, the artists went early by taxi to the Ethnology Museum. Each group was guided to their 'stage'. The Brâu artists were to perform on the main stage in front of the Museum's main gate. A Thút's

group was put in a livelier setting: the traditional Bahnar communal *rong* house in the Museum's large and famous garden, where the traditional houses of many ethnic minorities have been built. During the Spring Festival, each house becomes the performance space for 'its' ethnic group. Then, as the audiences make a tour around the garden, they experience cultures from all parts of the nation.

The Đắk Mế villagers performed first, playing *tha* gongs as usual. While Thao La and Thao Mưu performed on stage, one of the MCs explained the particular characteristics and value of the *tha*. The strong and monotonous sounds, repeated over and over again without any melody, seemed strange to the audience. The audience sat around the Brâu group on plastic chairs during the artists' performance. Huyền Anh had come with her two sons. When I ask her about her feelings towards the *tha* gong musical performance, she told me that she was a bit confused at the beginning. Due to her experience of watching gong performances on TV, she thought that the gong music at the festival would have more melody than the *tha* gong music was displaying. However, she then thought that it might be a unique characteristic of the *tha* gongs. Moreover, due to the MCs' explanation that the *tha* gongs are nearly a hundred years old and came originally from Laos, she explained to her sons that they were very ancient and valuable objects and that they should take the opportunity to observe them. The scene became livelier during the part of the performance that showcased the flute, when the MCs invited the audience to try the Brâu traditional bamboo instrument or join in the dance with the Brâu women that was part of the *tha* performance.

Compared to A Thút, who often seemed in a good performing mood, Thao La looked more relaxed. When it was his turn to perform, he simply went to the stage, sat down and played the *tha*. And when the MCs asked him to explain how to play *tha* gongs, he replied in a monotonous voice, while A Thút, for his part, spoke out like an actor on stage.

While the Brâu performed musical works, the performance of A Thút's group seemed to be livelier because they also presented rituals and festivals. The Bahnar artists occupied an ideal space: the substantial traditional Rong communal house. A Thút, with his organizing skills, used the space well, performing traditional songs to the accompaniment of the gong music, he and his group performed in the front yard.

Plate 26. *Tha* gong performance of the Brâu group.

As mentioned earlier, the core method whereby the VEM aims to organize cultural activities at the festival is to offer audiences the opportunity to experience the local artists and their traditional cultural work as closely as possible. This approach is similar to the ways in which cultural activities are organized in the Smithsonian Institution's festival. A Thút explained this similarity to me based on his own experience. As he put it, in both festivals the audience can 'touch' his gongs and try to play them under the guidance of minority artists. Ritterband (2018) offers an example of similar ways of organizing tourism in the Living Museums in Namibia, which he describes as offering audiences and tourists a chance to participate actively in and thus experience local culture. In the case of the Vietnam Ethnology Museum, the two most important techniques used to facilitate audience - artist interactions are to open up an intimate 'stage' for performances and to use MCs.

In the following, I will describe the two most typical ways in which these two techniques worked to connect artists with their audiences during the festival. The first case describes how the MCs worked under the Museum experts' advice to enable close interactions between audiences and artists. In the second case, I describe how A Thút and his group drew the audience into a staged but emotional and engaging festival environment. Both cases, in their different ways, illustrate how minority cultures are presented and experienced on a particular stage for cultural heritage such as the Vietnam Ethnology Museum.

To perform their role of bringing the audiences together with the artists, the MCs not only made speeches to introduce the artists' performances. The Museum experts had also trained them to organize interactive games (*trò chơi giao lưu*) for audiences to experience the performers' culture. The games were organized after two or three rounds of performing, so that most of the artists could take a rest while others acted as teachers and commentators for the audiences to join in the games. In each game, five volunteers from the audience were chosen to join in a competition. The rule of the game was simple. Each participant was given a gong. A Thút taught them how to use the gong stick to beat the surface of the gong and make the 'right' sounds. After that, he played some musical notes on his gong following a simple melody and asked the participants to repeat the melody he had just played on their gongs. As the commentator, A Thút would choose as the winner the person who, in his judgment, played his original melody as closely as possible. The award for each winner was a *Đông Hồ* traditional folk woodcut painting. The idea behind the game was to offer the audience a chance to really experience cultural heritage, as they could touch the gongs and learn from the 'cultural carriers' or 'living treasures', that is, the artists, how to produce the 'right' sound and a simple melody out of the gongs. As I observed, the audiences were often very excited to join in the games. Parents encouraged their children, students volunteered enthusiastically, and sometimes the elderly in the audience joined in as well.

