

## Potent rituals and the royal dead: Historical transformations in Vietnamese ritual practice

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*This article considers the intricate entanglements of ritual, history and power by focusing on the recent rejuvenation of ritual practices pertaining to former kings as enacted in contemporary Huế, the former imperial capital of Việt Nam (1802–1945). It examines how the Nguyễn monarchs, who were previously repudiated by the early socialist regime, have been ritually reinstated as extraordinary ancestral figures and acknowledged as potent spirits to whom many turn for blessings. Drawing on ethnographic and historical material, the article traces changes in the locals' ritual engagements with the royal dead and pays attention to fluctuations in the posthumous fate of the Nguyễn royalty while highlighting the city's transformation from imperial capital to a tourist marketplace via the horrors of the battlefield.*

In contemporary Việt Nam, the landscape of the dead is an overgrown one, marked by a plethora of departed souls whose posthumous fates pre-occupy the living. These souls include celebrated war heroes, benevolent dead kin, malevolent ghosts and glorious kings of the past. Focusing on Huế, the former imperial capital of the country (1802–1945),<sup>1</sup> this article considers the current rejuvenation of ritual practices pertaining to the Nguyễn kings, the last Vietnamese monarchs. It examines how the Nguyễn kings, long excoriated by the socialist state, are being rapidly reinstated as extraordinary ancestors and acknowledged as potent spirits to whom many turn for blessings. Tainted because of their role in the colonial conquest of the country and subsequently denounced as 'feudal' despots, the

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1 On Vietnamese capitals, see William Logan, 'The cultural role of capital cities: Hanoi and Hue, Vietnam', *Pacific Affairs* 78, 4 (2005): 559–75.

Nguyễn kings appeared in socialist state-sponsored annals mostly as traitors and villains.<sup>2</sup> The forces of the revolution struck further blows to the Nguyễn legacy, most importantly by dismantling their sacred sites and defiling imperial temples. Now, however, previously banned rituals for the Nguyễn kings are turning into lavish and conspicuous affairs taking place in newly restored imperial temples and tombs which are now much-visited local pilgrimage and tourism sites. Drawing on ethnographic and historical material, this article traces changes in local ritual engagements with the royal dead and pays attention to fluctuations in the posthumous fates of the Nguyễn royals while highlighting Huế's transformation from imperial capital to tourist marketplace, via the horrors of the battlefield.

The changing modes of Vietnamese religiosity and the current proliferation of practices relating to the dead and other spiritual entities have been explored in a number of writings by anthropologists as well as historians.<sup>3</sup> This growing body of literature charts the impact of the country's turbulent history on religious life and the effects that recent shifts in the political economy have on ritual practice. It explores how war and revolution, as well as socialist and post-socialist reforms, have shaped the sacred landscape of the country. These studies point in particular to a surge in spirit-related practices since the introduction of *đổi mới* policies (economic 'renovation') in 1986 and chart the effects of the country's capitalist transformation on its ritual economy. Focusing on the ritual commemoration of the victims of massacres during the Cold War, Hoenik Kwon points to the changing fates of 'ghosts of war' in post-conflict Việt Nam and highlights the effects of market reforms on the shifting fates of these troubled souls and their potential for emancipation.<sup>4</sup>

2 On the monarchy and their re-evaluation, see Bruce McFarland Lockhart, 'Re-assessing the Nguyễn Dynasty', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, 1 (2001): 9–53 and Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'Historical research in Vietnam: A tentative survey', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, 1 (1995): 121–32. On the reinvention of the monarchy in Thailand, see Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of things: The fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's modern image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

3 Hy Van Luong, 'Economic reform and the intensification of rituals in two North Vietnamese villages, 1980–1990', in *The challenge of reform in Indochina*, ed. Borje Ljunggren, pp. 259–92 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute of International Development, 1993); *The country of memory: Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Shaun Kingsley Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Hoenik Kwon, *After the massacre: Commemoration and consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); *Modernity and re-enchantment: Religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007). Kirsten W. Endres, *Performing the divine: Mediums, markets and modernity in urban Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011).

4 Hoenik Kwon, *Ghosts of war in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008);

This body of work throws light on important areas of Vietnamese religiosity, examining the changing dynamics in ritual engagements with a host of ordinary and extraordinary dead who were previously occluded from public worship and the socialist state's glorified pantheon, which is dominated by revolutionary heroes and martyrs.<sup>5</sup> Alluding to the crowds of previously excluded spirits that are today propitiated in domestic rituals and local festivals, these studies focus on war victims and more particularly on those who fell fighting on the opposite side in the course of the recent conflict as well as a host of 'exceptional dead' and heroic figures of old who faded into obscurity under socialist rule.<sup>6</sup> The present article focuses on the rejuvenation of rituals given in honour of the royal dead. With a few notable exceptions,<sup>7</sup> former royalty and their increasing significance as spirits with exceptional potency have been largely disregarded in ethnographic reflections on religious change in Việt Nam. Focusing on the last kings of the realm, this article seeks to highlight the rich diversity of historical figures that swarm the nation's sacred landscape and require or even demand ritual attention by locals. The Nguyễn kings present an interesting case for one added reason. In their eventful posterity, they have been both *exceptional* and *excepted* dead. From being at the polity's core as consecrated rulers with glorified ancestries, the revolution pushed them to the margins of both polity and cosmos.

Attention to this distinctive set of royal dead allows us to reach into Việt Nam's imperial and colonial pasts, and consider their significance in the shaping of spiritual realms and ritual practices in the market-driven present. Particular attention is paid to the impact of colonialism — which, much like today, involved changes induced by capitalism<sup>8</sup>— and French rule on royal lives, deaths, and afterlives. This article also explores the impact of both the first and second Indochina wars on royal ancestral sites and rituals.

H. Kwon, 'The dollarization of Vietnamese ghost money', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 13 (2007): 73–90.

5 On the cult of Hồ Chí Minh as the revolutionary hero par excellence, see Marina Marouda, 'The unending death of an immortal: The state cult of Hồ Chí Minh in contemporary Việt Nam', *South East Asia Research* 21, 2 (2013): 303–21.

6 Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'Festivals and the dynamics of the exceptional dead in northern Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2007): 515–40; Kwon, *After the massacre*.

7 Pham Quynh Phuong, *Hero and deity: Tran Hung Dao and the resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2009); Dieu Thi Nguyen, 'A mythographical journey to modernity: The textual and symbolic transformations of the Hùng Kings founding myths', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, 2 (2013): 315–37.

8 Gerard Sasges and Scott Cheshier, 'Competing legacies: Rupture and continuity in Vietnamese political economy', *South East Asia Research* 20, 1 (2012): 5–33.

