

The Sacred and Heritagization in the Safeguarding of Traditional Village Festivals in Viet Nam: A Case Study

HIEN THI NGUYEN

Viet Nam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies: Associate Professor of Folklore

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Introduction

INSCRIPTION of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) on the list established by UNESCO's 2003 Convention has the admirable purpose of safeguarding the vitality and viability of cultural expressions in general, while respecting cultural diversity and opening possibilities for dialogue among the individuals, groups, and communities involved.¹ The inscription process, one of many aspects of heritagization—a process that interprets, adapts, and presents heritage, typically to facilitate social or political management, but does not generally archive or sustain it—invariably disturbs cultural practices to some extent as it involves the participation of both national and international governmental and heritage regimes together with other institutions, laws, actors, and various stakeholders. The heritagization of traditional village festivals in Viet Nam has been influenced by a vertical management system that

extends from the central to local levels. While some examples of intangible culture are still practiced by custodian communities as they have been for centuries, other examples have been deeply influenced by close coordination between the community and the concerned cultural management departments. Likewise, the state has at times been directly and heavily involved in the management of other intangible elements of culture, with the community performing only a small role, rather than proactively practicing their own heritage.² There are about eight thousand traditional village festivals in Viet Nam, but heritagization differs according to the nature of the specific elements of culture involved. This study will focus on the traditional Gióng Village Festival dedicated to the tutelary god of the Phù Đổng Commune, Gia Lâm District, Hanoi City.³ The Gióng Festival is a so-called battle festival involving more than

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Please note that the article header and summary use the name "Hien Thi Nguyen." The author is one and the same as "Nguyễn Thị Hiền"—as is given elsewhere.

1 UNESCO, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

2 Nguyễn Thị Hiền, *Quản lý, bảo vệ và phát huy*.

3 The Gióng Festival of Phù Đổng Temple commemorates the Gióng deity, who was born as a result of his human mother stepping on an enormous footprint of Mr. Đổng, a giant character in the myth of the Việt people. At the age of three, the deity still could not talk or walk, but when he heard the king's appeal to find talented and brave people to protect the country and its people from invaders, he began to talk and miraculously grew up into a giant. He went to battle, defeated the foreign invaders, and flew into heaven. Gióng was sacralized as an immortal god

one thousand villagers in celebratory activities, including organizing a wide range of roles for the mock battles. The most notable roles in the festival are played by those who must train and practice in sacred rooms, and these, which bring villagers enhanced social status, are the commanders (Ông Hiệu) and generals (Cố tướng). The commanders are played by young boys who give the commands for the festival activities such as waving flags and playing drums and gongs, etc. They function as the god's servants. The generals are played by girls around the age of about thirteen who represent the invaders who will lose the battle. The festival is well organized by the Festival Management Board (Ban Khánh tiết), which is made up of elderly members of the local community, who act in a manner so as to preserve the spirit of the *Festival Notebook* (Sổ Hội lễ), which is a guidebook for organizing the Gióng Festival's activities.⁴ Thus, the traditional way of organizing the festival is the key factor in ensuring the vitality of the festival and constraining the influence of the government as well as heritagization.

This study is based on research data collected using qualitative methods during field trips undertaken to observe the Gióng Festival and interviews with relevant managers and village elders of the Festival Management Board, as well as members of the local community who performed different roles at the festival. This research was carried out during the development of the nomination file submitted to UNESCO during 2009–2010 (when I played an active role in developing the nomination), and also when carrying out my collaborative research project funded by the UNESCO Office in Viet Nam during 2011–2012, and while I attended the festival in 2015 and 2016. Through participant observation of the festival and ethnographic data collected from the field, I determined that sacredness plays an important role in maintaining and ensuring the vitality of the Gióng Festival. As a result, this article will analyze the sacredness of the site of worship, the relevant artifacts, and practices in relation to safeguarding the visibility of the festival.

During the land reforms of the 1950s, many temples and communal halls in Viet Nam were dismantled, and practices and rituals related to traditional village festivals were banned. The religious practices and worship spaces that were seen as superstitious, backward, and feudalistic were demolished. One of the earliest legal documents related to religious practices as superstition was Circular 785 VH/TT issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information (today's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) with the objectives of limiting superstitious practices and enhancing the festive activities of traditional festivals. As this circular stated: "Instruct the masses to change backward activities (such as offerings of sticky rice with meat, village customs, hierarchy, depraved customs, and superstitions) into sound activities such as livestock competitions, improving production by learning from mistakes, sharing a rice meal for solidarity, putting on folk performances (plays and dramas) and folk games such as wrestling, boat racing, and so on."⁵ In the 1970s, Decision No. 56-CP, concerning regulations for weddings, funerals, death anniversaries, and festivals stated that "divination, physiogramic practices, soul calling, spirit possession, amulets, exorcism, the burning of votive offerings, spiritual healing and so on are regarded as superstitions."⁶ The limitations and even prohibitions of religious practices lasted until the Renovation (the term used for economic reforms instituted by the national government) in 1986 when Viet Nam launched policies for economic development as well as for expanding the social and cultural lives of its citizens. Today, in contrast, numerous traditional festivals and religious practices have been revitalized and some have even been recognized as examples of intangible cultural heritage that reflect cultural identities and have been inscribed on UNESCO's and Vietnamese lists of cultural heritage.