On the first day of the performance, at about 1 pm., I noticed Mrs Tú among the audience. She had initially stayed in the middle of the crowd to observe how the MCs were making the introductions and running the games. The games had just started and the MCs were about to explain the rules to the chosen volunteers from the audience when Mrs Tú went to the 'stage' and interrupted the MCs' work. She criticized them for not running the game effectively as they had been trained to do. This was because, according to Mrs Tú, the MCs drew those who had joined the game too close to the space under the stilted Rong house, where they remained partly out of sight. Besides, she complained that the MCs were not speaking loudly and clearly enough to draw the audience's attention to the performance area. She then ran part of the game herself as an example to the MCs, bringing those who had joined the game to the center of the performance area. Mrs Tú then explained the rules of the game and invited a member of A Thút's group to explain how to play the gong sufficiently loudly and clearly, as they were not only speaking to the competitors but also to the crowd of people surrounding them. Mrs Tú then stayed for a while observing the MCs' work to make sure they did as she had instructed. A Thút was beside me when Mrs

Tú re-trained the MCs and gave an example, repeatedly nodding with satisfaction. He seemed to have learned a new and effective way of 'doing' culture that he could apply to his group's work. Mrs Tú's expertise certainly had a positive effect on the game, and thus on the communication between the artists and the audience. Their verbal exchanges and the sounds of the gongs were not lost in the midst of the mixture of noises around them, and the emotional and excited first encounters between those who joined in the game and the minority artists did not remain 'hidden' in the shadow of the *rong* house. Everyone was brought to the center of the performance area.

Besides the expert arrangement of the museum, the open stage and the artists' excellent performance skills also enabled special interactions between themselves and the audience. To perform the sacred rituals, A Thút and his group used the Rong house as a center. They performed the march of the ritual around the communal house so that the audience could join the line and somehow experience the ritual feeling. As they marched around the Rong house to kick bad luck out of the village, A Thút was in the lead. He wore a devil's mask and carried a wooden sword. Periodically he would suddenly stop and howl out as a sign that he was kicking out the bad luck. The audience, whether or not in the marching line, responded with fascination.

There were many lively moments during the performances by A Thút's group. Once, a man from the audience even asked to join in playing the drum. This moment recalls what Cantwell (1993) terms the 'magical moments' that occur during public folklore performances in the interaction between audiences and artists. These are moments in which, according to Cantwell (1993: 226), audiences are deeply involved in the performance and thus experience the culture directly.

Plate 27. Performance by A Thút' group.

The close interaction between artists and audiences helped to create some of these 'magical moments'. The arrangement of the 'stages' worked nicely to eliminate the 'hierarchy of vertical arrangement' that distances audiences from the performers on the stage (Cantwell 1993: 190). By means of this term, Catwell proposes to describe how different distances between artists and audiences can affect the cultural interaction between the two parties. According to Cantwell (ibid.: 190), the higher the artists are up on the stage, the more passive are their audiences. The Vietnam Ethnology Museum avoided the 'mass culture' style and the way the Vietnam National Village for Ethnic Culture and Tourism places the artists on a stage that is distant from the audience. As a result, as the performances by A Thút's group showed, this arrangement successfully enabled 'magical moments' to occur, so that concerns about 'authenticity', which had been so prominent during the cultural experts' 'examining trip', gave way to direct experience. Indeed, during the Brâu and Bahnar performances, no one in the audience asked questions regarding the flowers on the Bahnar group's costumes (in fact, A Thút's group did not leave out the embroidered flowers). No one criticized either A Thút's group's practice of bowing to the audience. Similarly, no one asked whether or not the dance accompanying the Brâu group's *tha* gong

performance was authentic or not. Instead, the audiences enjoyed the artists' performances because they expected to be entertained while visiting the festival.

Plate 28. A Thút group's performance and interaction with the audience.

