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The emperor's new clothes: Re-fashioning ritual in the Huế Festival

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This essay focuses on the political dimensions of the Festival Huế, which is claimed to be significant as a celebration of the nation. Although socialist state rituals have lost their relevance in the Đổi Mới *era, the revival and re-invention of ritualised tradition create fertile ground for new ritualised events that legitimate and lend significance to the current regime. I argue that despite the unfamiliarity of many spectators with the symbolic contents of these new forms, they are effective because of their aesthetic resemblance to, and association with, familiar rituals.*

In the spring of 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006, the city of Huế in Vietnam organised biennial performing arts festivals under the name of 'Festival Huế'. The concept of a modern, public-oriented, international performing arts festival following the model of those held at Avignon and Edinburgh is new to Vietnam. The Huế Festivals are major cultural events and generally meet with great public acclaim and appreciation among the Vietnamese. The first such event was the result of close Franco-Vietnamese cooperation; in 2002 the Festival was greatly expanded to include artists and troupes not only from Vietnam and France, but from four ASEAN neighbours (Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia) and three East Asian countries (China, Japan, South Korea). The Huế Festivals represented the first attempts to host troupes from Vietnam and other countries performing for a mixed audience of local people and Vietnamese and foreign visitors.

After stagings of the Festival, local, central and transnational stakeholders claim that the event is highly successful – culturally, economically and politically. Their claim

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I have had the opportunity to attend the Huế Festivals in 2000 and 2002 (in different capacities, representing a donor organisation and also as a guest) and have had access to internal documents and conversations during various stages of preparations for, and reporting on, the festivals. For information on the Huế Festivals in 2004 and 2006 – in particular the *Nam Giao* rituals – I have relied on Michael DiGregorio. Research for this paper was made possible by a travel grant from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I would like to thank Prof. Phan Đăng Nhật, Prof. Ngô Đức Thịnh, Prof. Nguyễn Văn Huy, Mai Khắc Ứng, Trương Ngọc Thắng, Nguyễn Hiền and the organisers of the Huế Festival for their generous support during my research in Vietnam. I thank Michael DiGregorio, Hy Van Luong, Hue Tam Ho Tai, Laurel Kendall, Bruce Lockhart and anonymous reviewers for *JSEAS* for their critical comments which helped me sharpen my analysis. Any mistakes, however, are my responsibility alone.

to success resonates with the local public, domestic and foreign visitors and – via the media – a nationwide audience as well. This modern arts festival with international allure, aiming to be on a par with its famous counterparts at Edinburgh or Avignon, is seen as a major contribution to national identity and hence as serving state interests.[1] This is surprising given the absence of any explicit political message or overt political symbolism in the performances. Against the backdrop of the religious and ritual revival or renewal in Vietnam – mostly involving 'traditional' temple and village festivals – considerable political and scholarly debate in the country and overseas refers to a politics of tradition in the sense given by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in *The invention of tradition*.[2] Although new and modern, defining performances at the Festival Huế are often presented as 'traditional' or else refer to 'traditional' cultural forms. Given the frequent attempts to de-contextualise and re-contextualise these forms for new audiences and purposes while claiming to represent authentic cultural identities, the Festival Huế could even be called postmodern.

In this essay I would like to focus on the political dimensions of the Festival Huế, which is claimed to have significance as a celebration of the nation. How would it achieve this aim, given the fact that it is not a traditional village or temple event but a modern arts festival?[3] Can Festival Huế be analysed as a ritual event with ritual and political effects if it is first and foremost entertainment? This question is predicated on the classic Durkheimian distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane' categories, whereby ritual is classed as somehow belonging to the sacred sphere.[4] In *The ritual process*, Victor Turner theorised ritual time-space as liminal, i.e. as non-structure in the sense that in ritual, different rules apply from everyday life. These rules, often an inversion from what is 'normal', result in what Turner calls *communitas*, i.e. 'the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses'.[5] In his later work, Turner applied these analytical tools – honed to the study of ritual – to festivity,

1 Interview with Lê Viết Xê, Deputy Chairman of the Thừa Thiên-Huế People's Committee and Chairman of the Festival Huế Organising Committee, 14 May 2002. The categories 'traditional' (*truyền thống*) and 'modern' (*hiện đại*) are often used synonymously with notions of 'us' (*ta*) and 'them'/'West' (*Tây*).

2 *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger; Kirsten Endres, *Ritual, Fest und Politik in Nordvietnam. Zwischen Ideologie und Tradition* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000); Hy Van Luong, 'Economic reform and the intensification of rituals in two north Vietnamese villages, 1980–90', in *The challenge of reform in Indochina*, ed. Börje Ljunggren (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, 1993), pp. 259–91; Luong, 'The Marxist state and the dialogic re-structuration of culture in rural Vietnam', in *Indochina: Social and cultural change*, ed. David Elliott *et al.* (Claremont, CA: Claremont McKenna College Keck Center, 1994), pp. 79–117; John Kleinen, *Facing the future, reviving the past: A study of social change in a northern Vietnamese village* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1999); Shaun Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

3 The extent to which traditional temple and village festivals form the object of a politics of tradition in the sense given by Hobsbawm and Ranger has been highlighted in this issue in the contributions by DiGregorio, Salemink, Lê Hồng Lý and Malarney.

4 Émile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

5 Victor Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967); *Celebration: Studies in festivity and ritual*, ed. Turner (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 44.

carnival, drama and performance, thus disengaging the study of ritual from Durkheim's category of the sacred.[6]

Combined with Robert Bellah's groundbreaking work on civil religion, Turner's seminal work inspired scholars like David Kertzer to study the phenomenon of political ritual – a field that turned out to be fertile ground in former Communist countries.[7] Scholars working on China and Vietnam focused on the containment and appropriation of existing ritual by coining such notions as 'ritual displacement'.[8] In this essay, however, my focus is not on the invention of political ritual or displacement and appropriation of existing ritual, but rather on scripted public events that are ritualised and increasingly mediatised. While the notions of ritualisation and mediatisation are pertinent for the analysis that follows, my emphasis is on ritual as embodied, performative practice rather than as textual narrativity and conscious reflection.[9]

It is precisely this embodied experience of ritualised performance – on the part of both performer and audience – which allows for partly subliminal but highly emotional bonds of identification.[10] In my analysis of the hidden message of the ritual form I am inspired by Hayden White's structural analysis of the historical narrative which suggests that compared with the diary and the chronicle, the narrative form always eliminates alternative historical possibilities through selection and order, and moralises events by suggesting a particular closure.[11] If applied to ritualised public events, it

6 Victor Turner, *The anthropology of performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987).

7 Robert Bellah, 'Civil religion in America', *Daedalus*, 96, 1 (1967): 1–21; José Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994); Gerd Baumann, 'Body politic or bodies of culture? How nation-state practices turn citizens into religious minorities', *Cultural Dynamics*, 10, 3 (1998): 263–80; Christopher Binns, 'The changing face of power: Revolution and accommodation in the development of Soviet ceremonial system', Part I, *Man*, 14 (1979): 585–606; Part II, *Man*, 15 (1980): 170–87; David Kertzer, *Ritual, politics, and power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988); Christel Lane, *The rites of rulers: Ritual in industrial society – the Soviet case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

8 Ann Anagnost, 'The politics of ritual displacement', in *Asian visions of authority: Religion and the modern states of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre and Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 221–54; Shaun Malarney, 'The limits of 'state functionalism' and the reconstruction of funerary ritual in contemporary northern Vietnam', *American Ethnologist*, 23, 3 (1996): 540–60.

9 Don Handelman, *Models and mirrors: Towards an anthropology of public events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); John Stewart, 'Patronage and control in the Trinidad Carnival', in *The anthropology of experience*, ed. Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 289–315. On ritualisation see Catherine Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and *Recasting ritual: Performance, media, identity*, ed. Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Mary M. Crain (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). Mediatisation is discussed in Nick Couldry, *Media rituals: A critical approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); and Birgit Meyer, '"Praise the Lord": Popular cinema and Pentecostalite style in Ghana's new public sphere', *American Ethnologist*, 31, 1 (2004): 92–110.

10 Thomas Csordas, 'Introduction: The body as representation and being in the world', in *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–26; M. L. Lyon and J. M. Barbalet, 'Society's body: Emotion and the "somatization" of social theory', in the same volume, pp. 48–67; Ingrid Rudie, 'Making persons in a global ritual? Embodied experience and free-floating symbols in Olympic sport', in *Recasting ritual*, ed. Hughes-Freeland and Crain, pp. 113–34.