Following the changing fates of Vietnamese royal dead from imperial times to the present allows for the retracing of the intricate entanglements of ritual, history and power, which have been explored in a series of anthropological studies.<sup>9</sup> Such studies point to ritual as a mechanism for maintaining social order and sustaining politico-economic systems as well as a means for challenging and contesting structures of power; they also highlight the importance of history for understanding ritual and its political implications. For instance, Michael Taussig's incisive study examines the iconography of the devil and pertinent practices in Latin America as arising from and responding to colonial conquest, the advent of Christianity and capitalist development.<sup>10</sup> Yet, relevant discussions have often been articulated in terms of 'unchanging' patterns and as bearing strong connections to 'tradition'.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Bloch's detailed ethnographic and historical work traces the ways in which ritual and symbolism construe 'traditional authority' and legitimise structures of power. Examining the history of circumcision among the Merina of Madagascar he concludes that, despite significant political, social and economic changes, and considerable modifications in the enactment of the ritual itself, the symbolic core of the rites remained the same over the course of two centuries. For Bloch, it is precisely by means of this unvarying core that ritual achieves its legitimating function, that is, by representing human existence as 'timeless' and 'unchanging', and conveying a sense of permanence and continuity.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, for Bloch, the 'power of ritual' is rooted in its appeal to the past, and in symbolically construing a transcendental eternal order that appears to govern human existence.<sup>13</sup>

This article considers history as crucial for understanding the workings of ritual; it seeks, however, to account primarily for breaks and discontinuities in the history of rituals for the Nguyễn kings, not only for continuities.

9 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man: A study in terror and healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, history and power: Selected papers in anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1989); *Modernity and its malcontents: Ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

10 Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man*.

11 Geertz, *Negara*; Maurice Bloch, *From blessing to violence: History and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Maurice Bloch, 'The ritual of the royal bath in Madagascar: The dissolution of death, birth and fertility into authority', in *Rituals of royalty: Power and ceremonial in traditional societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon Price, pp. 271–96 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

12 Bloch, *From blessing to violence*, pp. 175.

13 *Ibid.*

More particularly, it traces disruptions in ritual exchanges between the royal dead and living worshippers, and the effects of these disconnections on royal afterlives. Recent studies explore the entanglements of ritual, history and power by shifting emphasis from tradition, continuity and permanency to modernity, transformation and reform.<sup>14</sup> This work explores how colonialism and the advancement of capitalism shape and reshape religious form and practice, calling attention to the ways in which capitalist reform creates the conditions for turning religious practice into a powerful means through which ordinary people react to a changing world, by enabling them to express their fears and anxieties about the workings of power. Recent studies on post-socialist Việt Nam, inspired by James Scott's *Weapons of the weak*, have also examined the resurgence of rituals and spirit worship as a form of resistance, exploring the ways in which the country's 're-enchantment' process is challenging and disrupting the projects of a still interventionist party-state.<sup>15</sup>

My investigation into rituals for the Vietnamese royal dead also considers the far-reaching effects of ritual practice with respect to the potential it holds to bring about important transformations and changes — as much to the dead as to the living implicated in the ritual process. Drawing inspiration from Marcel Mauss's thesis on ritual as a means of acting upon and influencing sacred beings, this article discusses rejuvenated rituals for Vietnamese royalty as efforts to (re)form and transform the posthumous fates of former kings that have been adversely affected by history.<sup>16</sup> Much like practices for a host of ordinary dead held today all around Huế, rituals for the Nguyễn royalty seek to recover the souls of the departed from the depths of neglect and ignominy and turn them into well-cared-for and munificent spirits that readily engage in reciprocal exchanges with the worshipful living.

Mark Johnson's and Oscar Salemink's articles offer insights on the current restoration of Huế's imperial past for tourism purposes by focusing on

14 Jean Comaroff, *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985); Harry West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the invisible realm in Mozambique* (London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

15 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Kirsten W. Endres, 'Culturalizing politics: *Doi moi* and the restructuring of rituals in contemporary rural Vietnam', in *Vietnamese villages in transition*, ed. B. Dahm and V. Houben (Passau: Passau Contributions to Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 197–221; Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'The Fatherland remembers your sacrifice: Commemorating war dead in North Vietnam', in Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *The country of memory*, pp. 46–74; Kwon, *After the massacre*.

16 Marcel Mauss, *On prayer*, trans. Susan Leslie; ed. and intro. W.S.F. Pickering (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Press, 2003 [1909]).

conservation discourses as well as the re-fashioning of former kings in the context of arts festivals in order to promote state agendas.<sup>17</sup> This article provides, however, the first substantial ethnographic account on rituals for the royal dead in contemporary Việt Nam. It considers official discourses as well as the narratives and activities of those most intimately related to the royal past, namely locals who trace descent from the former rulers. The crowds that trace affective connections to Nguyễn royalty and organise pertinent rituals have significantly increased in recent years, and now include people living in Huế and elsewhere in the country as well as abroad.

The material presented here draws from eighteen months of fieldwork carried out in Huế (2004–06) and an additional three months of research in the same locality (in 2011). This material draws mainly on the accounts and undertakings of descendants of Nguyễn monarchs, and the genealogical and archival records the latter have made available to the author. The descendants I encountered and conversed with were mainly locals living in Huế's urban and semi-urban areas, though some of my informants were Vietnamese of noble descent based overseas, particularly in the United States and France.<sup>18</sup> I encountered the latter as they briefly returned to Huế to reunite with relatives and actively take part in rituals for distinguished ancestors.

Tracing and identifying people of noble descent in Huế was anything but uncomplicated. Many royal descendants had changed their names and disguised their ancestries, especially after reunification (1975–76). My efforts to identify and speak with them initially met with difficulty; state agents' intense interest in the activities of the royal clan did not make this mission any easier. Nonetheless, when I eventually met members of the royal clan, the welcome was warm and they enabled my access to pertinent rituals. Interestingly, it was the Huế Monuments Conservation Centre (HMCC) — the local authority responsible for the management of royal monuments, whose associates include a handful of people of noble origin — that allowed initial contact with and research access to royal descendants and their ritual activities.

17 Mark Johnson, 'Renovating Hue (Vietnam): Authenticating destruction, reconstructing authenticity', in *Destruction and conservation of cultural property*, ed. Robert Layton, Peter G. Stone and Julian Thomas (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 75–92; Mark Johnson, 'Aspiring to the "tourist gaze": Selling the past, longing for the future at the World Heritage site of Hue, Vietnam', in *Heritage tourism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King and Michael Parnwell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), pp. 173–201; Oscar Salemink, 'The emperor's new clothes: Re-fashioning ritual in the Huế festival', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2007): 559–82.

18 In the course of the two Indochina conflicts, many of Huế's noble elite fled to the United States and France, where many remain today.

### Royal rulers and legitimacy

Ethnographic reflections on royal rituals have been primarily concerned with ideal representations of kingdom and court, focusing on how kings are symbolically constituted as the navel of the polity and cosmos.<sup>19</sup> Huế court ceremonials and rituals for royal dead can also be considered as symbolic displays of splendour and magnificence intended to prop up the legitimacy of royal rule. However, the tumultuous lives and reigns of many Nguyễn monarchs prompt us to consider rituals for royalty in a different light. In the course of their rule many Nguyễn kings were divested of their powers, degraded and dethroned; several suffered further ignominy in death. The encroachment of foreign imperial powers into the kingdom and the court's ensuing involvement in the rapacious colonial project had devastating effects for the monarchy. Royal power and authority were gradually eroded as the French colonial project unfolded in Indochina.<sup>20</sup> But such challenges in themselves were hardly new: the early Nguyễn kings, who reigned over an expanding and flourishing pre-colonial kingdom, suffered no less from challenges to their rule. The first two Nguyễn emperors (Gia Long r.1802–20, Minh Mạng r.1820–41), had faced frequent and long-lasting revolts and fierce opposition against their efforts to establish and consolidate a new kingdom that later came to be known as Đại Nam.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, both early and later Nguyễn kings faced difficulties in their ceremonious and unceremonious efforts to assert authority.