Once an example of intangible cultural heritage has gone through the process of international and national inscription it is almost always influenced by outside actors. Specifically, following its inscription by UNESCO, an element of culture can be altered by programs

and has been worshipped as a god at communal halls in a number of villages as villagers pray for a good harvest, peace for the country, and prosperity for all people.

4 The *Festival Notebook* was composed by knowledgeable village elders. An older version was lost and it was rewritten in the 1990s after the Renovation and is now stored at the Prohibition Hall (Cung cấm), the most solemn and sacred room of the temple dedicated to the communal god.

5 Circular 785 VH/TT of 8 July 1957, cited in Bùi, "Quản lý lễ hội truyền thống," p. 27.

6 Decision No. 56-CP of March 18, 1975, on the Regulations on Weddings, Funerals, Death Anniversaries, and Festive Days; chapter 5 on the Abolishment of Superstitions. <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/van-hoa-xa-hoi/Quyet-dinh-56-CP-The-le-to-chuc-viec-cuoi-tang-ngay-gio-hoi-44673.aspx>.

or projects meant to safeguard it, as well as by the intervention of the heritage management system and the expectations of the local community. These local expectations include external support at the national and international level in upgrading and repairing infrastructure and promoting tangible elements of ICH in order to attract tourists. This has had a significant impact on heritage practices in general. However, although it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 and the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012,⁷ the Gióng Festival in which the tutelary god Gióng is worshipped has not been influenced or changed to a significant degree. This is due to the characteristics of the festival itself, including the method of organizing festive practices in which the community plays a key role, as well as the activities and sacred spaces that are integral parts of the festival. The sacredness of the communal hall dedicated to the tutelary god, the god himself, and the social status of those who perform the roles of the commanders and generals in the festival have all played an important role in ensuring that the practice of this example of intangible cultural heritage has not been greatly influenced by the inscription process.

The sacred religious practices of the festival have also remained largely uninfluenced by UNESCO, the State Party of Viet Nam, and local authorities after undergoing the process of heritagization. The sacred elements of the festival have remained intact and UNESCO's inscription has not resulted in the loss of the festival's specific nature. Following inscription, the Gióng Festival still retains its role in maintaining historical, cultural, and social values. This outcome challenges some previously held notions that the concept of international standards proposed by the 2003 Convention results in elements of intangible cultural heritage losing their specificity and historical meaning.⁸ The sacredness of the festival has become part of the subconscious of the community and as a spiritual activity, the process of heritagization conducted under the government has consequently not had much effect. There is therefore an interactive relationship between the nature of an exam-

ple of intangible culture and its heritagization, as well as between the dynamics of local communities to their own heritage. These findings challenge previous statements about the sacralization of heritagization made by scholars who have argued that the reconstruction of religious forms as "heritage" entails a process of profanation through which their initial sacredness is gradually lost.⁹

Heritagization

Heritagization is a concept dating back to the 1990s, and it has been applied by scholars with many different semantic nuances. Initially, the concept of heritagization likened the transformation of an element of culture "to a negative and destructive process."¹⁰ However, according to Denis Byrne, the concept focuses more on heritage as a social action, which also allows for an appreciation of change.¹¹ This is a view shared by Anna Karlström, who noted that "heritage is a mode of cultural production and it produces something new."¹² Heritagization is a term for a process that bestows value on "something." It could be any practice or "heritage good" that a group of people consider to be their property. Building on the dynamic perspective entailed in heritagization, including its political and symbolic dimensions that were engendered in scholarship in the 1990s, Xerardo Pereiro defines "heritagization" as the activation of cultural heritage and its promotion.¹³ On the other hand, Kevin Walsh, one of the first authors to use the term in English, employs it in a pejorative manner in the context of the "heritagization" of space.¹⁴ Oscar Salemink similarly noted that the process of creating heritage is a process conducted by outsiders like government agencies, researchers, and NGOs, and in some cases, some of the elements of intangible cultural heritage have been "appropriated."¹⁵ He also makes it clear that "heritagization brings in not just the state, but also the market, as the label of heritage—especially, but not exclusively, World Heritage—functions as a certi-

7 See UNESCO's list at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/giong-festival-of-phu-ong-and-soc-temples-00443> and the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage at <http://dsvh.gov.vn/danh-muc-di-san-van-hoa-phi-vat-the-quoc-gia-17>.