11 Hayden White, *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

becomes understandable how these can have such profound political effects and carry so much political weight, even in the absence of overt political messages. Although against the backdrop of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms socialist state ritual loses its relevance, the revival and reinvention of ritualised tradition create fertile ground for new ritualised events that legitimate and lend significance to the current political regime.

In the following sections I shall develop this argument with reference to the Festival Huế. In the next section, I shall introduce the Festival as a ritualised public and performative event before highlighting Minh Hạnh's fashion show 'Eyes of the Moon'. I shall compare that performance with ritual mediumship performances during pilgrimages in Huế as an instantiation of the iconographic cross-over between various religious traditions and artistic disciplines. I shall conclude the article with an analysis of the Festival as ritual by looking at the re-enactment of the imperial *Nam Giao* ritual and at the closing ceremony.

Festival Huế as public event and as authentic performance

Festival Huế is a major cultural event in Vietnam and – by all accounts – in the region as well. To give a sense of the magnitude of the 2002 Festival, from 4 to 15 May, 1,554 artists belonging to 33 troupes from nine countries staged 195 performances in the official 'In' programme and 28 'Off' performances during 12 days, attracting over 75,000 paying visitors, including over 18,000 foreigners.[12] These figures do not include the number of spectators at public, open-access events like the massive opening and closing ceremonies, and these numbers have grown substantially in subsequent years. The official 'In' programme took place on several stages and in various locations within the sumptuous surroundings of the imperial citadel (*Đại Nội*). Many of these performances alluded to the legacy of Huế as the former imperial capital (under the Nguyễn dynasty, 1802–1945) by showcasing or reworking court traditions not only from Vietnam but also from other Asian countries and even France. The 'Off' programme was organised at sites around the city and consisted of popular programmes that were freely accessible. In both 2000 and 2002, major events like the opening and closing ceremonies were broadcast nationwide on live television – a novelty for Vietnam – and attracted international media attention, including CNN and the French-language TV 5.

For the organisers and the authorities, the Huế Festival meant many different things at the same time. For local authorities and cultural leaders of Thừa Thiên-Huế province and of the city itself, the organisation of the first two Festivals seemed an uphill battle. Wanting to put Huế on the cultural and economic map nationally and internationally, they initially had to fight indifference and disdain in the 'centre' ('*trung ương*', referring to Hanoi) in terms of confidence that Huế – as a cultural 'sleeping beauty' and an economic and political backwater – could pull off such a mega-event. Local leaders sought allies by targeting politically influential leaders of Huế descent, like Politburo member and former Minister of Culture and Information Nguyễn Khoa

12 Statistics from 'Báo cáo tổng kết Festival Huế 2002' [General report on Festival Huế 2002], unpublished document. The festival was covered extensively in the Vietnamese media, with major events broadcast nation-wide on television.

Điềm; cultural leaders with a soft spot for Huế – like *tuồng* (traditional opera) singer and Vice-Minister for Culture Lê Tiến Thọ; and foreign donors such as various foundations and the embassies of France and other countries. In forging these alliances, the Huế leaders also had to overcome some distrust with regards to their intentions, fighting off allegations of localism (*cục bộ*), of supposed attempts to revive Huế-based feudalism, and of inappropriate spending on artistic performances in a poor region that had been ravaged by floods in 1999 and 2000.

One way to deal with this complex situation was to portray Festival Huế as a conscious attempt to contribute to the construction of a national identity (*bản sắc dân tộc*) by building a bridge between what was seen as 'traditional' (and hence quintessentially Vietnamese) and as 'modern' (meaning cosmopolitan or even Western), in the context of the national effort to 'industrialise and modernise the country' (*công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa đất nước*). As the 'former imperial capital' (*cố đô*), Huế's material and intangible heritage was inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage list in December 1993.[13] By developing Huế into an internationally renowned festival city, local authorities have hoped to achieve a number of different aims. The first is to build a bridge between Huế's past imperial grandeur and a more forward-looking orientation based on contemporary art forms, taking pride in its present-day cultural achievements as a festival city.[14] Though definitely not a traditional celebration, Festival Huế is seen as a major contribution to the conservation of the city's cultural heritage by instilling pride; developing a forum for research, training and performance; and creating a social, cultural and economic basis to sustain these efforts. The second aim has been to ground the economic development of the city on its main asset – culture – by promoting it as an international tourist destination, thus creating a social, cultural and economic basis to sustain the efforts of conservation.[15] For instance, the 2002 Festival featured theatre, ballet and music performances in the classical court traditions from both imperial Huế and other countries in East and Southeast Asia. A third aim is more ideological and concerns celebration of the nation, as brought out in a speech during the 2002 closing ceremony by the Chairman of the organising committee, Lê Viết Xê (who doubled as Vice-Chairman of the provincial People's Committee). Xê presented the Huế Festival as a fine realisation of Resolution No. V of the Party Central Committee: to 'build a progressive culture imbued with national identity' (*xây dựng một nền văn hoá tiên tiến đậm đà bản sắc dân tộc*). Although it was

13 Bruce Lockhart, 'Re-assessing the Nguyễn dynasty', *Crossroads*, 15, 1 (2001): 9–53; Colin Long, 'Feudalism in the service of the Revolution: Reclaiming heritage in Hue', *Critical Asian Studies*, 35, 4 (2004): 535–58.

14 See http://www.huefestival.com/duam/den_e.htm (accessed February 2003).

15 See Nguyễn Thái Thiên's interview with provincial governor Nguyễn Văn Mễ in *Vietnam Economic News*, 12 (2002): 17–18 ('Thua Thien Hue – A venue for festivals'); Lê Mỹ Y, 'Phỏng vấn Trưởng Ban Tổ chức Festival Huế 2002' [Interview with the Chair of the Organising Committee of Festival Huế 2002], *Sông Hương*, 159 (2002): 9–11; Trần Hoàng Phố, 'Hành trình đi tìm nguồn cội của một ý tưởng: Festival Huế (gặp gỡ Anh Nguyễn Khoa Điềm) [Journey of discovery for the source of an idea: Meeting with Nguyễn Khoa Điềm], *Sông Hương*, 159 (2002): 12–18; See also the special Festival issue of *Huế – the World Heritage Archives* for May 2002.

a new and definitely not a traditional festival, it was presented as a major contribution to national identity and hence as serving state interests.[16]

How would Festival Huế achieve this last aim? There are various possible answers to the question. One answer holds that in a major festival like this the main sponsor or organiser is credited with the prestige of being the centre of attention. This amounts to the kind of political patronage detected by John Stewart in his analysis of the Trinidad Carnival.[17] However, such public credit is not automatic and can be easily subverted. For example, when the (televised) closing speech linking the Huế Festival 2000 to national identity was interrupted by fireworks going off prematurely, many in the audience were laughing, thus making a farce of the message as well. During press conferences I also noticed a critical attitude among journalists who were suspicious that the Festival would be an elite affair without resonance among 'ordinary people'.

Another possible argument is that a festival like this contributes to political legitimacy by presenting itself as one chapter in a historical narrative of descent and authenticity. Although widely used and invested with a positive aura, authenticity is a contested concept in the social sciences. In culture and the arts there is a widespread quest for things deemed 'authentic', i.e. representing something genuine but transcendental and hence disconnected from this world. Authenticity is then conceived of as something 'real', as the 'essence' of practices experienced in the past but which has disappeared in the present, modern context. This loss is deplored by many cultural analysts, including Stewart, who describes the politicisation of the Trinidad Carnival and its appropriation for tourist purposes as a loss of the authentic, communal experience.[18] Some critics, on the other hand, argue that authenticity is an impossibility as it assumes a point zero beyond historical time, and that it is imposed on 'others' in order to keep them in their places. Others like Richard Handler claim that the quest for authenticity is a corollary of modern individualism and nationalism because it refers to something 'real' and 'genuine' which we have lost but which can be redeemed through the nation.[19]

A clear example of this is the official celebration of the Hùng Kings Festival in Phong Châu district of Phú Thọ province, once organised by the nineteenth-century Nguyễn dynasty and now by the Hanoi government, thus suggesting a direct line between the legendary founding dynasty of the Việt nation and the present political regime.[20] In the same vein, the Huế Festival could conceivably be interpreted as an attempt to construe the present political regime as the natural successor to the Nguyễn,