As historians point out, the decline of the monarchy began in the 1860s when the fourth king, Tự Đức (r.1848–1883), was criticised for his failure to deal effectively with French encroachments.<sup>22</sup> Tự Đức signed a number of agreements that allowed the French to assert control over the kingdom,

19 Geertz, *Negara*; Bloch, 'The royal bath'; *Rituals of royalty: Power and ceremonial in traditional societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon R.F. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Grant Evans, 'Revival of Buddhist royal family commemorative ritual in Laos', in *On the margins of religion*, ed. Francis Pine and João de Pina-Cabral (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 115–34.

20 Nguyễn Thê Anh, 'The Vietnamese monarchy under French colonial rule', *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 1 (1985): 147–62; Bruce M. Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy* (New Haven, CT: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1993); Oscar Chapuis, *The last emperors of Vietnam: From Tự Đức to Bảo Đại* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

21 Yoshiharu Tsuboi, *L'Empire Vietnamien: Face à la France et à la Chine 1847–1885* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987); Wook Choi Buyng, *Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mạng (1820–1841): Central policies and local response* (Ithaca: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 2004).

22 Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*; Nguyễn Thê Anh, 'The Vietnamese monarchy under French colonial rule'; Oscar Chapuis, *The last emperors of Vietnam*.

spelling the beginning of the end for Đại Nam as an independent polity. The first treaty (1862) that ceded southern provinces to the French was met with vigorous reactions from the scholar gentry, who criticised the emperor and organised an abortive movement in Huế. As the French moved up from Cochinchina in the Mekong Delta to conquer Tonkin in the Red River Delta, the king's position became even more tenuous. In response to the second treaty that affirmed French control over Tonkin (1874), the scholar gentry issued a call to arms and organised violent opposition to the emperor's policies. Tự Đức's reign marked a turning point for the dynasty and the kingdom at large. But it is worth noting here that widespread famine and unrest had plagued the kingdom long before French flotillas reached its shores. The king's 'inadequate' response to popular suffering and subsequent failings to reverse French gains eventually found Tự Đức accused of 'selling out the country' and 'abandoning the people'.<sup>23</sup>

The year following Tự Đức's death (1883) was the most turbulent for Nguyễn rule, as kings were made and unmade at a vertiginous speed.<sup>24</sup> Four kings ascended the throne in the space of thirteen months as the regents and the French battled for control over the court. Dục Đức was the first of the successive kings whose reigns and this-worldly life were violently cut short. Arrested on the very day of his coronation for failing to observe proper mourning rites for his predecessor, he was sentenced to death and left to die of hunger in prison, most likely not even afforded a proper burial, but simply 'tossed into a cavity'.<sup>25</sup> His immediate successor, Hiệp Hòa, who signed the 'Harmand treaty' that effectively brought all of Việt Nam under French oversight, was also arrested by his regents and died in confinement four months into his reign. A fifteen-year-old prince, Kiến Phúc, was hastily enthroned, but a few months later he was accused of failing to annul the Harmand treaty and died under 'suspicious circumstances'.<sup>26</sup> The string of precipitous successions, ill-fated deaths and transient royal lives ended when the French took control and began appointing kings directly; but while the colonial administration managed to quell strife over succession, efforts to restore the king's authority failed spectacularly. When Đồng Khánh (r.1886–88), the first king chosen by the French, set off on a tour around the protectorate, his procession was met with angry crowds and fierce protests. The king, fearing for his life,

23 Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, p. 23.

24 Nguyễn Thế Anh, *Monarchie et fait colonial au Viêt-Nam, 1875–1925: le Crépuscule d'un ordre traditionnel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992).

25 Chapuis, *The last emperors*, p. 15.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 17.



abandoned the trip and fled back to Huế in a fleet of armed junks.<sup>27</sup> He fell ill and died soon after, adding to the string of unpropitious royal deaths.

While the dawn of the nineteenth century saw the ascendancy of the Nguyễn clan (1802), by the end of that century the king's powers had been mutilated by regents and the imperial budget was controlled by the French. By the early twentieth century the monarchy was stripped of all remaining vestiges of its authority and the role of the king was restricted to matters such as conferring certificates to village tutelary spirits and promulgating decrees for ceremonies.<sup>28</sup> As the dynasty was pushed to the periphery of political power, Khải Định (r.1916–25), instituted a ceremony for the 'celebration of national restoration' to commemorate Gia Long's unification of Việt Nam under the Nguyễn,<sup>29</sup> an action that has some resonance with Clifford Geertz's description of royal ceremonies in nineteenth-century Bali, and John Pemberton's on Java.<sup>30</sup>

Geertz's *Negara* highlighted the use of glory and worship as essential elements in the articulation of power. Nonetheless, it describes the Hindu kingdom of Bali in an ahistorical manner, that is, unchanged for centuries and untouched by Dutch colonial ambitions. Pemberton discusses court ceremony and pomp not as diachronic elements of 'Javanese' political culture, but rather as a 'modern form of power' that emerged through the colonial encounter.<sup>31</sup> He demonstrates that court displays became an important means of conducting politics in a changing cosmos, where Javanese kings became domesticated by the Dutch, and royal houses were destroyed, displaced and pushed to the margins of the polity. A most telling example is a royal procession held to celebrate the royal house of Surakarta — just as the sultan was pushed out of his former palace in Solo by the Dutch.<sup>32</sup>

In the changing cosmos of colonial Việt Nam, similar court displays may have been meant to prop up a weak monarchy, but they created targets of criticism and derision instead. There was widespread 'disillusionment' and contempt for the monarchy during the late phase of the protectorate.<sup>33</sup> This disaffection, voiced in the popular press and writings, targeted mainly royal splendour and pageantry. Thành Thái (r.1889–1907) and Khải Định were often criticised in the press for their profligate lifestyles, peculiar

27 Charles Gosselin, *L'empire d'Annam* (Paris: Perrin et Cie, 1904), pp. 266–7.

28 Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, p. 34.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

30 Geertz, *Negara*; John Pemberton, *On the subject of 'Java'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

31 Pemberton, *On the subject of 'Java'*, p. 190.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

33 Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, p. 30.