Chapter 9
Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined the colorful activities and involvement of various actors (the state, scholars, cultural experts, cultural cadres, leaders of local artists groups, ordinary local artists, etc.) in what I call the 'heritage community' to preserve, protect and perform the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities in Vietnam's Central Highlands, the so-called 'Space of Gong Culture'. In doing so, I have used the conceptual framework of 'doing culture' in approaching the topic of 'living heritage'. 'Doing culture' (*làm văn hóa*), as I explained in the Introduction, is an unofficial but popular term which cultural cadres in Vietnam use to refer to their sphere of cultural work in using, managing, promoting and preserving culture. As I also pointed out there, this term resonates with a broader anthropological theme regarding the making and strengthening of various types of identity, namely gender, race and class. In my own research, 'doing culture' by actors also actively contributes to the 'living' appearances and performances of the 'Space of Gong Culture'. The actors contribute to producing what Bausinger (1990) calls 'modern folk culture', a term that implies the continuous presence of folklore in the modern world. Even though UNESCO's initial ideal was to consider and preserve cultural practices of intangible cultural heritage in their actual living situations, actors' cultural works contain many acts of meaning-making, following first of all the state's cultural, economic and political purposes, and secondly the purposes of the other actors. Somehow, these heritage practices contribute to another 'living' image of the 'Space of Gong Culture' on the heritage stage. Thus, the framework of 'doing culture' for 'living heritage' is useful in unpacking actors' interactions with heritage practices in my case study of the 'Space of Gong Culture' in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Certain cultural phenomena are highly likely to appear on the heritage stage depending on how well they fit with the state's national identity project. In Chapter 4, I showed how one such cultural phenomenon, the gong culture of minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, has been

acknowledged and used by the state, as well as being imbued with specific meanings to serve the state's political purposes in different historical periods. Indeed, after 1975, Vietnamese scholars and cultural cadres recognized the gongs for their cultural value, and they gradually came to be considered an essential symbol of Vietnamese 'national identity' helping to strengthen ethnic minorities' identification with the nation state. It was also in the state's interest to distinguish Vietnamese from Han Chinese culture and argue that Vietnam is 'a focal point of Southeast Asia rather than an insignificant periphery of East Asia' (Pelley 2002: 156). However, since the mid-1980s, after the collapse of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese party-state has been pursuing a new policy of political and economic reforms (*đổi mới*) that has led to rapid economic development. At the same time, the state also processes its vision of building up Vietnamese culture to be a 'progressive culture imbued with national identity' as created and promoted by Resolution No. 5 of 1998. In this context, the government's policy of cultural diplomacy (*chính sách ngoại giao văn hóa*) became an essential strategy for the Vietnamese state as it announced the message that 'Vietnam is always willing to be the friend of every country'. Due to this new international diplomacy, relations with the United Nations via its institutions, such as UNESCO, have become crucial. UNESCO's 'stamp of approval' is essential for the international legitimacy of the Vietnamese government given the vacuum left by the collapse of most other socialist regimes (Salemink 2012b: 278). Accordingly, the cultural experts started working hard to apply for possible Vietnamese cultural elements to be inscribed into UNESCO's heritage lists. One positive result of this policy was that on 25 November 2005 the 'Space of Gong Culture' of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities was added to the list of the World's Intangible Cultural Heritage and honored as a 'masterpiece' of humanity because of its 'outstanding' value. An urgent protection program was therefore required to protect this heritage from the threat of modernization.

This shift of meaning for gongs and gong culture through the state's support is similar to what Meeker (2013) describes in her work on Quan họ, other of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritages: that is, a shift 'from a concern with post-colonial and socialist nation-building to a concern with preserving the disappearing cultural heritage in the face of rapid development and modernization' (Meeker 2013: 2). It also represents a 'terminological shift … from traditional culture (*văn hóa cổ truyền or truyền thống*) to that of cultural heritage (*di sản văn hóa*) (Meeker 2007: 20). In other words, it represents a shift in gong culture from its uses in the struggling 'front' of culture (*mặt trận văn hóa*) to being exploited as part of

the diplomatic 'front' (*diện mạo*) of Vietnamese cultural heritage in the international sphere.

In these two moments in which gongs and gong culture received national and international consideration, as I showed in Chapter 4 the state's cultural experts and cultural cadres played essential roles in arguing and interpreting the value of gong culture in order to make them suitable for the state's efforts to construct a national identity. Their active roles in cultural work are similar to what Herzfeld (1986) observed in Greece, where 'Greek scholars constructed cultural continuity in defense of their national identity' by collecting 'what they considered to be relevant cultural materials and [using] them to state their case. In the process, they also created a national discipline of folklore studies, providing intellectual reinforcement for the political process of nation-building that was already well underway' (Herzfeld 1986: 4).