16 Lê Viết Xê, interview, 14 May 2002.
17 Steward, 'Patronage and control'.
18 Ibid., pp. 291, 310.
19 Richard Handler, 'Authenticity', *Anthropology Today*, 2, 1 (1986): 2–4. On the impossibility of authenticity see, for example, Beth Conklin, 'Body paint, feathers, and VCRs: Aesthetics and authenticity in Amazonian activism', *American Ethnologist*, 24, 4 (1997): 711–37; and Sidney Kasfir, 'African art and authenticity', *African Arts*, 25, 2 (1992): 40–55.
20 See, for instance, *Nhân Dân*, 20 Apr. 2002; the article by Shaun Malarney in this issue; Oscar Salemink, 'Religious definitions of nation and nationalism in post-socialist Vietnam', paper presented at the conference on Nationalism in Mainland Southeast Asia, Amsterdam, 17 Oct. 2005; and Salemink, 'Nieuwe rituelen en de natie: Nederland in de spiegel van Vietnam', inaugural lecture, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 9 June 2006.

thus representing the government as 'authentic' and hence legitimate. However, the historical relations of the Communist Party with the Nguyễn dynasty have been too antagonistic to make that argument plausible.[21] Some of the Vietnamese performances at the Festival refer explicitly to Nguyễn court traditions, either as self-styled re-enactments of those traditions or as modern performances inspired by those elements of the imperial past.

For instance, the performances of *nhã nhạc* (classical – literally, 'refined' or 'solemn' – music) and *múa cung đình* (court ballet in the Huế court tradition), staged at the Duyệt Thị Đường royal theatre inside the citadel, were presented as re-enactments of 'authentic' court traditions, supposedly narrowly saved from oblivion by tapping the memories of three nonagenarians. Yet somehow the performances appeared more to be an aesthetic mixture of Revolutionary choreography and East Asian drumming shows, and tended to be far removed from the dubious notion of 'cultural authenticity'.[22] In the words of the musicologist and General-Secretary of the Vietnam Folklore Association, Tô Ngọc Thanh: '*Nhã nhạc* is considered by many to be

Figure 1. A court dance (*múa cung đình*) performed as part of the classical court music (*nhã nhạc*) programme at the Festival Huế, 2002

Source: Photograph provided by the author

21 Lockhart, 'Re-assessing the Nguyễn dynasty'; Long, 'Feudalism in the service of the Revolution'.
22 Handler, 'Authenticity'.

an academic art and as such is not popular among people nowadays. Very few people understand enough about it to enjoy it fully. It is for this reason that it has almost disappeared.'[23] The enthusiastic public response to 'non-authentic' elements during the *nhã nhạc* performance seemed to confirm Thanh's expectations, and as far as his Huế colleagues were concerned, justified efforts to 'improve' court music by making it more interesting and spectacular.

Given that Festival Huế is expected to contribute to the construction of a national identity and to the idea of the present political regime as the legitimate guardian of that identity, how is that goal achieved? What is the 'message' projected and communicated in the performances, and how is it perceived by the audience? With respect to the *nhã nhạc* performance, the message is contained not in the symbolic content of the show, but in its cultural form. A few artists and cultural experts aside, few people inside or outside of Vietnam could understand and interpret the ritual meanings contained in *nhã nhạc*. In a situation where the symbolic meaning of the performances as rituals have been hidden from view, they cannot be taken to be Turnerian or Geertzian public symbols. This seems to confirm Frits Staal's idea that 'there are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual'.[24] What matters, then, is not the symbolic substance but the cultural form of the performance as an artistic genre – a form which through borrowing, cross-over and repetition has become quintessentially Vietnamese, and therefore 'authentic', in the eyes of a large part of the audience.

In the following section, I shall elaborate on this distinction between form and symbolic content of ritual at a time of religious revival and reconstruction in Vietnam. By emphasising cultural form and consequently de-emphasising symbolic content, I develop an argument regarding the formal continuity between 'official' culture and – putatively authentic – traditional folk culture as a form of aesthetic politics. In the following pages I am presenting three performances as vignettes, as a basis for an analysis of Festival Huế in the light of the questions above. The first vignette discusses the fashion show 'Eyes of the Moon' by designer Đặng Minh Hạnh – a self-styled modern performance but rooted in imperial Huế tradition. The second vignette presents the closing ceremony in 2002, in particular the revived tradition of releasing floating lanterns on the Perfume River (*Sông Hương*).

By juxtaposing these vignettes with ritual in action in a section on spirit mediums in Huế, I shall argue that these performances use particular cultural forms that allude to the iconography of ritual in Vietnam. Through aesthetic association the effect of the performance is linked to the efficacy of ritual, regardless of the symbolic content in the way these performances are presented to and accepted by the audience. By this focus on recognisable iconographic forms across disciplinary and religious boundaries, the political regime can assume the role of mediator between this world and the 'other world' as in the Confucian court tradition. In a last vignette, then, I shall pay attention to the hesitant attempts in the context of Festival Huế to revive the *Nam Giao*

23 Lê Hương, 'Majestic melodies evoke echoes of royal past in Hue', *Việt Nam News*, 16 May 2002.
24 Frits Staal, 'The meaninglessness of ritual', *Numen*, 26, 1 (1979): 3. See Turner, *Ritual process* and Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

ritual – historically performed by the Emperor on behalf of the nation, and hence explicitly political.

The Minh Hạnh fashion show

The performance which was most popular with the Vietnamese audience was the fashion show 'Eyes of the Moon' by the couturier Minh Hạnh, offering 'a combination of the present and the past' – in particular 'a collection of royal costumes of Huế and French courts'.[25] The shows took place in the normally tranquil garden of the recently restored Diên Thọ Palace, formerly the home of the Empress Dowager. Against a background of 'techno' music by French composer Laurent Garnier, the models showed clothing which clearly referred to the court heritage of Huế in combination with motifs and fabrics inspired by eighteenth-century French royal clothing. Minh Hạnh, who as guardian of a specifically Vietnamese fashion rooted in traditional clothes – she is the Director of the Hồ Chí Minh City-based Fashion Design Institute and specialises in *áo dài*, Vietnam's iconic 'long dress' – was clearly inspired by a project to re-create the imperial fabrics and clothes of the Nguyễn dynasty, and lavishly used such fabrics, motifs, forms and colours.[26] The clothes had a definite traditional 'feel' to them. Minh Hạnh said that the two fashion shows during the Huế Festivals of 2000 and 2002 'exposed the value of [Huế] people's sense of aesthetics. Violet, the city's most characteristic colour, played the leading role in the first collection, while the second featured designs derived from traditional royal garb.' Yet the new style also evoked criticism from elderly Huế women who deplored the coldness (*thoáng mát*) and novelty of the clothes in comparison with the truly 'traditional royal garb'.[27]

The show, featuring ceremonial and largely 'unwearable' clothes displayed by models moving to postmodern techno music in this nostalgic setting, clearly excited the mainly Vietnamese public of all ages, who had been willing to wait long hours and were now craning their necks to see the models. During the show, people were pushing and shoving to get a good view of the show and of the models who – with their cool and aloof attitude – are the embodiment of physical beauty and desirability in present-day Vietnam.[28] The excitement created among the audience by the 'Eyes of the Moon'

25 See the websites: www.huefestival.com, and http://vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Van-hoa/2002/05/3B9BBC41/ (last accessed 10 May 2007).

26 http://www.cinet.vnn.vn/vanhoa/0004/0001/trangphuc.htm (accessed February 2003). A discussion of the role of fashion and of Minh Hạnh is in Ann Marie Leshkowich, 'What to wear on the journey toward modernity: Debates about fashion, identity, and development in Ho Chi Minh City', paper presented at the conference on Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 2003.

27 Minh Hạnh is quoted in http://www.angelfire.com/vt/hongnam/hue.html (last accessed 10 May 2007). After Huế, the fashion show also toured Europe at the invitation of the French Embassy in Vietnam (see http://www.consulfrance-hcm.org/article.php3?id_article=556, last accessed 10 May 2007). The women's comments are in 'Thời trang Minh Hạnh ăn khách nhất ở Festival Huế' [Minh Hạnh's fashion attracts the most visitors at the Festival Hue], *Tiền Phong*, 7 May 2002. See also http://www.vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Van-hoa/Thoi-trang/2004/06/3B9D386E/ (last accessed 10 May 2007).