8 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*.

9 Meyer and de Witte, "Heritage and the Sacred," p. 277.

10 Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*, p. 135.

11 Byrne, "Heritage as Social Action," pp 162–63.

12 Karlström, "Spirits and the Ever-Changing Heritage," p. 395.

13 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*; Pereiro, "Patrimonialización, museos e arquitectura," pp. 98, 104.

14 Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*, p. 4.

15 Salemink, "Appropriating Culture," p. 173.

fication label and, hence, as a brand name in domestic and international tourist markets.”¹⁶ Heritagization following the lines of UNESCO’s directives and supervision produces more government interference; that is, an expansion of the institutional dimension of the state apparatus and its potential to reach into previously unmapped cultural terrains.¹⁷

From a state management perspective, Viet Nam has a central and local cultural heritage management system, beginning with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and reaching down to provinces, districts, and communes/villages. The inscription process and the management of intangible cultural heritage is a process of centralizing the power of managers rather than stimulating the initiative of the custodian community, and as such it is the institutions, policies, agencies, departments, councils, and organizations that are involved, along with leaders, managers, and members of the Cultural Heritage Committee. Thus, the impact of the state, management agencies, administration from the grassroots (village, commune, district, province) to the central government level, as well as from the provinces to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, have all made the Gióng Festival’s cultural practices that date over a thousand years into examples of intangible cultural heritage that are inscribed nationally and internationally.

Inscription of an element of culture is linked to heritagization through the participation of international and national organizations, a cultural management system from the central government to local levels, as well as a contingent of experts, researchers, and cultural managers. With the participation of multiple stakeholders, an aspect of intangible cultural heritage will naturally be transformed with new cultural nuances and meanings. The complexity of the nomination process, as well as ICH management after it is inscribed, is increasingly creating a scholarly arena for battles over proper management and also for much academic scholarship. At the same time, the community sees the inscription of their example of intangible cultural heritage as an honor that gives them pride, and hopes that it will become the catalyst for creating a new impetus for safeguarding, transmitting, and practicing their heritage. The journey of developing a nomination and achieving

ICH inscription may be exciting to the participants and concerned onlookers because of their different social and political motivations, and the needs and goals of related individuals, groups of people, and communities. The inscription is often interpreted as a championship title, and always accompanied by fame and motivation, which overall brings more benefits than disadvantages. This attitude also provides the impetus to better understand the importance of ICH, and it contributes to the safeguarding of its vitality in Viet Nam, as well as by other states party to the 2003 Convention.

The views of the abovementioned scholars on heritagization all imply the transformation of the community’s heritage into something new, such as a tourist destination or a cultural product, and thereby entangled in politics, economics, and sometimes used by community members to benefit themselves.¹⁸ This article demonstrates the dynamics of the heritagization process despite the fact that these dynamics are shaped by whoever governs the heritage. The process of heritagization does not follow a set course determined by the rules, nor is it completely governed by specific rules or outsider interests; rather, it follows the dynamics of the local community, as well as the nature of the heritage site confronting the process of heritagization. Given the diversity of ICH in local communities, this article argues that it is important to recognize the complexities of heritage and the dynamics of local communities. Throughout the uneven course of history and development, it is local communities who have safeguarded and ensured the continuity of their heritage.

The Tutelary God Gióng and Traditional Village Festivals

The custom of worshipping tutelary gods is a cultural mark of the Vietnamese in the villages and communes of the Northern Delta region of Viet Nam. Possibly an historical figure, the tutelary god is an ancestor or a patron god who is worshipped by people as a guardian of the villagers when they are facing difficulties, epidemics, or natural disasters. Every time a family member is sick, gives birth to a child, conducts business, studies, or completes a job, he or she will go to the communal hall to pray to the god. The biggest commemoration of the

16 Salemink, “Described, Inscribed, Written Off,” p. 319.

17 De Cesari, “Thinking Through Heritage Regimes,” p. 407.

18 Nguyễn Thị Hiền, *Quản lý, bảo vệ và phát huy*.

year takes place during the traditional three-day feast to petition the god and take the god in a procession around the village. This is when a ceremonial group of dignitaries prays for the village to receive favorable weather and a good harvest. This is also a sacred time, a moment for everyone in the village to come and make offerings, worship, and pray to the god for blessings.

The Gióng God is a legendary figure in Vietnamese mythology who was consecrated by the local people into one of the most powerful immortal gods in the Vietnamese belief system. To commemorate the god, the local people hold the annual Gióng Festival in which they act out the mock battle of the legendary hero Gióng, expressing the dreams and aspirations of the people in the fight against invading enemies to protect the independence of the nation. At the same time, the festival reflects the desire for peace, prosperity, and a happy life.