The term 'Space of Gong Culture', as entered into UNESCO's Masterpiece program, implies the whole 'traditional' complex of the ritual cosmology that is signified by the gongs: the gongs themselves, gong ritual music, agricultural and life-cycle rituals, gong players, mountain rice fields, shamans, communal houses, longhouses, wine jars and many other elements. Due to the rapid and crucial political, economic, religious and cultural changes that have taken place in the Central Highlands, this idealizing term has come under criticism (e.g. Salemink 2013). However, Nguyễn Chí Bền, one of the key cultural experts I mention in this work, taught me that being considered 'at risk and in danger of disappearing' is actually a strong advantage for a heritage to obtain recognition as a UNESCO-approved intangible cultural heritage. He also told me that, among the characteristics which led to the 'Space of Gong Culture' being listed by UNESCO, the most important was not the gongs' excellent value, but its condition of being 'on the edge of disappearance'. As a result, this heritage needed effective protection. Indeed, as Meeker put it when she examined quan họ, the concept of tradition emerges as an object in modernity only after its initial disappearance. Moreover, 'it lives on in discourse [as heritage] in the many representational practices which are, to varying degrees, in dialogue with that discourse' (Meeker 2007: 19). Like the case of *quan họ*, the image of the 'Space of Gong Culture', with its ensembles of gongs, gong music, rituals and traditional artists, 'lives on' as 'structural nostalgia' (Herzfeld 2016) in both heritage discourses and practice.

Despite the fact that UNESCO emphasizes the process but not authenticity in practices of intangible cultural heritage, my research shows that in gong culture heritage practices and performances, actors often look

for authentic traditional aspects and require material culture as effective references for their positive performances on heritage stages.

Indeed, as I showed in Chapter 5 (on gong and gong music), Chapter 6 (on rituals and festivals), Chapter 7 (on traditional artists) and Chapter 8 (on cultural heritage performances), the actors in heritage practices and performances normally use 'historical authenticity' as an indicator of the quality of their performances on heritage stages. Indeed, as I showed in Chapter 5, following the official heritage discourse about the ideal image of gong culture and the 'fear of loss' as an important aspect of heritage, the 'traditional', 'sacred' aspects of gong music became more salient. Looking in from the outside, it seems that the local artists have learned very well how to perform these 'sacred' aspects. In Chapter 6, I have shown that, even though agricultural rituals have almost disappeared in both 'traditional' villages and Catholic communities, the image of the gong's ritual space is still performed on the heritage stage as imbued with its former agricultural characteristics. This nostalgic image of the Central Highlands is perpetuated by the government to showcase the Highlands' lively heritage culture, to merit its title as a Masterpiece and to promote tourism. In discussions between cultural experts and local artists to prepare for the Spring Festival, described in Chapter 8, authentic details regarding artists' clothes or elements of the ritual of sacrifice were identified by the cultural experts as matters of concern regarding the authenticity of the performances. Interestingly, it is not only the cultural experts but also the local artists who use authenticity to indicate the 'quality' of their performances. This use of 'historical authenticity' in intangible cultural heritage practices is nothing exceptional but has also been observed by Hassard (2009: 283) in intangible cultural heritage practices in the United Kingdom and by Ritterband (2018) in respect of performances of Ju/'Hoansi San Indigenous Heritage for tourists in Namibia.

Thanks to selective acts of performing the 'authentic' aspects of intangible cultural heritage, as I have shown in this work, other aspects of the 'Space of Gong Culture', such as trading in gongs, certain social songs, newly composed musical pieces and Catholic identities, are hidden in what Meeker (2010: 154) calls 'the silent background of such discursive unity' of a cultural narrative.

In his critical assessment of Vietnam's heritage policy, Salemink rightly calls the state's policies on folk culture 'folklorization of culture' (Salemink 2003), which he describes as a policy in which the forms of cultural events and practices, such as festivals, are created by the state. Along with that process, minority cultures are 'decontextualized' from their original contexts of ritual and feasting, thereby turning festivals 'from a

participative event into a performing art for an audience which generally is not aware of the "traditional" cultural context' (Salemink 2003: 264). Thus, according to Salemink, this act of folklorizing culture 'creates an image of culture as an aesthetic survival from the past, detached from the present cultural context' (ibid.). In a 2013 article, Salemink pushes his argument further to describe the state's promotion of folklore as heritage to be a process of appropriating culture. As he puts it:

> Their cultural practices are appropriated by outside cultural experts who claim (state) authority over authentication and are reduced to cultural property decided on and disposed of by outsiders. As property (rather than as lived and embodied practice), culture can be appropriated by outsiders in a process that might be interpreted as a form of cultural dispossession from the so-called 'culture carriers' in UNESCO parlance (ibid.: 173).

Furthermore, in the 'process of cultural appropriation', Salemink argues, local cultural practitioners might become cultural 'proprietors' who in UNESCO's view differ from 'culture carriers' (ibid.: 172). However, as I have argued in this dissertation, Salemink's claim rather oversimplifies the opposition between ethnic minorities and the state, and it also seems to over-emphasize the state's impact. Besides, Salemink does not consider different types of cultural practices and performances. Based on my own in-depth investigation of Vietnamese minorities' engagement with heritage practices, I would distinguish the 'image' of culture that has been produced from heritage practices as a 'heritage culture' in the sense of an essentialized and idealized cultural image of a 'structural nostalgia' that helps to empower both the state and the artists who engage in heritage practices and performances.