28 In some Vietnamese press accounts the popularity of that fashion show was attributed to the public's expectation of seeing the models in see-through clothes. In my observation, however, the fabrics were not transparent.

fashion show in Huế can be best compared to the excitement created by a pop music concert. This was quite different at the other shows in the 'In' programme where a more relaxed and dignified atmosphere reigned.

Why did the show resonate so much with the Vietnamese audience? It cannot be simply the recognition of, or allusion to, imperial clothes. People from Huế and visitors from other places in Vietnam do not lack opportunities to familiarise themselves with imperial dress. All major hotels in Huế have re-created 'royal' dinners and events for tourists and provide photo opportunities for those who would like to wear the yellow robes. This meets the requirements of both foreign and Vietnamese guests, as I witnessed in 2000 when Vietnamese participants in an anthropology conference in Huế had their pictures taken wearing such regal clothes in the lobby of the Duy Tân Hotel. Rather, the 'Eyes of the Moon' fashion show must be seen as being on a par with other fashion shows, evoking the expectation of stardom and glamour associated with fashion.

The popularity of this fashion show is brought out best in the observation of the elderly women about the 'coldness' of the show and 'aloofness' (*hờ hững*) of the models, who are considered stars and celebrities in the context of turn-of-the-century Vietnam. After a period of austerity, fashion shows became quite popular in Vietnam during the 1990s, meeting a public demand among a growing urban middle class for glitzy forms of entertainment offering spectacle, beauty, popular music and imaginings of luxury and glimpses of stardom in large auditoriums.[29] Especially in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City, fashion shows were occasions for the 'in-crowd' to see and be seen, and entry tickets were much sought after. A modelling career seemed a sure way to stardom and became the dream for many girls, as depicted and moralised in the popular 2004 film *Những cô gái chân dài* (Long-legged girls).[30]

The models represent an aesthetic image of modernity, albeit in Vietnamese style, and constitute a reason for pride in the physical shape of the female half of the country's population. This gendered and embodied vision of the nation is considered attractive because it is simultaneously modern and uniquely Vietnamese. The quintessential female embodiment symbolising the nation is clothed in the *áo dài*, the tight long tunic worn over a pair of long pants that became fashionable in the 1920s and became an icon for newly traditional national dress since the 1960s. In the various editions of Festival Huế since 2002, a *lễ hội áo dài* (*áo dài* festival) consisting of a parade of hundreds of women and girls wearing *áo dài* was part of the public 'Off' programme. Clearly, the 'Eyes of the Moon' fashion show was contextualised by an aesthetic politics that featured women's bodies in quasi-traditional national dress, and this partly explains the popularity of the fashion show in comparison with other artistic performances at the Huế Festival.

At the same time, however, Minh Hạnh's show was different from 'ordinary' fashion shows – either modern or *áo dài* – in that it explicitly and directly referred to a feudal past from which she attempted to recover fabrics, techniques and motifs that seemed to have been lost. In feudal times, particular fabrics, forms and colours had

29 Leshkowich, 'What to wear'.
30 See http://www.yxine.com/?gf=fa&view=1&movie_id=269 (last accessed 10 May 2007).

specific symbolic meaning, and their uses were prescribed or proscribed according to elaborate ritual requirements. Yet not only has the technical knowledge for producing the fabrics now largely been lost, so too has the knowledge about the symbolism of the Emperor's clothes. While the fashion show borrowed from the aesthetic forms of the imperial dresses – the fabrics and colours, the embroidery, brocade and motifs – there was no attempt to give this form symbolic substance. The clothes related to a Vietnamese past, but it was quite clear from conversations with the audience that the exact symbolic meaning of colours, fabrics and forms of the imperial robes was largely lost on them, reducing the fashion show to an aesthetic spectacle.

Given the absence of any substantive interpretation of the imperial aesthetics on the part of designer, performers and audience alike, no overt symbolic message was conveyed through the symbolic meaning of the clothes as in imperial times. The audience simply would not pick up the messages contained in such symbols. To paraphrase Staal, the great scholar of Vedic ritual, there are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they perform or watch the fashion show.[31] Even so, the show was popular and somehow made sense to most. I came across a clue to solving this puzzle a couple of months later, when I joined a day-long pilgrimage.

Interlude: A pilgrimage in central Vietnam

I had the opportunity to attend a day-long pilgrimage in Huế in September 2002, bringing together some 40 people on a boat taking a trip on the Perfume River. This boat trip was organised by people associated with the Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo temple on Chi Lăng Street, a temple dedicated to the worship of a Mother Goddess of Cham origin, Thiên Y A Na (or Yana), whom the Cham have long worshipped as Po Nagar. (The Cham are acknowledged as the original proprietors of the land before the Việt came down from the north.)[32] During this pilgrimage the women acted as spirit mediums for the Goddess and associated spirits in a ritual known as *lên đồng* or *hầu đồng*.[33]

This small-scale pilgrimage had been authorised by the City Department of Culture and Information, although no officials took part. My friend Mai Khắc Ứng and I had been invited by the mistress of Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo temple, an old lady and a decorated revolutionary hero. I came at 7 a.m. to Bến Mê landing in front of the Citadel, where preparations for the ritual took place. Most of the participants were women; most of the men had a specific function, like *thầy cúng* (ritual master), *chầu văn* (spirit ritual music) performer, boat crew or cameraman (videotaping the

31 Staal, 'Meaninglessness of ritual', p. 3.

32 See Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'The Vietnamization of the Cham deity Po Nagar', in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995), pp. 42–50.

33 On these practices see Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'The religion of the Four Palaces: Mediumship and therapy in Viet culture' (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2002); and Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation in the veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in contemporary Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., LaTrobe University, 2005). See also the article by Nguyễn Thị Hiền in this issue and the recently published volume *Possessed by the spirits: Mediumship in contemporary Vietnamese communities*, ed. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006).

performance of the ritual). The itinerary took us upstream to Thiên Mụ (sometimes called Linh Mụ or Thiên Mẫu) pagoda, Hòn Chén temple and the Hải Cát shrine near the mausoleum of Emperor Minh Mạng. From there the boat was supposed to take us downstream to Tam Giang lagoon, situated between water and land, but a heavy rainstorm prevented the company from performing rituals there; instead, the boat called on the Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo temple on the left bank of the river before returning to the point of departure.

The rituals of spirit mediumship are simultaneously performances, in which important roles are played by the medium, the ritual master reading the questions/requests, the medium's attendants and the musicians accompanying, explaining and commenting on the ritual.[34] The session usually lasts at least a few hours and can stretch up to one full day and night. In contrast to the more individualistic *lên đồng* rituals in northern Vietnam revolving around one medium with his/her attendants, the ritual of mediumship in central Vietnam is a group affair, without a sharp distinction between medium and audience. After the preparations consisting of the chanting of requests (*cầu*) from the (sponsoring) audience by the religious master, chants by the temple mistress and the arranging of sacrificial items and clothing, the mediumship dance started when groups of women entered the 'stage' before the altar on the boat (or in the temple, when on land) in order to act as vehicles for spirits in the pantheon of Thiên Y A Na. Groups of three to six women – alternately older and younger women – took turns in taking the stage and in becoming vehicles for the various spirits and deities, putting on ceremonial clothes associated with the spirit of the deity who would incarnate them, and dancing to *chầu văn* ceremonial music to please the spirit. The colour and form of the clothes reflected the identity and position of that particular spirit in the Vietnamese hierarchy, imagined as an imperial palace overseen by the 'Emperor of Heaven'.

According to Đoàn Lâm, *Đạo Mẫu* or the cult of the Mother Goddess lacks a complete doctrine and organised clergy, and is structured by the ritual of mediumship, partly grafted onto elements of other religious creeds and practices.[35] In other words, the ritual is central to the creed. If asked what the compelling aspects of *hầu đồng* are in the eyes of the adherents, we can point to two important factors: efficacy and aesthetic pleasure. Nguyễn Thị Hiền, in her dissertation on the northern variant of *hầu đồng*, mentions both, focusing on the ritual as drama and performance and as therapeutic practice.[36] In terms of therapy or healing, many followers have wishes relating to good

34 This description is necessarily very brief. For more in-depth accounts I refer to Maurice Durand, *Technique et panthéon des mediums viêtnamiens* (đồng) (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1959); Ngô Đức Thịnh, *Đạo Mẫu ở Việt Nam* [Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam] (Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin, 1996); Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Hầu bóng as viewed from the angle of the performing arts', *Vietnamese Studies*, 131 (1999): 56–60; and the sources mentioned in the previous footnote.

35 Đoàn Lâm, 'A brief account of the cult of female deities in Vietnam', *Vietnamese Studies*, 131 (1999): 18–19.