The Gióng God is worshipped in numerous villages in the north of Viet Nam, but most notably at a festival that takes place at Phù Đổng Temple on the seventh and ninth of the fourth lunar month, when the god's feats against foreign invaders are reenacted through symbolic performances. The performances include riding a white horse into battle, drumming, beating gongs, the waving of the flag by the Commander of the Flag (Ông Hiệu cờ) who symbolizes the victory (figure 1), and twenty-eight female enemy generals who symbolize the yin elements as the enemy force (figure 2). As interpreted by Trần Quốc Vương, the Gióng God was a giant, and together with his iron horse they were seen as the symbol of the sky; the twenty-eight female generals represent the twenty-eight constellations located in the sky according to the division of the heavens in ancient Chinese astronomy. They were female, yin elements in opposition to the male Gióng God, a yang element.¹⁹ The commanders and generals are trained in a sacred space for approximately two weeks²⁰ during which time they must strictly follow the rules to prepare for their roles in the festival.²¹

The Gióng Festival requires more than one thousand villagers to perform roles in a mock battle in which for-



Figure 1. The Commander of the Flag waves the flag to symbolize the victory of the local people over the foreign invaders. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.

eign invaders are defeated (figure 3). My observations suggest that the local people regard the organization of the Gióng Festival as their duty to their tutelary god and that they feel obliged to contribute labor and money to organize the festival. Every citizen participating in the festival seems willing to fulfill their role with a deep belief that the god will witness their devotion and bless them, their families, and the villagers with a lucky and peaceful year. A member of the Festival Management Board said, "The thirteen thousand people of Phù Đổng Commune have great respect for the god, so everyone joins the festival and serves the god because it is a great honor." This member stated, "My family tries to save time to serve the god with the expectation that the god will bless my children with good health and good results in school."²²

¹⁹ Trần Quốc Vương, "Căn bản triết lý," p. 243.

²⁰ "Sacred space" here means a clean, private, and separate room in the house of the masters and generals. They stay in the room for approximately two weeks for training by experienced elders on how to perform their roles during the Gióng Festival.

²¹ Nguyễn Thị Hiền, "Đi làm Ông Hiệu, Cô Tướng," p. 60.

²² Interview with Mr. Đinh Văn Thịnh, a member of the Festival Management Board, March 2015.



Figure 2. A female general on her palanquin during the Gióng Festival. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2011, used with permission.



Figure 3. Panorama of the mock battle and the three mats where the commanders wave the flag. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.



Figure 4. The separate room where the commanders live during their training period before the Gióng Festival. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.



Figure 5. Commanders and their servants march to the mock battle against the foreign invaders. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.

The most important roles in the festival are those of the commanders and generals. The commanders act as the god's people (*người của thánh*), symbols of justice, and the domestic army. The generals act as the unrighteous forces—that is, as the foreign enemy. The village members performing these roles must be selected carefully, and must only come from “decent” families, that is, members of the family must not have broken any laws, must have good manners, and must maintain good relationships with other community members. Those performing the leading roles must also perceive that it is holy and respected work that guarantees their social status in the village for life. Performing these roles in the festival gives them pride and honor. In terms of material and spiritual rewards, they expect to receive good health, luck, and prosperity. As Mr. Biền, a village member, said, “It is part of spiritual life and happiness. It is an honor for your whole life.... If they perform such a role in the festival—in other words, they serve the god that will bring them luck, prosperity, and good business.”²³

However, participating in the festival, especially in the role of a commander or general, is a financial burden. Families must spend a great deal of money to buy clothes, new appliances, mattresses, pillows, blankets, and other personal belongings. Participants must stay in a clean room in their house during their apprenticeship for about two weeks. During this time, members of their family look after them like servants—cooking for them, washing their clothes, and carrying out other related errands (figure 4). During the celebratory days their families must host a feast to treat their relatives and friends. According to Mrs. Lê Mỹ, “Everyone is excited to participate, because it is a special time. Look how much effort people put into their roles during the festival.”²⁴ Many people volunteer and are determined to perform a role if they can afford to do so, and their relatives, friends, brothers, and neighbors help them by being assistants to them, serving them during the festive days by carrying their palanquin and parasol, and by carrying out other miscellaneous errands (figure 5).