European-style dress and lavish displays.<sup>34</sup> In a published letter to Khải Định, the scholar–activist Phan Chu Trinh voiced the elite’s disillusionment with the monarchy, criticising their extravagance while people lived in poverty, and denouncing the forced veneration of and kowtows to an outdated monarchism.<sup>35</sup>

If such public scorn posed a challenge for the late Nguyễn kings, the ill-fated end of so many of their predecessors called into question its claims to illustriousness. So many monarchs suffered a violent, untimely and humiliating death, perishing in confinement or exile, starved, poisoned or killed by the hand of plotting regents and courtiers. Their deaths cast serious doubts over the posthumous status of many kings, suggesting the possibility of unpropitious afterlives. Some monarchs had not even been accorded appropriate funerary rites, which traditionally included being bestowed a posthumous title — crucial for calling and engaging the soul of the deceased thereafter. As a local taxi driver explained, ‘if a sovereign is dethroned before passing away he does not die as a king and thus does not enter the other world as a sovereign’. Such poignant remarks were often made by locals who, though unrelated to the Nguyễn clan, have a great stake in the glorification of the monarchy, since they earn a living from the tourist industry which has developed around the citadel and royal tombs. Despite their vested interest in royal legacies, local shopkeepers, hoteliers and tourist guides often pointed to the cosmological implications of these unpropitious deaths, and the uncertainties over royal ancestries. Hence, in the case of imperial Huế, it is perhaps difficult to assume that rituals for royalty — mainly consisting of sacrifices for ancestral and other spirits — could effectively entertain images of royal magnificence and symbolically construe the kings as glorious divinities.

### **The fluctuating fates of the Nguyễn: A history of royal rituals**

Court ceremonies have often been discussed as purposeful ways to ensure ‘stability’ and ‘continuity’ in social and political life.<sup>36</sup> However, in the case of royal rituals in Huế, it is the disruptions, breaks and discontinuities that emerge as significant in local historical narratives and call for analytic scrutiny. This section considers key developments in the history of royal rituals in Huế, paying particular attention to the narratives articulated by those most intimately related to the city’s royal past, that is, people who trace descent from or familial ties with former kings, and who today lead

34 David Marr, *Vietnamese anti-colonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*.

35 Marr, *Vietnamese anti-colonialism*, pp. 246–7.

36 Cannadine and Price, *Rituals of royalty*; Bloch, ‘The ritual of the royal bath’.

rituals for royalty. This section also considers the discourses of other locals, such as historians, officials and conservationists, who take an active interest in Huế's imperial past, despite not being related to royalty.

According to historians in Huế, rituals for ancestral and other court-decreed spirits were of utmost significance for the early Nguyễn kings.<sup>37</sup> The first two kings made concerted efforts to regulate and marshal spirit-related practices, and enshrined the ancestral cult in law.<sup>38</sup> Constructing magnificent tombs and temples for their ancestors was a primary concern for successive kings. Soon after the first emperor, Gia Long, ascended the throne a temple dedicated to the kings' forerunners, the Nguyễn Lords, was built in the citadel precincts (1804).<sup>39</sup> Subsequent kings added to the royal sacred landscape by erecting more structures for ancestral spirits.<sup>40</sup> Vietnamese scholars stress that sacrificing to noble forebears was a required act for newly crowned emperors.<sup>41</sup> Sacrificial rituals for noble ancestors were designated in the legal code as 'great rites' and exceeded in significance practices relating to all other spirits. Marking the court's annual calendar, such rites sought to constitute the royal dead as part of an exalted line of kings whose magnificent tombs and temples inscribed their presence and greatness onto the capital's landscape.<sup>42</sup>

Such efforts were never without their challenges, but became even more problematic in the colonial context when royal lives and reigns were cut short, and a string of stately souls were forced to enter the other world in unpromising circumstances. The posthumous fates of royals were further adversely affected by the tides of revolution that targeted the royal line and its legacy in 1945 and again in 1975.<sup>43</sup> Johnson examines the 'narratives of destruction' concerning Huế's imperial sites as articulated by tourist guides and site interpreters, and observes that these discourses are effectively

37 Hue University International Centre, *An introduction to Vietnam and Hue* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2002); Phan Thuận An, *Kiến Trúc Cổ Đô Huế* [Monuments of Huế] (Huế: Nhà Xuất bản Thuận Hóa, 2004).

38 Thien Do, *Vietnamese supernaturalism: Views from the southern region* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Olga Dror, *Cult, culture and authority: Princess Lieu Hanh in Vietnamese history* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

39 The Nguyễn Lords (1558–1777) were a series of rulers who governed a territory known as *Đàng Trong*, today's central and southern Việt Nam. See Oscar Chapuis, *A history of Vietnam: From Hong Bac to Tự Đức* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

40 Phan Thuận An, 'Huế the imperial city', in *An introduction to Vietnam and Hue*, pp. 265–79.

41 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* [A general history of Vietnamese culture], (Hà Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất bản TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1992[1938]), pp. 154–5.

42 Phan Thuận An, 'Huế the imperial city'.

43 See also Johnson, 'Renovating Hue'.

‘dehistoricizing’ this destruction.<sup>44</sup> This dearth of historical references may be observed in signposts and notices all around the imperial heritage sites. Officials working on imperial conservation projects as well as royal descendants paint a different picture. Both highlight the devastating impact of specific historical events on royal legacies — although the descendants do so rather cautiously.

In private conversations royal descendants remarked that soon after the abdication of the last emperor Bảo Đại (1945) in favour of the Việt Minh, the royal council responsible for ancestral affairs was disbanded and its sacred seat was destroyed in a devastating fire in 1947.<sup>45</sup> The operations of the royal council were further stalled as the first Indochina conflict took hold (1946), but with the end of the war (1954) the council resurfaced and resumed its filial affairs under the auspices of eminent royals who acted as keen guardians of the royal sites and ancestral cult. Soon after his abdication, Bảo Đại returned to the political scene, serving briefly in the revolutionary government led by Hồ Chí Minh and later forming an alternative French-sponsored government (1946–55).<sup>46</sup> Elderly members of the royal clan maintained that during these years, Bảo Đại remained actively involved in the clan’s filial affairs and undertook responsibilities as head of the royal clan (*trưởng dòng họ*). They also added that even after Bảo Đại’s flight to France the filial affairs of the clan were upheld by the queen mother, who took over and acted as a guardian of royal legacies until her death (1980), sponsoring the restoration of war-ravaged royal sacred sites and organising pertinent rites.

According to royal descendants, in the post-imperial polity, former royalty maintained their political clout and upheld their ancestral affairs albeit for a short time. Some of them maintain that in the years following the end of the First Indochina conflict (1954) and until 1975 — which marked the end of the Second Indochina war — the royal clan continued to perform rituals for noble ancestors. Elderly members of the clan in particular, who lived through both wars and today lead rejuvenated rituals for royalty, mark these years as a ‘period of continuity’ for the imperial ancestral cult. Some of these elders are today eminent members of the recently re-formed ‘Nguyễn clan council’ (Hội đồng Trị sự Nguyễn Phúc Tộc). These clan elders stress that the First Indochina War (1946–54) was

44 Ibid., p. 76.

45 Ibid., p. 84.

46 Garry Hess, ‘The first American commitment in Indochina: The acceptance of the “Bao Dai solution”, 1950’, *Diplomatic History* 2, 4 (1978): 331–50; Jessica Chapman, ‘Staging democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 referendum to depose Bao Dai’, *Diplomatic History* 30, 4 (2006): 671–703.

nothing but a ‘temporary interruption’ for noble ancestral affairs. Despite the momentous fall of the monarchy in 1945 and the ensuing devastation of the council’s sacred seat, the clan sustained ritual engagements with their illustrious dead. In contrast, the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975 and the reunification of the country are noted by the council members as a ‘sharp break with the past’; a major disruption for both the clan and the country. In the words of one of the clan members — a retired professional who traces direct descent from the first Nguyễn king — ‘after the events of 1975 there was no more worship’ (*không cúng nữa*); the kings and former royalty could no longer be openly remembered and propitiated.