36 Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'Religion of the Four Palaces', pp. 19–20, 73, 99–124. Stanley Tambiah uses the word 'efficacy' in relation to ritual in order to understand it from an actor's perspective and to avoid becoming entangled in fruitless discussions about rational causality or positivist statements about truth or falseness of ritual claims; Stanley Tambiah, *Culture, thought, and social action: An anthropological perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 2.

fortune and good health; they hope that their sacrifices and prayers will be rewarded by the Mother Goddess or the spirits. Similarly, in interviews about their life stories, mediums claim that they had a physical or psychological need to perform this role, and that the occasion for *ra đồng* (mediumship initiation) has often been a serious disease.[37]

The Huế-based researcher Nguyễn Hữu Thông links the fact that many upper-class women in the city became spirit mediums to their subordinate social position and restricted movement in feudal (pre-colonial) society. The atmosphere of togetherness with music, dance, smoking and alcohol provided a release from the tensions, stress and hysteria generated by their position and had a therapeutic psychological effect. This inversion of prescribed everyday social roles is made possible by the out-of-the-ordinary ritual time-space characterised by Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* or 'anti-structure'.[38]

Another form of ritual efficacy can be related to wealth. Many of the followers' wishes and many of the practices in mediumship rituals revolve around the hope or expectation of gaining material wealth through the intervention of particular spirits, including the blessing of objects or (new, unused) money travelling back and forth to the other world and circulating between spirit medium, attendants, and worshippers. Both the 'Lady of the Realm' (*Bà Chúa Xứ*) in Châu Đốc near the Cambodian border and the 'Lady of the Granary' (*Bà Chúa Kho*) near Bắc Ninh north of Hanoi are known to 'lend' auspicious money which 'borrowers' must repay with interest afterwards.[39] Both these temples and many other sites have experienced a rapid growth in popularity in the context of Vietnam's transition to a market economy as they are seen to cater to the concerns of traders.

In the Huế pilgrimage many of the elderly participants were former aristocrats, but many younger participants were urban market traders, usually women. Nguyễn Thị Hiền found a similar commercial background of followers of spirit mediums in the northern variant of the ritual.[40] During ceremonies – and especially towards the end – the excitement in the audience usually grows as the number of blessed, 'auspicious' (*lộc*) objects and banknotes distributed by sponsors increases. The closure of the ritual constitutes a return to 'normalcy', but on a higher level as it engenders enhanced well-being and confidence in the future on the part of the participants. In their eyes, then, the efficacy of the ritual lies in its effect in terms of well-being, health and wealth.

During the Huế pilgrimage the *hầu vui* dancing took place in a group within a small space in front of the altar, surrounded by the audience, as if they were moving on the catwalk. (The term '*hầu vui*', which means something like 'fun/cheerful incarnation by the spirit', differs from the 'normal' (i.e. northern) *lên đồng* or *hầu bóng* possession rituals in that it is done in a group, hence the term '*vui*'). Like a fashion show, the

37 See Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'Religion of the Four Palaces', pp. 80–91, and her article in this issue.
38 Nguyễn Hữu Thông, personal communication, 27 Sept. 2002; Turner, *Celebration*, p. 29; Turner, *Anthropology of performance*, pp. 44–5.
39 See Lê Hồng Lý, this issue; Philip Taylor, 'The ethnicity of efficacy: Vietnamese Goddess worship and the encoding of popular histories', *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 1 (2002): 85–102; and Taylor, *Goddess on the rise: Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
40 Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'Religion of the Four Palaces', pp. 91–4.

stylised movements were scripted but not strictly choreographed. Although taking place in a group, the dancing was only loosely coordinated. Much of the commentary from the audience (many of whom doubled as performers) concerned the form of the dancing and the artistic skill of the performers; some ladies were praised as being '*quá giỏi*' (very skilful) and their performance as '*rất hay, rất đẹp*' (very beautiful).

Figure 2. A collective dance (*hầu vui*) inviting the spirits to descend into the bodies of the mediums, taking place on the boat during the September 2002 pilgrimage

Source: Photograph provided by the author

It is clear that the mediums and religious specialists were serious about the religious significance of the ritual. Nevertheless, they had hired a cameraman to record the ritual performance on video – an act which suggests an artistic motivation on the part of the spirit mediums, besides religious devotion. Following Ngô Đức Thịnh, Nguyễn Hữu Thông comments on the artistic and theatrical aspect of the ritual, and the pleasure and emotion derived from the performance, comparing it with modern dance in 'pop-culture'.[41]

41 Nguyễn Hữu Thông, *Tín ngưỡng Thờ Mẫu ở miền Trung Việt Nam* [Beliefs concerning Mother worship in central Vietnam] (Huế: Thuận Hoá, 2001), pp. 231–2.

Artistic creativity is what motivated Trung, the leader of the small *chầu văn* music band on the boat. His band strove to improve themselves in order to make their contribution to the performance more interesting. In general, *chầu văn* bands have become professional troupes which try to improve themselves and their contributions. When playing music during the day-long boat pilgrimage, Trung – a former officer in the People's Army of Vietnam – showed me a book with *chầu văn* songs (mainly from northern Vietnam) collected by Ngô Đức Thịnh, from which the singer drew new inspiration and which allowed him to expand his repertoire.[42] Despite important regional differences in liturgical traditions and mythological content between northern and central Vietnam, this singer was much enamoured with lyrics from remote Lào Cai and Lạng Sơn provinces. He found Thông's book on Mother Goddess worship in central Vietnam less interesting, perhaps because he already was familiar with the 27 *chầu văn* songs included in its appendix.

On the way back to Huế the mediumship ritual reached a dramatic climax when two of the younger women were possessed by the spirit of the great tiger-mandarin, the master of the forest. One in particular had displayed a tense attitude and had prepared and danced very enthusiastically. While dancing, she suddenly fell down and started to behave like a wounded tiger, limping and crawling on the floor, growling and clawing her way around. She then started to gobble up food from the floor, which after some time she threw up again. After around five minutes she fainted for a moment; when she came to, she did not remember anything. In the meantime the other mediums had stopped to watch her behaviour, taking care of her when she fainted. In the audience the label used to describe her actions was '*sợ*' (afraid, or frightening). In the evening, a beautifully decorated floating dragon boat of paper with effigies of spirits was released on the river, along with floating lanterns. When the boat finally moored at Bến Mê wharf, most people went home, but some continued with music and dance into the night.

The rituals and worship of Thiên Y A Na were banned by Emperor Gia Long in the early nineteenth century, revived again by Emperor Đồng Khánh in 1886, then banned again by the Communist regime after 1975 as 'superstitious' and 'feudal' practices. The rituals had enjoyed strong support among wealthy women in the Huế aristocracy during colonial times and have recently been revived under *Đổi Mới*, with new popularity among women traders.[43] Whereas the main temple in Huế (the Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo) is still closed, other practices related to the worship of this deity have been permitted as part of Vietnam's religious and cultural revival. The Hòn Chén temple festival celebrating Thiên Y A Na has become part of the tourist itinerary and was even an integral part of Festival Huế in 2000.[44] What was striking was the similarity in terms of the formal aesthetics and the iconography of the *hầu vui* ritual dancing with the fashion show staged by Minh Hạnh during the 2002 Festival. What this means for the interpretation of the popularity of the fashion show I shall explain in the next section.

42 Ngô Đức Thịnh, *Đạo Mẫu*, vol. 2.

43 Đông Vĩnh, 'The cult of Holy Mothers in Central Vietnam', *Vietnamese Studies*, 131 (1999): 73–82; Nguyễn Hữu Thông, *Tín ngưỡng Thờ Mẫu*.

44 See http://www.vietnamtourism.com/vietnam/culture/festival/trung/vcf.honchen.htm; http://www.cinet.vnn.vn/vanhoa/0004/0001/ctrinh.htm; http://www.nhandan.org.vn/english/identity/20001007.html (accessed February 2003).