Playing the role of commander or general is sometimes done for business reasons. For example, Mr. Đặng Duy Thành suffered financial hardship for several

consecutive years on his farm when many of his pigs died of disease. He wanted to send his son to participate as a commander in order to get a blessing from the god to reduce the risk of further disease on his farm. Or Ms. Bùi Thị Mến, who, since she was a child, wanted to act as a general at the festival; her parents, however, did not have the economic resources for her to participate. She confided that she never had the opportunity to become a general. Nowadays she and her husband have a milling service to earn extra income, and they wanted their daughter to be a general with the expectation that their family would be successful in business. This way of thinking—that acting as a commander or general is something honorable that influences one for life—permeates the commune, and that year, the family's business in fact prospered.²⁵ Symbolically, the commanders and generals become the people of the god immediately after asking for incense from the temple. This act marks the beginning of the practice period (lasting about two weeks), when they live in the sacred space, and then when they play the role of commander or general during the festival. Therefore, after the festival, they must strive to keep worthy of the “title” to ensure, as Mr. Bùi Khắc Thân said, “the holiness of the god, and at the same time, that they live with honor for their whole life in their commune ... without the role and position in the community, it is very difficult to mobilize people to take part in and assist in organizing the festival.”²⁶

The Gióng Festival is a large folk theater with hundreds of roles performed orally and accompanied by props and costumes. Each of these roles contains profound and symbolic meanings of serving the gods as commanders and generals who fought in the battle against the northern invaders (Han Chinese).²⁷ Besides the roles of commanders and generals, the local people are involved in carrying palanquins, parasols, and drums, cooking for feasts, and cleaning. There are also other roles—for example, army soldiers dressed in red costumes on reconnaissance duty and army soldiers dressed in black costumes as militia, as well as child scouts (figure 6).

23 Interview with Mr. Nguyễn Văn Biền, a villager from Phù Đồng Commune, May 2018.

24 Interview with Mrs. Lê Mỹ, a villager from Phù Đồng Commune, March 2015.

25 Interview with Mrs. Bùi Thị Mến, a villager from Phù Đồng Commune, May 2015.

26 Interview with Mr. Bùi Khắc Thân, a member of the Festival Management Board in Phù Đồng Commune, May 2015.

27 Trần Thế Pháp, *Lĩnh Nam trích quái*.



Figure 6. A procession during the Giong Festival with members of the local community. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.

Festival performances include processions and reenactments of the god's feats carried out during the battle against foreign invaders. The festival has numerous characters that participate in a water procession to a nearby river to get fresh water in a large jar as an offering to the god. They then carry the jar to the communal hall for worship for the entire year until the next cycle begins. The mock battle is set three kilometers away from the temple. At the battle site, three mats are laid on the ground, symbolizing the Northern Delta region of Viet Nam. In the middle of each mat is a bowl turned upside down, symbolizing a mountain, on a white sheet of paper that symbolizes clouds. The Flag Commander holds the flag of command and dances on each of the three mats, pushing the sheets out from underneath the bowls to the acclaim and joy of the participants. The battle is then over and weapons are again stored in the temple.

After the festival has finished, the local people pray for rain as a blessing from the god to be bestowed upon them for an abundant harvest. The participants claim a piece of a mat or a bowl, as they are considered sacred objects bringing good luck, curing spiritual afflictions, or for protection. The local people regard the Gióng Festival as extremely sacred, and organizing and participating in the festival is regarded as their duty to their god for which they receive blessings from the god in return. Through a symbolic battle, the local people have created both the imaginary and the real, as well as the sacred and the profane. The god embodies their aspirations for a peaceful country and for good weather that will bring an abundant harvest. Worship of the god has been spiritually linked to the cultural life of the custodian villagers, and it is a moral obligation for locals to commemorate their god. The fact that the sacred is

maintained so that the visibility of the festival is ensured will be scrutinized in the next section.

The Sacred

The rituals, religious festivals, and worship spaces related to the Gióng Festival that are regarded as sacred have been protected and kept intact. According to Durkheim, the sacred is a characteristic of religious beliefs and rituals, and is often placed higher and is seen as more powerful than the mundane; it is also forbidden on normal days, and it deserves to be complied with.²⁸ The sacred is seen from the perspective of local people, their experiences, and oral narratives that have been told to them.

The village communal hall is the most sacred place in Vietnamese villages. The space contains not only records of the story of the establishment of a village and the reclamation of the land, but it is where the villagers worship their gods, who always bless them. The message was passed down that people who walked by the hall had to remove their hats, or, if they were riding a horse, they had to dismount. As I recall from my own childhood, when I studied at the primary school located next to my home village's communal hall, I would not dare to point my forefinger toward the hall or to pluck any flowers or tree branches within the boundaries of the hall. It is said that during the Vietnamese-American War, bombs would not fall inside the temple, but outside. The ancient architecture of the temple remains intact to this day.