Disruptions and discontinuities in the history of royal rituals are central in a distinct set of accounts voiced by Huế’s inhabitants, who though unrelated to royalty, maintain a strong interest in the royal clan’s worship activities. In the past decade, senior staff at the Huế Monuments Conservation Centre (HMCC), which is responsible for the management and preservation of the imperial sites, have been closely following the royal clan’s ancestral affairs. In 2007, one HMCC member, Huynh Thi Anh Van – who appears to be unrelated to royalty — published a brief account of the history of royal rituals, paying particular attention to discontinuities, breaks and inconsistencies.<sup>47</sup> Huynh calls attention to the end of imperial rule in 1945 as a watershed in the history of royal rituals, suggesting that rituals for royalty continued to be performed in post-imperial times but were in many ways different. For instance, from ‘great ceremonies of a ruling dynasty’, the royal rites were ‘transformed to small ritual activities of a clan’ that were sporadically conducted.<sup>48</sup> Most importantly, she remarks that in post-imperial times such ‘family’ rituals for the noble dead were inaptly conducted by a ‘daughter-in-law’, that is, Bảo Đại’s queen mother.<sup>49</sup> This observation reflects the patrilineal reckonings of kinship that are predominant in Việt Nam and require ancestral practices to be officiated by senior male descendants. Turning her attention to the present-day, Huynh observes that the royal rituals are rather ‘simple’, that is, they are marked by limited knowledge and resources as opposed to the lavish, elaborate and sophisticated sequences of imperial times.<sup>50</sup> She further suggests that ritual proceedings are often disrupted by the presence of ‘tourists’ who swarm the royal temples and tombs.<sup>51</sup>

47 Huynh Thi Anh Van, ‘Revival of ritual ceremony in Huế royal temples after Renovation (Đổi mới): The reconstruction of identity’ (Chiang Mai: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 2007).

48 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 In her paper, Huynh includes a photograph of me attending a royal ritual with the caption ‘tourist taking photos’, rather than a fellow researcher who had been invited to observe

Huynh's brief account provides the first ever published study on royal rituals in contemporary Huế. Crucially, this study is primarily concerned with the efficacy of such rituals, raising concerns about the soundness of ritual proceedings in post-imperial and contemporary times. The efficacy of rituals relating to the dead and other spiritual entities is a key concern for many in Huế, and ritual sequences are commonly assessed on the basis of their rightful articulation, dextrous performance and aesthetic refinement. In Huế, rituals for the dead — royal or ordinary — are commonly evaluated and assessed by participants on the basis of their 'beauty' and 'refinement' (*đẹp*). Locals often comment on the quality and variety of food and votive offerings, adherence to ceremonial etiquette and the participants' graceful conduct. The aesthetic articulation of rituals is crucial because it is pertinent not merely to living participants but first and foremost to the venerated spirits. Rituals for the dead seek to appeal to the 'senses' and 'sensibilities' of the revered souls, and therefore flavours, colours and scents are attuned to the tastes and perceived needs of ethereal guests.<sup>52</sup> The offerings made, the way food is arranged on altars, the garb, words and comportment of the living participants, are all means of engaging the dead and inviting them to partake in reciprocal acts of communication. It is on that basis that the efficacy of death rituals are assessed in present-day Huế, and thus it comes as no surprise that Huynh's account considers current royal rituals in this light, looking at the means through which these sequences strive to appeal to and engage the royal dead.

The differences observed between official accounts of royal rituals and the discourses of the Nguyễn clan are also important for understanding current rituals for royalty, revealing the tensions and disarticulations therein. However, it is difficult in this particular case to make a sharp distinction between the state and locals. For instance, while the HMCC is a state-sponsored organisation, as mentioned, a number of its staff or associates belong to the royal clan. Intimately acquainted with the royal past, versed in Han–Viet script — the official script of the Nguyễn court — and with valuable archival material at their disposal, royal descendants are today indispensable to the state-sponsored mission to decode and restore the imperial past for tourism development.

Huynh's account as well as HMCC official narratives emphasise the disruptive effects of the monarchy's fall on imperial legacies, while the devastating effects of the two Indochina conflicts on imperial sites and

royal rituals. This could be an indication of how foreign researchers are construed by local counterparts when they find themselves in the midst of the latter's fieldsite.

52 Marina Marouda, 'Lives intimately connected: The living and the dead in contemporary central Việt Nam' (Ph.D. diss., Dept. of Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, 2009).

practices are edited out. As noted above, active members of the royal clan recount the devastating effects of the two wars and the second Indochina conflict in particular. After the 'liberation of the south' in 1975, the newly established government engaged in a vigorous campaign that sought to denigrate the royal past and disparage noble ancestries by defiling temples, dismantling altars and banning practices relating to former royalty.<sup>53</sup> The citadel with its dedicated temples became a primary target and sacred structures were burned down or turned into storehouses, especially for less valued crops such as cassava. This strategic move against royal sites and noble ancestries served a number of purposes. By defiling royal sacred sites socialist modernity sought to eradicate the remains of a 'feudal past' and usher in a new era. By the same token, the socialist state sought to divest the sacred landscape from a pantheon of departed royals and court-decreed spirits, and to promote its own cult of august deities and potent dead, most notably Hồ Chí Minh, the revolutionary hero par excellence.<sup>54</sup> Most importantly, desecrating the resting places of former kings and banning related worship was an effective means of forcing the souls of former royalty to less privileged after-worlds or even ghostly existence. In Vietnamese cosmology, ancestors and ghosts are not un-transformable states of being, fixed in permanent opposition, but rather fluid and porous 'states' directly affected by the relations the dead enjoy with the living, or lack of them.<sup>55</sup> The socialist state's attack on royal ancestral practices sought to afflict royal dead by disrupting their links and communications with the living. In this regard, the revolutionary state's efforts to abolish practices for the royal dead can be seen as comparable to ritual action, in the sense that it sought to directly influence and affect the afterlives of divinised royalty.

This state of affairs was somewhat reversed after *đổi mới* in the mid-1980s. Leading members of the royal council explained that in 1989, as market-oriented reforms began to take hold in Huế, the previously disbanded royal clan council sought official permission to regroup and resume ancestral affairs. At the time, local authorities were eager to promote the nomination of the imperial sites for inscription on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage list. Local authorities asked the royal clan to retrieve and move

53 See also Johnson, 'Renovating Hue'.

54 As mentioned earlier, this move by the Vietnamese state was not without precedent: the Nguyễn monarchy rigorously promoted the posthumous cult of loyal subjects while rendering the act of sacrificing to unregistered spirits punishable. Dror, *Cult, culture and authority*, pp. 55–6.