Ritual efficacy and iconographic cross-over

Aesthetic pleasure, the second compelling aspect of ritual, is derived from its nature as performance, from the music, dance and clothes, from the iconography. According to Lê Hồng Lý, practitioners first attend mediumship sessions out of curiosity, then for entertainment and finally out of religious need.[45] Not surprisingly, with many performances taking place simultaneously or at different temples and occasions, there is fierce aesthetic competition between spirit mediums. Although professional mediums regularly meet during temple festivals, their mutual jealousy and rivalry are famous. Nguyễn Thị Hiền quotes a saying that '*ghen chồng ghen vợ không bằng đồng bống ghen nhau*' (spouses are jealous but not as much as mediums are of each other).[46] Spirit mediums endeavour to enlarge their following in various ways, often by enhancing the beauty of the ritual. Many spirit mediums employ professional fashion designers for their ceremonial dress; such a wardrobe is quite costly, according to Ngô Đức Thịnh. The role of fashion in ceremonial clothes is also observed by Trương Huyền Chi in other types of ritual and for village festivals, but she relates it to urban influences.[47]

The stylised movements and dances during possession by the spirits are claimed to come naturally while the medium is in a trance. However, experienced mediums do give instruction and sometimes even formal training to their juniors. For instance, one particularly elegant spirit medium in Hanoi is a former *tuồng* (classical opera) performer. There is a good deal of cross-over in the choreography of *lên đồng*, *tuồng* and *chèo* (satirical) theatre, Vietnamese martial arts (*võ*) and – we may add – contemporary fashion shows. Many temple festivals in rural Vietnam feature a *tuồng* performance as part of the ritual sequence, usually lasting through the night. Thịnh analyses the literary, performative (music and dance) and decorative (clothes, architecture, statues, pictures and other objects) of *lên đồng* and speaks of a 'spiritual theatre' and a 'composite performing art'.[48] At the markets accompanying temple festivals, videotapes, VCDs and DVDs are sold which feature *hát văn* or *chầu văn* recordings of the ritual – the two Vietnamese terms are interchangeable – complete with music and dance. The 'official' editions published by the Ministry of Culture and Information feature so-called officially recognised 'meritorious artists' (*nghệ sĩ ưu tú*) and tend to be devoid of religious content, thus appropriating *hát văn* music and *lên đồng* ceremony as one performing art form within Vietnam's rich and diverse traditional cultural heritage.[49] By contrast, the 'unofficial' editions circulated under the table feature mediums and musicians with a popular reputation. One such video I

45 Lê Hồng Lý, 'Tín ngưỡng lên đồng từ cái nhìn của người trong cuộc' [*Lên đồng* ritual from an insider's perspective], paper read at the International Conference on Mother Goddess Veneration and the Phủ Giầy Festival (Tín ngưỡng Thờ Mẫu và Lễ hội Phủ Giầy), Viện Nghiên cứu Văn hoá Dân gian, Hanoi, 2001; see also Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 'Religion of the Four Palaces', pp. 73–4.

46 Ibid., p. 96.

47 Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Hầu bóng', p. 49; Truong Huyen Chi, 'Changing processes of social reproduction in the northern Vietnamese countryside: An ethnographic study of Dong Vang village (Red River Delta)' (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2001), p. 257.

48 Ngô Đức Thịnh, *Đạo Mẫu*, vol. 2, pp. 104, 114; Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Hầu bóng', p. 60.

49 See the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Information on this topic: http://www.cinet.vnn.vn/vanhoa/0000/0000/index.htm (accessed February 2003).

watched at the ritually important Phủ Tây Hồ temple in Hanoi – where *lên đồng* has been forbidden by the temple master, who happens to be a senior Party member – presented a *lên đồng* ritual with many famous mediums taking place during a boat ride on West Lake.

Much like the cross-over between the professional performing arts condoned by the Ministry of Culture and Information on the one hand and by the ritual artists on the other hand, there is a cross-over and collusion between religious leaders and scholars. Published collections of lyrics serve to simultaneously enrich and homogenise regional and individual repertoires, as we have seen above. Scholars are also useful for other reasons, however; by their emphasis on the formal, iconographic aspects of the ritual as artistic traditions in their own right, they give legitimacy to a practice which not so long ago was officially condemned as superstitious. The mistress of the Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo temple rejected Nguyễn Hữu Thông's analysis of her religion – which she felt was flawed and biased – but his book will help create the official recognition required for a normal functioning of her religion.[50] In the same way, I noticed that my presence, my participation and my notebook were of great interest to participants in the ritual, as confirmation and vindication of the value and legitimacy of these not yet quite legal practices. For instance, when rituals were filmed or photographed, I was often the object, as if in an instance of counter-ethnography.

The most interesting example of such social role of research is that the Phủ Giầy temple in Nam Định province, historically an important centre dedicated to the Mother Goddess/Princess Liễu Hạnh, was willing to sponsor an international scholarly conference on shamanism and *lên đồng* in Vietnam. The temple master confirmed in an interview that the conference helped strengthen official recognition on the part of the authorities, in a manner similar to a visit by a Politburo member. Thus it helped legitimate mediumship practices in the temple, but at the same time it was useful in a competition for primacy with nearby Vân Cát temple, part of the same complex of temples in Vụ Bản district of Nam Định.[51]

Finally, in terms of iconography there is cross-over not only between ritual and artistic traditions but also between the ritual practices and iconography of different religious creeds in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese and foreign observers have pointed at the syncretistic character of Vietnamese religion, summed up in the concept of *Tam Giáo* (Ch. *Sanjiao*) or 'three creeds' of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. In terms of the pantheon there are differences but also overlaps between the creeds. The Buddha and his incarnations along with Quan-âm (Guanyin) often figure in Daoist temples, while most Buddhist pagodas in northern Vietnam have a small shrine dedicated to the Mother Goddess. If we look at the iconography of the statues, altars and sacred objects and the architecture, there are striking similarities in the idiom of form and style between sites devoted to Mother Goddess worship and other religious sites.[52] In terms of ritual behaviour there is also great similarity between the forms of veneration of the

50 Nguyễn Hữu Thông, *Tín ngưỡng Thờ Mẫu*.
51 Interview with Trần Viết Đức, 21 Sept. 2002.
52 Chu Quang Trứ, 'Kiến trúc phủ của Đạo Mẫu' [The architecture of Mother Goddess temples], *Kiến trúc* [Architecture], 4, 78 (1999): 53–7. On the juxtaposition of shrines see Đoàn Lâm, 'Cult of female deities' and Ngô Đức Thịnh, 'Hầu bóng'.

various creeds. For instance, the incense dance is peculiar to spirit medium ritual, but the practice of lighting incense before an altar is common to the various traditions. This similarity of iconography and idiom greatly facilitates the easy cross-over between different elements of a broader Vietnamese syncretistic tradition.

Amidst incredible religious and cultural diversity, this tendency toward 'uniformity' (in matters of form only) was buttressed in the past by attempts on the part of the imperial Ministry of Rites (*Bộ Lễ*) to prescribe precise and uniform ritual practice, for instance through the official recognition (*sắc phong*) of temples. This role has now been taken over by the Ministry of Culture and Information, which showers the public with didactic publications about the proper form and meaning of rituals and festivals. In the introduction, I noted that Vietnam's authorities hope to contribute to a sense of shared national identity and enhance the prestige of Party and State through their sponsorship of the Huế Festival. In the subsequent sections I described the *nhã nhạc* performance and the popular Minh Hạnh fashion show. Finding no inherent symbolic message in these shows that made a compelling symbolic or ideological statement, I proceeded to compare their formal aesthetics in a modern festival in the context of tourism with rituals of spirit mediums in the context of a pilgrimage. There we could observe a good deal of cross-over between religious creeds, between artistic disciplines and between sacred and secular traditions, underscored by political interventions in past and present and by the eclectic, postmodern nature of contemporary festivals.

Is there, then, a hidden message in the Minh Hạnh fashion show? There is, and that message is hidden in the cultural form rather than being obvious from the symbolic content. Returning to Hayden White and his analysis of the historical narrative, we can observe that telling a story assumes the existence of a speaking subject and the imposition of a logical order on a selected collection of facts or events. In other words, 'every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralise the events of which it treats' and endows this version of these events with the authority of reality itself.[53] Ritual has its own narrativity but – in Tambiah's words – it uses 'multiple media of communication (auditory, tactile, visual, and olfactory) and [multiple] presentational modes (song, dance, music, recitations, and so on)'. Ritual is performative rather than (exclusively) textual, and its symbolic communication is characterised by formality, stereotypy, condensation and redundancy.[54]

At the same time, ritual also constitutes a narrative insofar as it tells a story and achieves closure, thus moralising the events, positions and actions of the participants and raising expectations of healing, wealth and well-being, credited to the sponsor of the ritual. The efficacy of ritual depends on how convincing this closure is. By drawing on forms similar to those used in popular religious practice, the fashion show makes an aesthetic association with the structure of ritual, thus suggesting a similar closure: health, wealth and well-being credited to the organiser of the Festival – the State. The recognisable iconography, its form and its aesthetic aspects all suggest that the event

53 White, *Content of the form*, p. 20.
54 Tambiah, *Culture, thought, and social action*, pp. 1, 128.

will achieve closure; it moralises events by suggesting that the subject of the ritual narrative will make sure that this 'normalcy' will be auspicious.