Before being placed inside the communal hall, sacred objects such as the statue of the Gióng God, the altars, incense bowls, the parasols, weapons (*chấp kích*), the eight treasures (*bát bửu*; see below), and so on, have to be sacralized as offering objects. The weapons (which are made of wood and include a knife, a scimitar, a halberd, a cudgel, a spear, a hammer, a bow, and so on) symbolize the power and military force of the god (figure 7). And the eight treasures (also made of wood and including a book, a horizontal lacquered board, wine, poetry, a fan, a flower basket, a zither, and a feather brush) symbolize the literary skills and knowledge of the god (figure 8). The weapons and treasures also function as a means of protection for the worship



Figure 7. The weapons (*chấp kích*) are made of wood and symbolize the power and military force of the god. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.



Figure 8. The eight treasures are made of wood and symbolize the literary skills and knowledge of the god. Photograph by Cao Trung Vinh, 2018, used with permission.

space and make the temple more solemn and sacred.

In Vietnamese folklore, there are many stories of people stealing objects from the communal halls and temples. It is said that these people would become critically ill and lose their minds unless they returned the stolen objects, or that they might have accidents, or that their children and grandchildren might have limited opportunities for study and work.

In addition to the place of worship, the sacred objects of worship are regarded as untouchable, with the statue of the Gióng God and the area where the statue is placed being the most sacred. The statue is usually placed in the innermost room in a closed case. In many communal halls, the hall dedicated to the god is always kept closed to prevent impurity, and only those in

²⁸ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*.

charge of looking after the communal hall are allowed to open the case and then only on festive days or prior to the New Year, to perform the ritual cleaning of the statue and, in some cases, to put new clothes on the god. Acts related to the god's statues are sacred and must be performed as ritual acts by those responsible, who must be clean (in terms of body and soul, as well as being unblemished in social and family affairs) in order to touch the god's body. The water for bathing the god is fragrant water made from locally available fragrant flowers and herbs, and the water is sanctified after the bathing and then used for the treatment of those suffering physical pain. However, inside the temple, people usually stand as close as possible to the god when offering prayers. All sacred spaces and artifacts are inviolable, making the space more and more majestic and mysterious.

It is understood that acts of disrespect toward the sacred place of worship, as well as the tutelary god, are punished. Punishments, including curses, are inflicted on those who are blasphemous to the god and those who steal objects for worship such as statues, decorative vases, incense bowls, calligraphy, or other related items from the communal hall. It is the sacred nature of the communal hall that has enabled it to exist for hundreds of years, through the vicissitudes of history, including wars, without being destroyed by bombs, storms, or fire, or lost during the period of land reform in Viet Nam during the 1950s when many places of worship were taken over for storage or for use as army facilities.

The revival of the Gióng Festival took place after the period of Renovation in Viet Nam during the 1990s, when it was restored based on the memories of many people and the records that they made: in the first instance, from the *Festival Notebook* that the villagers had compiled; and second, from the worship dedicated to the tutelary god that remained in the consciousness and lives of the people. The latter was strong due to the cultural features of the village whose custom of worshipping the tutelary god was deeply ingrained, and also because of the social norms of those who participated in the festival's activities as the "god's children." This is related to the sacred and to the social roles people play when they participate in the organization of the festival and perform roles in festivities. The sacred has been a factor that not only has the power to frighten people, but also shapes how they worship the holy tutelary god. The sacred works as a catalyst to preserve the continuity of the festival, successfully safeguarding this element of intangible cultural heritage for generations. As Birgit

Meyer and Marleen de Witte have noted, "Sacralization is helpful to better grasp the success or failure of making heritage appeal, as well as the contestations invoked by it."²⁹

The sacredness of the Gióng Festival has also been preserved in the training space and objects used by the commanders and generals in their performances. Specifically, these participants are not merely involved in acting in the festival. They must symbolically take on a transitional state in performing ceremonial acts before the festival to prepare themselves for acting as the god's people. During training, those performing the roles of commanders and generals must stay in a separate and clean place, and they are regarded as sacred and, as such, are untouchable. Thus separated from daily life and placed in a sacred space that is pure and clean, they train to become the god's people as commanders and generals. In relation to the god, the sacred is to be maintained and protected, otherwise danger would arise, and taboos would be broken.

As a villager explained to me, performing the role of commanders or generals is also a blessing from the god. Families will try very hard to have at least one member perform this role, if someone in the family has not already done so. If more than one member has performed such a role, the family gains social status, luck, and prosperity. The role of sacred space in a festival whether for a general community member or for a general, or even a commander, has been interpreted by anthropologists as an important part of the transformation of social position.³⁰ At the liminality stage, those performing the roles of commanders and generals must abide by strict regulations governed by tradition and taboo, such as not eating food with a strong odor such as garlic or fish, not participating during a period of mourning, and not having sexual relations, otherwise they are thought likely to receive punishment in the form of bad luck and trouble for themselves and their families. It is felt that within the sphere of these festive practices, the sacred should be preserved and not violated. We see that this view corresponds with the idea of liminality—i.e., the "betwixt, between" status developed by Mary Douglas and Victor Turner during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Turner's schema, the