55 Marouda, 'Lives intimately connected'.

the kings' funerary tablets from a dilapidated pavilion in the citadel, where they had been thrown and left exposed to the elements, to the sheltered grounds of a royal temple.<sup>56</sup> Seizing the opportunity, the clan called for a big gathering at the citadel to clear out debris from the temples and recover the kings' funerary tablets (*long vị*). This gathering turned into a major ritual event as throngs of pilgrims dressed in ceremonial tunics converged on the citadel for the occasion. Photos taken by participants to document the event were proudly shown to me during our interviews in 2004–2006 and prompted interesting conversations. The photos depict tunic-clad crowds forming a ceremonial procession and moving the royal funeral tablets within the citadel as well as around its outer walls (*lễ cung nghinh long vị kiết thánh*). One participant who traces descent from the second Nguyễn king — described this as the moment when the royal clan 'publicly announced to the rest of the city's inhabitants the return of the kings to the citadel'.

The homecoming of the kings' tablets was the first postwar grand ritual to be held at an imperial site, and marked a turning point for the royal dead. A middle-aged shopkeeper and active member of the clan said that 'before 1989 the royal clan could not hold proper rituals for kings' for two main reasons. First, because rituals could not be held in the citadel and royal tombs, which remained for the most part closed to the public. After 1975, the noble dead were clandestinely propitiated in private houses and associated pagodas, but these spaces were bound to remain largely unfamiliar to the kings, who like all other Vietnamese dead, are bound to frequent the very spaces they inhabited in their worldly lives. Thus, rituals held in private houses were surely of limited influence and effect when it came to engaging stately souls. Second, the kings' souls were previously inaccessible because their funerary tablets, essential for evoking the deceased's soul, were held in state-managed imperial sites. The ceremonious return of the kings' tablets to the citadel in 1989 opened the way for re-establishing communications between living and dead members of the royal clan, and hence to the possibility of ritually transforming the kings from disengaged souls, detached from their former realms and kin, to 'efficacious spirits responsive to the prayers of the living' (*linh ứng*).

This tide of change gained momentum in the early 1990s as Huế was awarded the title of 'World Heritage Site' by UNESCO (1993). The restoration of imperial sites became a primary concern for both local and central governments and in 1997, Huế was declared a 'national treasure' by the Vietnamese government. As restoration work progressed, the memorial tablets of noble ancestors were gradually returned to their respective

56 See also Huynh, *Revival of ritual ceremony*.



temples in the citadel, thus inviting the return of the kingly spirits to their rightful place. Today as the Vietnamese state and its international partners are sponsoring the repair and rebuilding of royal complexes in order to raise the tourism profile of the city, the royal clan's ritual activities are proliferating, with more events being added to the calendar each year and with rituals increasing in pomp and popularity.

### Ritual and effect

Since the return of the kings' tablets to the citadel temples in 1989 a series of rituals have been held there by the royal clan council. By the time I was doing fieldwork, there were four main occasions in the council's annual ritual calendar. More specifically, death anniversaries were held for the first Nguyễn Lord, the first Nguyễn king, and the parents of either of these foremost ancestors. During my fieldwork anniversaries for apical ancestors and founders of descent groupings were held all around the province. As locals of noble and non-noble descent alike explained, these anniversaries serve as an occasion for the collective propitiation of all the generations emanating from this particular apical ancestor and thus for the ancestors of the grouping. The first post-1989 ritual organised by the clan was an anniversary for the first king (Gia Long), and thus an event for the communal worship of all the Nguyễn kings (2000). Two years later, in 2002, a ritual was held for all the Nguyễn Lords, the predecessors of the royal line, while in 2003 the clan organised an anniversary for Gia Long's parents.

These rituals were held in four distinct citadel temples situated on either side of the main palace in order of seniority. On the 'left', the highest side, is a pair of adjacent temples dedicated to the most senior ancestral cohort, the Nguyễn Lords (Thái Miếu) and the progenitors of the first Lord (Triệu Miếu) respectively, while on the 'right' side lies a pair of structures enshrining the kings (Thế Miếu or Thế Tô Miếu) and the parents of the first king (Hưng Miếu). Built in the nineteenth century, Thế Miếu today stands as a fully restored majestic structure with a roof adorned with dragons and red-lacquered pillars; both features denote a structure sheltering stately souls.<sup>57</sup> Once desecrated, today the temple is furnished with ten gilded shrines holding all the essential paraphernalia found in ancestral altars all around Huế, namely, photos and visual representations of the ancestors, coupled with funerary tablets and incense burners as well as flower vases and various containers for sacrificial offerings.

57 All other structures in the citadel stand partially restored or dilapidated. For more on the royal temples, see HMCC website, <http://www.huedisan.com.vn> (last accessed 30 July 2014).

Not all kings are enshrined here. The absence of Bảo Đại, the last king who was much reviled by revolutionaries is rather telling, bespeaking past conflicts and enduring political tensions. Members of the royal clan offer a range of explanations for the absence of some kings. Some point to changing historical and political conditions, noting the example of the three 'patriotic' kings, namely Hàm Nghi, Duy Tân and Thánh Thai. Rebuked by the French for their subversive attitude and resistance activities, all three kings were banned from the royal temple and could not be publicly worshipped during colonial times (1884–1954). In 1959, the government of South Việt Nam celebrated the three kings as national heroes and reinstalled them at the temple, where they remain today. But the issue of who is or could be enshrined here is further complicated by local understandings of kinship and the precepts of ancestral worship. Bảo Đại's absence can be considered in light of the fact that he lived most of his life, died and is buried in France, where many of his descendants, charged with the responsibility for his care in afterlife, remain. The absence of two other kings, Hiệp Hòa and Dục Đức who were unseated soon after their dubious coronations, further drives the point home. Despite his humiliating end, Dục Đức was later enshrined in a temple dedicated to him, erected by his son king Thánh Thai who set out to restore his father's reputation. Hiệp Hòa on the other hand, who died unmarried and childless, had never found a rightful place in a temple enshrining divinised forefathers. Reshufflings and absences aside, Thê Tô Miếu is today the hub of the royal clan council's cult activities where 'all thirteen kings, from first to last' are collectively propitiated, as some members of the royal clan quietly maintain.

The most important ritual on the clan's annual calendar is the death anniversary for the first king and founder of the royal line, Gia Long. His anniversary is a lavish and widely attended event that draws together all disparate sides of the clan. I attended this grand event on two separate occasions, in 2006 and again in 2011. Like all other anniversaries, worship takes place during the course of two consecutive days. The afternoon of the first day, a handful of royal council members gathered at the temple to burn incense by way of 'deferentially announcing' (*báo cáo*) the event to enshrined spirits and inviting them to partake in the following day's worship. As the day of the main event dawned, leading members of the council, including the elected clan head and the heads of sub-branches, all dressed in ceremonial tunics evoking the ornate silk outfits of mandarins and courtiers, gathered at the temple to prepare for the worship. Assisted by junior clan members, they polished candle-holders and incense burners, meticulously arranged flowers, fruit and food on the altars, and bundled together stacks of votive paper. The ritual sequence resumed with the elders

‘verifying the offerings’ before taking their place in front of the kings’ altars. The clan head stood before the altar of the first king to officiate proceedings while sub-lineage heads took their rightful place in front of their respective royal ancestor. ‘Kings without descendants, like Hạm Nghi, have a member of the clan standing in as a surrogate descendant,’ an elderly sub-lineage head explained. The ritual sequence was punctuated by the pleasing sounds of court music played by a hired band and vociferous calls to kowtow (*quỳ*), dispensed by fittingly clad ‘Confucian scholars’. Calls and gongs marked meaningful intervals, when pouring rice wine into cups on the shrines was followed by deep prostrations by way of inviting the enshrined spirits to accept and enjoy the offerings. A prayerful petition (*sớ*) addressed to the first king and written in Han–Viet was recited by the clan head. As a middle-aged male participant and junior member of the clan later explained, this petition notes the ‘name, age and date of death of the king and his queen’ by which means the said spirits are evoked so that they are ‘present at the ritual’.