In the old days, the Emperor mediated between this – *yang* or *dương* – world and the other – *yin* / *âm* – world through Confucian rites, predicating his authority and legitimacy on his efficacy as 'mediator' – or, to put it more precisely, as the nation's supreme spirit medium. This partly explains the emphasis on and attempted control over ritual form in pre-colonial Vietnam. The structural and ritual position of the Emperor, then, was that of the 'supreme spirit medium' on behalf of the nation – an idea which is not far-fetched given the position in the spirit pantheon of former kings and national heroes like Trần Hưng Đạo and their spiritual potency.[55] The widespread belief that the two worlds not only influence each other, but actually mirror each other – *dương sao âm vậy* (however the *yang* world, so the *yin* world), as the saying goes – explains why special clothes worn during rituals, processions and spirit possessions must be imitations of the robes of heavenly mandarins.[56] Simultaneously, a fashion show that takes its cue from imperial garb, in a temple-like setting with choreographic movement resembling the dances of spirit mediums, must evoke ritual connotations through association and embodiment.

Even though Festival Huế is a modern arts festival, it doubles as a ritualised public event contextualised with references to a broader Vietnamese politico-religious cosmology. In that cosmology the authority to mediate between a situation of profane normalcy and a sacred, transcendent order on behalf of the Vietnamese nation, linking it with the 'other world' through the Festival, belongs to the present regime. As with ritual in the context of pilgrimage or mediumship, the closure of the Festival as ritualised narrative projects the promise of auspiciousness. This puts the Party-State – as organiser of the Festival – in a similar ritual position to the former Emperors who occupied a unique position mediating between this world and the other, namely that of the 'supreme spirit medium' on behalf of the nation. Given Vietnam's revolutionary antecedents, the simultaneously transcendental and intermediary position that past sovereigns occupied is both enticing and scary, forcing the Communist Party in the post-socialist era to decide whether or not to shore up its political legitimacy by assuming the ritual potency of the former ('feudal') Nguyễn dynasty.

This uncertainty and ambiguity are reflected in the authorities' hesitant attitude toward the revival of the imperial *Nam Giao*, the ceremonial sacrifice for Heaven and Earth on behalf of the nation by the Emperor which constituted the ritual linchpin of the notion of divine kingship in the imperial era.[57] After the devastating floods which ravaged Huế in 1999, some people from the city and elsewhere began to perform the ritual sacrifice by themselves – and, so the story goes, there were no more floods. In

55 See Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity'.

56 See Tòan Anh, *Phong tục Việt Nam (Thờ cúng tổ tiên)* [Vietnam's manners and customs: Ancestor worship] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1991), p. 20. Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) goes as far as to interpret Vietnam's history as a struggle between *yin* and *yang* forces.

57 Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'La conception de la monarchie divine dans le Viet Nam traditionnel', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 84 (1997): 147–57.

2004 the *Nam Giao* became part of the Festival, thus conveying the impression that it was a folkloric parade rather than serious ritual business. However, the belief that the re-enactment of the old imperial ceremony had prevented more floods, the participation of well-known scholars such as the late historian Trần Quốc Vượng and the last-minute withdrawal by senior officials from Hanoi all indicate that this particular ritual does have political significance. In 2006, however, the *Nam Giao* was performed and televised nation-wide in its entirety, with the role of the Emperor played by a professional actor calling on the Lord of Heaven on behalf of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (though refusing to sit on the throne), and with high-level political leaders in the audience.[58]

Obviously, this outcome was not deliberately planned before the first Festival Huế took place. In fact, organising the event seemed an uphill battle then, and few people would have predicted that Festival Huế was there to stay, let alone that the re-enactment of the *Nam Giao* could eventually be consciously planned.[59] However, amidst uncertainties and changing circumstances, central and provincial political and cultural leaders slowly and hesitantly groped their way towards this politically significant ritual. It was precisely the substantive ambiguity about the symbolic meaning of rituals combined with the focus on form that allowed for ritual experimentation and – via the detour of the *Nam Giao* ceremony – ultimately a redemption of substantive contents and symbolic meaning from the past in contemporary political ritual. The focus on form allowed the protagonists to test the popularity and appropriateness of the ceremony, and allowed the Party-State elite to feel its way around the uncharted terrain of new political ritual in Vietnam.

Lanterns floating down the river

If my analysis holds any currency at all, then similar processes must be at play during the key public events at the Festival, such as the opening and closing ceremonies. These large-scale public ceremonies were televised nationwide, reaching an audience of millions; a major part was conducted in the all too familiar style of any such event in Vietnam, which may include speeches, dance, music and fireworks. One could analyse this style in terms of secular ritual, civil religion, or political religion, but that is not what I wish to do here.[60] Instead, I am looking at ritual borrowing and aesthetic cross-over with other disciplines and genres in terms of their formal aspect. In 2002 I attended the closing ceremony (*lễ bế mạc*) of the Festival, the high points of which included a speech by a political leader serving as Chair of the Organising Committee, fireworks and a regatta of boats that released thousands of *hoa đăng* (floating lanterns made of folded, coloured paper and a candle) onto the waters of the Perfume River. Adjectives like 'traditional', 'magical', 'enchanting', 'fairy-tale', etc., are often associated with this phenomenon, thus figuratively marrying aesthetics with ritual. Is there such a connection? Yes, and that connection again has to do with *Đạo Mẫu* or Mother Goddess worship.

58 My information about the Festival Huế in 2004 and 2006 and about the *Nam Giao* ceremony has been provided by Michael DiGregorio, for which I am very grateful.
59 As grantmaker working for The Ford Foundation from 1996–2001, I was part of such discussions.
60 On these categories see the literature cited in footnote 7.

Releasing paper effigies (*mã*) onto the water is often done in order to honour the spirit of the water (*thủy thần* or *hà bá*). Water is one of the most important elements in Vietnam, mentioned in its founding myth about the marriage of fairy Âu Cơ and dragon god Lạc Long Quan – the marriage of land and water. There are many rituals – including pilgrimages and house inauguration ceremonies – when the release of effigies onto the Perfume River is normal practice in Huế. According to my informants in Huế, floating lanterns may have the function of releasing *mã* onto the water, but do not have a similar ritual significance. Such a practice used to be an important part of the Hòn Chén temple festival dedicated to Thiên Y A Na, but mainly as entertainment on the part of the aristocracy and officials. That event takes place largely on the water in the form of a procession on boats, much greater than the small-scale, informal pilgrimage described above, and rather like the regatta organised for Festival Huế; thousands of *hoa đăng* are released. Huế people assure me that this is done mainly for reasons of aesthetic pleasure, comparable to similar practices in Thailand and India. The lanterns have no intrinsic symbolic meaning and are now part of the staple of tourist entertainment in Huế, much like the Hòn Chén temple festival itself, once seen as a 'superstitious' event (the French called it '*la pagode de la Sorcière*', 'the Pagoda of the Sorceress') but now a celebrated tourist event on the official festival calendar, and in 2000 even an integral part of Festival Huế.[61]

Floating lanterns have no symbolic meaning, or at least my interlocutors were not aware of any such significance. Is the aesthetic pleasure of the magic sight of thousands of lanterns floating on the stream the only reason for its prominent position in the closing ceremony of Festival Huế? No, there is another aspect, namely the meaning of sequence. During the Hòn Chén festival the lanterns are released at the end of the procession, in order to mark and celebrate its completion and the return to everyday life. The lanterns as such may not have symbolic meaning, but their release marks an important turning point in the Hòn Chén ritual and celebrates its closure. Within the framework of Festival Huế, the release of the *hoa đăng* marks precisely the same thing, namely the successful completion of the festival, its ritual closure and the return to the normalcy of everyday life. Although few people bothered to think about why the release of the lanterns took place at the end of the Festival, it would have been inconceivable at the beginning or in the middle. It is self-evident for them that the release of lanterns marks the ending, not the beginning of the Festival – which has the connotation of ritual as the Vietnamese word for 'festival' (*lễ hội*) contains the word '*lễ*', meaning rite or ritual. It is this self-evidence of something not explicitly articulated that makes for a powerful statement.