29 Meyer and de Witte, "Heritage and the Sacred," p. 280.

30 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*; Turner, "Betwixt and Between."

liminality stage marks the moment when one is not a person in everyday life, but not yet a god. It is also a moment of exalted and extremely sacred power and, at the same time, it can be a dangerous time if not completed in accordance with custom; any violations are likely to have severe consequences. Douglas applies Turner's concept of liminality and the sacred to the development of a theory of purification.³¹ According to Douglas, the sacred should continue to be barred with taboos and always be considered infectious because its relationship is limited by boundary rituals and the belief that crossing the forbidden border is dangerous.³² Douglas then discusses situations, people, and things that threaten the boundary. The next situation deals with an important moment in the state of change in the ritual.

The sacred and mundane must be prevented from colliding and the means of preventing this unwanted outcome mainly include prohibitions or taboos. A taboo is the protection that determines the location of the sacred. The training of the commanders and generals is practiced in a sacred space that has been safeguarded for generations, and entering and leaving this sacred space is always prohibited to avoid it being violated. It is believed that if the sacred is violated, there will be consequences. During fieldwork, numerous stories were recounted to me about the sanctity of the punishments that are carried out: for example, for being unclean, arbitrarily entering the sacred rooms reserved for the commanders and generals, blaspheming the god, and stealing sacred objects from the communal hall. According to Alfred Gell,³³ such punishments amount to the abduction of agency. Agency is the abduction of man, and it is the sacred object (god, power) that causes something to happen. The sacred is thereby preserved and heritage ensures its vitality.

The Impact of Heritagization on the Gióng Festival

In the more than ten years since its inscription, the Gióng Festival has not changed into something "monumental" or become the type of "world heritage" site that was expected. This is because the community's expecta-

tions that investments would be made in infrastructure, tourism development, and to support local people in organizing the festival on a large scale have not materialized.

In cases of the inscription of other examples of intangible cultural heritage, however, the community's wishes for the state to invest in building "monumental" infrastructure did not happen because the inscription was simply not a "gift of money." The practice of the Gióng Festival involves seeing the worship of the communal god as an indispensable cultural and spiritual activity that has been organized by the community for hundreds of years. However, other examples of intangible cultural heritage, such as Xoan Singing and the Worship of the Hùng Kings were subject to bureaucratic oversight after their inscription. All activities related to the Worship of the Hùng Kings, including the implementation of measures to safeguard it, such as the anniversary celebration held on even years, are under the management and leadership of the central and provincial government agencies and divisions, from the grassroots to the district, provincial, and central levels.

In other cases, the inscribed examples of ICH are privileged in that they are favored over others, such as through concentrated investment in the development of those that are the object of programs to safeguard them (for example, hundreds of billions of Vietnamese dong have been invested to revitalize rituals that have disappeared, build performance spaces, and transmit heritage, including Xoan Singing in Ph Thọ Province).³⁴ Inscription is almost like turning an example of intangible cultural heritage into a brand, so that it becomes more of a cultural expression or practice to be exploited as a tourist attraction, to promote a locality, and for personal gain rather than something that has existed in the community for hundreds of years. To a certain extent, the intervention of UNESCO, the state, and the team of experts involved in the inscription has resulted in the element of cultural heritage being "appropriated" by external stakeholders, governments, and international organizations.³⁵ Through this process, the example of cultural heritage has been transformed into something else.³⁶

31 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

32 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 41.

33 Gell, *Art and Agency*.

34 Nguyễn, Thị Phương Châm, "Dynamics of Power and Contestations," p. 35.; Nguyễn Đức Thủy, "Bảo vệ và phát huy."

35 Salemink, "Appropriating Culture," p. 174.

36 Harrison, *Heritage*; Sjöholm, *Heritagisation, Re-Heritagisation*.

In the case of the Gióng Festival, as demonstrated above, the local community actively participates and still organizes the festival every year under the administration of the Festival Management Board, which is mainly comprised of elderly people operating with the support of the government, unions, local leaders, and concerned departments, as well as the relevant agencies in relation to security, social order, and the environment. Cultural practices in Viet Nam are operated under a management system involving laws, directives, resolutions, and circular letters from the central to the local levels of government; however, in the case of the Gióng Festival, government support also includes external aspects like security and order, as well as some organizational issues, such as public relations and advertising. As for festival activities, including related practices and performances, the rules for participation and the process by which the festival takes place are carried out by the Festival Management Board and experienced village elders. Thus, I have argued that, despite the passage of time, the effects of modern life, and cases of intervention in the Gióng Festival due to its inscription, the festival has retained its historical, cultural, and special spiritual meaning as well as its social functions for the custodian community.