At first glance, these anniversaries for past kings seem at pains to recreate the splendour of imperial cults. But ritual participants consistently failed to declare that the aim of such anniversaries is to ‘revive’ imperial ceremonies and traditions. Most participants admittedly know little about the manner and detail of court life and rituals, their knowledge is mostly based on historical records that only a few can decipher. But even where adequate information is available, ritual proceedings have been creatively interfered with and purposefully altered. Could this be then another case of ‘reinventing tradition’, whereby human creativity takes over, reinterpreting and reformulating a supposedly determinate past and homogenous tradition in order to serve present concerns and the particular interests of the living?<sup>58</sup> The ‘re-invention of tradition’ thesis may help explain the rejuvenation of ritual practices for ancestral spirits in Southeast Asian realms to a certain extent. But rituals for royal Vietnamese spirits are creatively interfered with to serve not only the political manoeuvres and strategic interests of the living, but first and foremost to address the perceived needs of royal spirits. It must be noted that changes and modifications in Vietnamese death rituals are not uncommon, serving to engage the dead whose lives and existential circumstances are as fluid and changing as those of their living counterparts. Furthermore, in rituals for royalty court decorum and splendour serves not only to impress living spectators and onlookers, but first and foremost to draw in and appeal to kingly

58 Jörgen Hellman, ‘Meeting with ancestors: Contesting borders in Indonesian religion and politics’, *Anthropological Forum* 23, 2 (2013): 178–97.

spirits, who are accustomed to regal ways. A closer look at ritual details reveals more.

One of the novelties of current rituals for royalty is the participation of women and children, who have been historically excluded from clan halls and related practices. Today, women's participation in ancestral rituals held in houses and lower-ranking ancestral halls is rather common, indicative perhaps of the impact of socialist modernity on Vietnamese kinship practices; but women and children are still excluded from higher-ranking ancestral halls such as clan and lineage temples. The inclusion of female kin in rituals for royal forefathers is of particular significance, serving to add to the numbers of worshippers and strengthen the impact of prayerful voices. In Huế, mobilising large crowds of worshippers is seen as crucial for addressing the fates of unfortunate dead and troubled ancestral souls. A wealth of human and other resources and the earnest support of committed others increase the chances of releasing ill-fated souls from suffering and adverse existential circumstances. In the words of a female participant, 'the more the prayerful voices the better the chances these voices will be heard and responded to.' The involvement of children and young relatives in the clan's filial affairs — perhaps a novelty too far for many locals — is of utmost importance for senior members of the royal clan, who are keen to 'educate' younger generations on noble genealogies, and prepare them to undertake responsibilities for the care of royal ancestors in the future.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the seeming splendour and glory, current rituals for royalty do not proceed on the basis of certainty, but instead allow for an array of possibilities regarding the posthumous conditions of stately souls. As discussed, many Nguyễn kings suffered untimely and ill-fated deaths, which set off the possibility of unpromising afterlives. The revolutionary state's attacks on royal sacred sites and practices may have forced still more kingly souls to a troubled other-worldly existence, turning previously exalted dead to neglected lost souls. Royal descendants consistently described anniversaries for Gia Long as both a death anniversary (*ngày giỗ*) for the founder of the line and an occasion for the 'communal propitiation' (*hiệp kỳ*) of all kings. Held today all around Huế, *hiệp kỳ* often involve intense ritual efforts to engage forgotten and neglected familial dead who died 'without descendants' or in unknown and unsettling circumstances, amidst war and hardship. The aim of these rituals is to acknowledge and provide care to such disregarded and troubled souls and (re)integrate them to ancestral cohorts.

59 See the introduction to the published genealogies of the royal clan: Vĩnh Cao et al., *Nguyễn Phúc Tộc Thế Phả* [Genealogical records of the Nguyễn clan] (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1995), p. 5.

Ritual offerings reveal further uncertainties and ambiguities about the status of royal dead as well as meticulous efforts to address their particular needs. Anniversaries for ordinary ancestors commonly include a variety of cooked dishes, prepared in domestic hearths, whereas offerings for past kings comprise foodstuffs bought in the local market. These ready-made offerings include fruit, flowers, rice wine and water that make up the elemental offerings for spirits of human origins, be they munificent ancestral entities or unknown wandering souls. Further ambiguities relating to the kings' posterity are evident in votive offerings. In Gia Long's anniversary in 2006 offerings included copious bundles of votive money, silver, gold and paper garments. Copious amounts of paper money are part of the resources required to release troubled souls from suffering and effect their transformation. The most striking paper outfits burned on this occasion were bundles of *áo bình* (lit. imperial soldiers' tunics), an offering that is commonly used in rituals for ghostly entities. In the anniversary for the same king in 2011 attentiveness to the particular and 'insatiable' needs of wandering souls increased and an outdoor shrine was set up for these purposes in the temple yard. Loaded with copious offerings, including a roast piglet, this shrine stood in contrast to the kings' altars inside the temple where offerings remained modest.

Tending to more or less troubled souls of forebears, noble or otherwise, is today a primary concern for their living counterparts all around the province. As the economic fates of the living inhabitants of Hué improve — from a booming tourism industry developed around the UNESCO-listed imperial sites — part of the newly acquired wealth is being channelled back towards the care of ancestral souls. To my interlocutors in Hué, this wealth is not unrelated to the munificent influence of deceased kin, considered in many respects an instantiation of ancestral blessings. The changing fortunes of the living members of the royal clan are also linked to the changing fates of royal dead, as the latter are being gradually transformed from disengaged souls to munificent spirits responsive to the prayers of the living. Consequently, rituals for royal dead — as for all other dead — do not remain the same, but are constantly modified to suit the mutable 'states of being' of kingly souls.

On my visit to Hué in 2011, I observed that anniversaries for kings had become noticeably more lavish while new rituals were being added to the clan's annual calendar. Moreover, the clan's cult activities had expanded beyond the confines of the citadel, to temples in the royal tombs, staking a claim to these magnificent burial enclosures as sacred family sites. In conversations, junior and senior members of the clan spoke enthusiastically about taking part in a grand procession to the royal tombs to ceremonially

‘weed the ancestral graves’ (*tảo mộ*) that was organised for the first time in 2008.<sup>60</sup> By 2011 this had become an eagerly anticipated annual event for many locals.<sup>61</sup> The procession in 2011 reached only a few of the most accessible royal tombs (those of Minh Mạng and Tự Đức), but according to an elderly male participant descending from a high-ranking mandarin, the ambition was to reach all the royal tombs in the province, including that of Gia Long, who remains a controversial king for his role in inviting French interests to Việt Nam, and whose tomb is still closed off and in a state of disrepair.