So what is this statement which is not explicitly articulated? It is a powerful association between the ritual completion of the Hòn Chén festival and the successful completion of Festival Huế, marked by the release of thousands of *hoa đăng* from dragon boats on the Perfume River. Similar to the association of the Minh Hạnh

61 See for instance http://www.vietnamtourism.com/vietnam/culture/festival/index.htm, http://www.ksvn.com/festival/page6.html, and http://www.gamitravel.com.vn/travel/festival.htm (accessed February 2003). Colonial-era discussions of the festival are in H. Délétie, 'Le fête de ruoc-sac de la déesse Thiên-Y-A-Na au temple Huê-Nam-Diên' and Nguyễn-Định-Hoè, 'Le Hue-Nam-Dien', in *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Huế*, 2, 4 (1915): 357–60 and 361–5 respectively.

fashion show with the *hầu đồng* ritual pilgrimage, this association suggests that the return to normalcy will be auspicious, but on a grander scale and watched by a national public on television. The organisers of Festival Huế thus assume the ritual authority to mediate between this world and the other. Since the organising committee is an agency of the State, it is the present regime which creates legitimacy for its rule. It would be inconceivable that another group, agency, institution or organisation would be allowed to release the lanterns and thus assume this strategic intermediary position – not through the substantive meaning of the messages conveyed through the performances and programmes in Festival Huế, but because of its role as intermediary between the two worlds, between the nation and its mythical ancestors. However, the 'agency' of the Party or State is not easy to locate, for 'the Party-State' is not a monolith. Above we have seen competition between the province and Hanoi and between various factions with respect to the right to organise the Festival and claim success for it, as well as the uncertainty and ambivalence surrounding the re-enactment of the *Nam Giao*.

Assuming ritual and political authority

In the introduction I noted that Vietnam's authorities expect to contribute to a sense of shared national identity and enhance the prestige of Party and State through their sponsorship of Festival Huế. In the subsequent sections I described and analysed three performances in the Festival: the *nhã nhạc* and *múa cung đình* in the Duyêt Thị Đường Theatre, the popular Minh Hạnh fashion show in the Diên Thọ Palace and the closing ceremony on the banks of the Perfume River. Finding no inherent symbolic message in these performances making compelling ideological statements, I proceeded to compare its formal aesthetics in a tourist context with that of rituals – especially the locally important context of spirit mediums and pilgrimage. I emphasised the cross-over between religious traditions and artistic disciplines and between sacred and secular practices, underscored by political interventions in past and present and by the postmodern nature of contemporary festivals. Is there, then, a hidden message in Festival Huế?

Via a detour which took me on a pilgrimage tour along various cultural, religious and tourist practices, I can now begin to answer that question. As announced in the introduction, that answer has to do with an analysis of cultural form rather than symbolic content. Taking my cue from Hayden White, I argued that the narrative form conveys substantive meaning through the selection and ordering of elements and through the moralising closure of the narrative. From Tambiah I took the insight that ritual narrativity uses various performative media of communication besides text. Yet, ritual also constitutes a narrative insofar as it tells a story and achieves closure, thus moralising events and the positions and actions of the participants. Turner has drawn attention to the structure of the ritual process as 'narrative' practice and – seeing important analogies – in theatre, festival and carnival. For him the ritual process starts with a social crisis or conflict which has to be resolved in a liminal space-time, characterised by anti-structure, *communitas*, sacrality, play and inversion of social authority and roles. The ritual process – and thus the initial social conflict – is concluded by re-aggregation of the participants in the everyday, secular time-space. In other words, rituals achieve closure – and hence moralise events – with recourse to powerful symbols which may be multivocal (speaking in many ways at once),

multivalent (having various values) or polysemous (having various meanings) but whose iconography is widely known and recognised.[62] The extent to which the sense of closure and moral resolution is shared among participants and audience determines the efficacy of the ritual.

With regard to *lên đồng* and *hầu đồng* rituals, the closure achieves therapeutic and auspicious effect among participants and audience alike. As argued above, its iconography is well known because most of it is not exclusive to this ritual or this creed. In Vietnam's syncretistic religious landscape, the iconography crosses all sorts of religious boundaries and is shared with artistic disciplines. The use of this iconography does provide aesthetic pleasure, but it suggests (ritual) closure as well – not only because of their symbolic meaning but also because of the iconographic form of the various components, their semantic position in terms of sequence and their use in other, similar rituals. The performances at the Huế Festival with which I started this essay make full use of this iconographic repertoire which is shared among a range of Vietnamese religious, cultural and artistic traditions.

However, in these performances it is not always the contents of the symbols used that matter, for the meaning of many symbols is often not consciously known by the audience. In this sense, ritual cannot be read as merely a series of public symbols whose meaning is part of the collective consciousness and shared or contested among participants. Instead, I argue that what is important is both their iconographic form and their use in many other rituals and performances. This is because if analysed as narrative as White proposes, they suggest a subject with the authority to narrate, they suggest narrative closure and hence they tend to moralise events by suggesting an auspicious outcome. For instance, if the closing ceremony of the Huế Festival consists of releasing thousands of lanterns on the river, this reiterates a common practice during festivals, processions and rituals in Huế and elsewhere in Vietnam, but also in other countries of East and Southeast Asia.

What is important about the floating lanterns is that they refer to a shared iconography and a shared sense of aesthetics rather than religious meaning interpreted and agreed on by religious experts. Because of its iconography, its form and aesthetic aspect, this action suggests that the event will achieve closure and a return to normalcy from the present state of liminality and *communitas*; it moralises events by suggesting that the subject of the ritual narrative will make sure that this 'normalcy' will be auspicious. In a way, then, the Festival refers to an aesthetic politics in the representational sense given by Frank Ankersmit, rather than a politics of anesthetics implied in the idea of 'loss of authenticity' implied by cultural experts who propose to interpret meaning.[63] The efficacy of ritual and festival in a political sense, then, is situated not only in the substantive message conveyed through public symbols, but also in the degree to which successful aesthetic associations are made with other rituals. Such associations work at a subliminal level through embodied practice whose efficacy is not discursive or textual but performative, and hence highly emotive. As embodied public identifications with, and interpretations of, such ritualised performances are not

62 Turner, *Ritual process*; Turner, *Celebration*, p. 16; Turner, *Anthropology of performance*.
63 Frank Ankersmit, *Aesthetic politics: Political philosophy beyond fact and value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

grounded in textual understanding, they cannot be assumed to be fully articulated in the discursive domain, yet they are highly efficacious.

In the case of the Huế Festival, the performances described above contribute to the construction of a national identity by drawing on a shared repertoire of common, recognisable iconographic forms which may have different meanings for people in different contexts, across disciplinary and religious boundaries. Unwilling to create political legitimacy by forging a direct line of descent with the last imperial dynasty before the Revolution, the present leadership seeks to create its own authenticity by presenting itself as a modern regime that simultaneously reaches for some form of traditional authority. The 'tongue-in-cheek' associations with rituals that promise well-being and auspiciousness convey the impression that the Festival organisers occupy an intermediary position between this world and the 'other world', continuing a Confucian court tradition brought out in the attempt of the Ministry of Rites to control the form of ritual and rites throughout pre-colonial Vietnam. For the public at large, the present regime is projected as the legitimate guardian of the nation through its intermediary position between worlds and its ritual potency – a position which is jealously guarded by the state's agency in charge of ritual. The present Ministry of Culture and Information, as successor of the pre-colonial Ministry of Rites, issues the *giấy công nhận di tích lịch sử /văn hóa* (certificate of recognition as a historical/cultural monument) instead of the imperial *sắc phong* (seal of recognition).

This puts the Party-State – as organiser of Festival Huế – in a ritual position similar to that of the former Emperors who occupied a unique position mediating between the *yin* and *yang* worlds, namely that of the 'supreme spirit medium' on behalf of the nation. The focus on form enables the protagonists to test the popularity and appropriateness of the ceremony and allows the Party-State elite to hesitatingly feel its way around the uncharted terrain of new political ritual in Vietnam. Uncle Hồ, the Father of the Nation who is currently turning into a celestial ancestor spirit and a saint, may be venerated in temples and pagodas, but as the political adversary of Vietnam's last Emperor Bảo Đại (r. 1925–45) he would probably be turning in his grave to see his political 'descendants' don the Emperor's new clothes, even if they hire an actor to stand in and play the Emperor's part.