I have also shown that, by engaging with practices of 'doing culture', local artists have developed a clear idea of the value of 'heritage culture' and how they should perform and act in specific cases. For instance, in their daily lives as Catholics, the residents of Kon Ktu village had no problem in performing a ritual to cure a sick man, despite that being contrary to their Catholic belief, when reporters from the VTV-5 channel came to their village to make a documentary. Or take the case of A Thút, when he made it very clear that the quality of his gong music group's performance depended on the amount of time available on stage and the amount of money they received for their performance. The interesting point here is that, in heritage discourses and rhetoric, the state gradually calls on local people to be aware of their culture's values. While this is in fact achieved by engaging with heritage practices, local artists are also made aware of the potential financial gains of their heritage practices.

This can be connected to local people's attitudes to the ownership of particular cultural practices. Through its heritage politics, the state has taken on the role of the protector of cultural heritage and the sponsor of heritage practices. Because many cultural practices designated for performance as heritage are gradually disappearing from local peoples' daily lives, such as agricultural rituals in the 'Space of Gong Culture', local people expect financial help from the state and therefore must to some extent comply with the state's requirements regarding public performances. Besides, as described in Chapters 7 and 8, some artists actively engage with heritage practices.

The cultural engagement of and close interaction between cultural cadres, cultural experts and local artists that I describe in Chapters 7 and 8 call to mind the relationship between actors, roles and 'teammates' that Goffman (1956) describes in his famous work on social interaction. These interactions between folk artists and experts partly illustrate how the 'heritage community' works. In the discussions over what were the 'authentic' elements in their performances, the artists acknowledge the experts, although they use their right to represent their ethnic identities in order to defend themselves against certain criticisms. The relationship between the local artists and the state's management of heritage appeared even livelier and more controversial while the various groups were preparing for their performances at the Vietnam Ethnology Museum during the Spring Festival. The ways in which A Thút, Thao La and the Brâu women responded to the experts' criticisms in humorous and intimate ways recall Herzfeld's (2016) description of how minorities deal with the 'encompassing society' in intimate relations of 'cultural engagement' by 'finding common ground with the encompassing society' (Herzfeld 2016: 7). The ways in which the discussions during the preparations for the Spring Festival performance were finely arranged also reminds one of Goffman's argument that social interaction has much in common with role taking during a theatrical performance. I therefore argue that 'cultural engagement' between actors in the 'heritage community', especially between cultural cadres and cultural artists, is crucial to maintaining the positive performance of heritage practices.

In her well-known work on tangible heritages (museum objects, historic buildings, and archaeological relics), Smith (2006) suggests that we should not look at heritage as just tangible objects with a set of specific and fixed values and meanings attached, but rather as processes of making meaning and experiences. She suggests that heritage '… is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural

tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process' (Smith 2006: 44). However, based on my case study I argue that, in heritage practices and acts of 'doing culture', a heritage shows its total meaning in tangible aspects and 'fixed values/meanings' as well as in 'processes'. Indeed, tangible aspects (such as bureaucratic reports regarding heritage preservation activities, books, artists' traditional costumes, sets of gongs, written texts describing rituals, etc) and 'fixed values/meanings' (that is, the ideal images of ethnic minorities' culture in heritage performances) contribute to a 'positive performance' on the part of both the state and the local artists. Thus, 'tangible aspects' and 'fixed values/meanings' in heritage are as important as its processes of meaning making, during which every actor in the 'heritage community' must produce 'evidence' of the richness of his or her living intangible cultural heritage.

At this point I return to the practical and lively existence of 'heritage culture' – that is, the ideal representational image of the 'Space of Gong Culture', in heritage practices – to argue that cultural reality may in fact emerge through and in performance (Schechner 1985; Schieffelin 1985; Turner 1988; from Meeker 2013: 18). The ways in which A Thút revived sacrificial rituals in his heritage performances, as well as Thao La's efforts to ensure his Brâu community a presence on the heritage stage, clearly points to the emergence of such cultural realities in their performances. And if this is so, taken together with active engagement between actors in the 'heritage community', 'heritage culture' appears as a living cultural practice or process in the full sense of the term 'intangible cultural heritage' as defined by UNESCO. In this intangible cultural heritage, practically, all actors are 'culture carriers'.

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Gábor Vargyas, Research Center for the Humanities, Budapest

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