Ceremonious efforts to influence and transform the afterlives of the royal dead have intensified in recent years. Apart from rituals organised by the clan itself, distinct sub-branches hold anniversaries for individual kings from whom they trace direct descent. Apart from listed temples situated in heritage sites, rituals for royalty and noble dead are also held in family houses and newly restored ancestral halls sitting in former princely estates. These peri-urban family structures are now painstakingly restored and transformed from obscure and humble private residences into marked places of worship for noble ancestry. Within these contexts, kings as well as other nobility, such as uncrowned princes, high-ranking mandarins and even royal wives and concubines, are now celebrated as distinguished ancestral spirits.

In many of these noble ancestral houses, groups of royal descendants strive to transform the fates of less fortunate kin. A most notable example is that of three kings — Dục Đức, his son Thánh Thai, and his grandson Duy Tân — all buried and cared for in a rather unremarkable royal burial complex known as An Lang. The An Lang Complex includes Dục Đức’s tomb and a dedicated temple. Unlike the majestic tombs of other kings situated amidst woodland and man-made lakes, this burial enclosure is ensconced in a crowded urban neighbourhood that falls well outside the popular heritage site list. Built by Thánh Thai to shelter the troubled soul of his father Dục Đức who died humiliated in prison, An Lang is marked as a ‘heritage site’ but stands dilapidated and unrestored. Thánh Thai and his son king Duy Tân were no less unfortunate; both dying degraded and away from Huế as exiles.<sup>62</sup> Today, there is a fenced burial

60 *Tảo mộ* (‘weeding ancestral graves’) is a task reverently undertaken by ordinary kin groups across Huế in preparation for the Lunar New Year.

61 During my fieldwork, rumours circulated that provincial authorities offered to commission boats to take pilgrims to the royal tombs via the city’s Perfume River, thus turning the occasion into a spectacle for the crowds, but the royal clan is said to have declined.

62 See Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*.

plot next to An Lang complex where the graves of Thánh Thai, Duy Tân, their wives, offspring and other kin are found. Maintained by a group of descendants this plot is a 'family gravesite', as the elderly male descendant who cared for it explained. In recent years, surviving kin have made concerted efforts to repatriate the remains of the two kings and prepared the two graves in anticipation. Duy Tân was eventually reinterred in 1987 and Thánh Thai in 2001. Subsequently, all three kings were enshrined in An Lang as 'grandfather, father and son'. This was a first and critical step that allowed descendants to step up ritual efforts to turn around the fates of these unfortunate ancestral souls, who suffered ignominy in life as well as in death, and were denied access to the temple of kings.

The intense efforts of living descendants and their care for past kings has seen some of the latter turning from forgotten souls to widely revered and efficacious spirits to whom many turn for blessings. The most widely revered king today is Ming Mạng (r.1820–40), whose lavishly restored tomb is swarmed by throngs of unrelated pilgrims every day. In the past few years, Minh Mạng has emerged as a highly efficacious and responsive spirit to whom pilgrims offer gifts of flowers, fruit and incense and address their prayers — often appealing for professional success and fertility. Pilgrims come from around the province as well as far beyond and include local officials, such as a young aspiring soon-to-be-married bureaucrat from the provincial people's committee, whom I found quietly praying in front of the king's shrine one weekday morning. The longest serving king, Ming Mạng is widely celebrated as the most successful and effective Nguyễn ruler.<sup>63</sup> Pilgrims as well as petty traders selling goods outside his tomb explained that he was the most 'prolific king', not least because he had 'dozens of wives' and 'more than a hundred offspring'. The king with the most populous and thriving group of descendants in Huế today, Ming Mạng enjoys the assiduous support and ritual care of scores of living kin. His descendants, who include HMCC associates, stress that Ming Mạng is the only king who has several death anniversaries and many veneration rites, held by the clan, descent sub-groupings, in related households, as well as in associated pagodas founded and sponsored by royals. His emergence in recent years as a 'highly efficacious spirit responsive to prayers' (*linh hồn*) and wide appeal with crowds of unrelated pilgrims has as much to do with his reputation as an effective ruler as with the support and care he enjoys by scores of living intimates.

63 See Wook Choi Buynng, *Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mạng*.

### Conclusion

This article considers current ritual practices for former kings and their significance for charting the dynamics of religious efflorescence in present-day Việt Nam. It explores the significance of history for understanding current rituals for the royal dead by tracing transformations in ritual engagements with the royal dead in the course of the country's eventful history, and the effects of these changes on noble ancestries. Colonialism had dire effects on the monarchy and its consecrated ancestries. The colonial project not only pushed living monarchs to the periphery of political life, but further caused many kings to suffer untimely, violent and ignominious ends that thrust them onto planes of uncertainty in the afterlife. The fall of the monarchy and the two Indochina conflicts further complicated the posterity of royal ancestries, afflicting pertinent formal structures and places of worship. In the post-imperial polity former royalty have endeavoured to remain engaged in public life and uphold the cult of their distinguished ancestors, but the uncertainties and ambiguities besetting the afterlives of the latter were heightened as the revolution advanced. The revolutionary state's vigorous campaign against imperial sacred sites and practices brought more misfortunes to the departed kings, denying them public worship and apposite care by the living.

Rituals for departed Nguyễn kings re-emerged in the post-socialist context and are now growing in scale and intensity. Undertaken by surviving kin, these prayerful acts seek to turn the dismal fates of royal dead, reverse the effects of neglect brought about by disruptive historical events and (re) constitute the royal dead as potent spirits. Rejuvenated rituals for royalty do not seek to reinstate former kings as formidable sovereigns and divinised rulers; many Nguyễn kings were divested of their powers and denigrated and suffered further ignominy in death. Rather, these rituals strive to (re) constitute former kings as extraordinary ancestors and members of a highly distinguished family — still regarded as such in the locality. Engaging former kings through the precepts and practices of ancestral worship is of particular significance for a set of reasons. First, it allows living kin to ritually engage with former kings in a public yet discreet manner without raising serious official objections. Second, it provides the ritual means to engage disaffected kingly souls in reciprocal exchanges and relations of mutual care with the living, by means of which the latter can be transformed into munificent ancestral spirits.

The recent intensification of ritual care for the royal dead has seen many kings turning into highly efficacious spirits to whom crowds of unrelated pilgrims turn for blessings. And therein lies the political significance of current ritual practices: the ontological transformation of the royal dead



from marginal historical figures to potent spirits makes manifest the politics involved in cosmological practice. As the posthumous 'configurations' of the Nguyễn kings are changing, they come to re-join today the ranks of divinised historical figures and take their place in the nation's pantheon of benevolent ancestral spirits, which also includes Hồ Chí Minh.