It is important to reemphasize the nature of the sacred and the consequences of it being violated. While not new to the anthropological study of religion, it is currently of considerable interest in the field of heritage studies. Punishments for violating the sacred create fear, as well as compliance, with customs. Despite the organization and practice of this example of intangible cultural heritage being under the direction and administration of the government and heritage regime of Viet Nam, it has proven difficult to overcome the boundaries of the sacred. These are far more powerful than the national and international management regimes imposed on the sacred elements of this example of cultural heritage.

This sacrality helps the Gióng Festival remain safeguarded and more intact than other examples of cultural heritage in the same domain. Sacredness envelops the space and the festive activities. The custom of the commanders and generals in learning and practicing their roles in the sacred space remains deeply entrenched among the members of the Phù Đổng community. The safeguarding of the sacred is a cultural trait of the community; the people safeguard it to protect their tradition and to motivate others to participate in

the practice. Once the activities and the worship space related to the god are considered sacred, a person who violates them can be punished, and they risk misfortune and sickness. And, on the contrary, if people practice according to custom, obey the prescribed rules, and do not violate the sacred, they will be compensated and enjoy good fortune and continued luck.

Heritagization may help renew an example of intangible cultural heritage³⁷ and also allow for an appreciation of that change.³⁸ Yet, more than ten years after its inscription by UNESCO, the sacredness of the Gióng Festival and the core values of the heritage have been maintained, and its visibility ensured. Once something partakes of the sacred, violations of that sacrality can be punished, so even outsiders, to say nothing of those in the community, dare not touch or violate the sacred, which includes the place of worship, the god's statue, and the participants acting as the god's people during the festival. The heritagization of the Gióng Festival through the intervention of the heritage regime, as well as the actors and stakeholders, did not subsequently change its values, meaning, or substance. Even though ritual practice may be profane at times in modern life, under all circumstances, the sacred has become a component that ensures the vitality of the festival today.

Conclusion

Heritagization is a process impacting the cultural heritage of local communities. This process can involve a wide range of actors intervening through governmental and heritage regimes at national and international levels, such as the inscription and safeguarding of an example of intangible cultural heritage in compliance with the regulations of the management system. This article has shown that the dynamics of heritagization are not the same for all examples of intangible cultural heritage, even those in the same domain. There is no common pattern of heritagization; rather, this process depends on the nature of the example of cultural heritage, the dynamics of the local custodian community, and the practices associated with the example throughout its history.

³⁷ Karlström, "Spirits," p. 397.

³⁸ Byrne, "Heritage," p. 155.

The core nature of the Gióng Festival is closely linked to the village communities of Vietnamese farmers. Due to rapid urbanization, the festival is now practiced by semi-urban and semi-rural people on the outskirts of the capital Hanoi, but this has not meant that the festival has lost its spiritual meaning or social and cultural functions. This example of intangible cultural heritage has not been overshadowed by its past like “lived elements of culture” as stated by Kristin Kuutma.³⁹ Moreover, despite the ups and downs and the external influences generated by its inscription, the Gióng Festival does not adhere to a universal standard, nor has the meaning of the historically and culturally specific character of this example of cultural heritage been lost, as was seen in other cases noted by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.⁴⁰ While the Gióng Festival has been inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List, it has not transformed itself “into manageable symbols of representation and argumentation,” nor does it “risk losing” its own attributes, a possible outcome suggested by Kuutma.⁴¹

This study has highlighted that for any example of intangible cultural heritage inscribed on the UNESCO list, it is important to ascertain that the example reflects cultural identity, continuity, and transmission across generations. Although the 2013 Convention and heritage nominations neither mention nor require a lengthy analysis of the history of the example of cultural heritage, this does not mean that the example has lost these values. The values of the Gióng Festival as an example of intangible cultural heritage are important for its custodian community. The custodians have practiced and transmitted the Gióng Festival for generations in accord with its intrinsic spirit—i.e., the sacred, and worship of the tutelary god as the patron deity of the villagers. UNESCO’s inscription has given the villagers pride, honor, expectations, and a willingness to continue the practice.

As amply demonstrated above, the people of Phù Đổng Commune voluntarily participate in the Gióng Festival, especially in performing the roles of the commanders and generals, as they feel it is done to honor, respect, and show faith to their patron god. This article has shown that participation in the festival is not understood as ordinary, mundane work but is done to

serve the communal god. The study has also demonstrated the relationship between heritagization and the sacred. Once the sacredness of the festival is observed in the community, it is safeguarded, maintained, and promoted in the context of contemporary life. If there is a violation of this sacrality, such as by breaking the sacred hat that has been passed down for hundreds of years, then there is also a risk of breaking the inherent structure of the festival, which would have a negative impact on the ability to safeguard it for future generations. This article has revealed that heritagization is not a singular process, but rather a dynamic one depending on the nature of the example of cultural heritage in question and the local community.

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