

BEAUTIFUL AND EFFICACIOUS STATUES: MAGIC AND MATERIAL IN VIETNAMESE POPULAR RELIGION

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...from the point of view of the anthropology of art, an idol in a temple believed to be the body of the divinity, and a spirit medium, who likewise provides the divinity with a temporary body, are treated as theoretically on a par, despite the fact that the former is an artifact and the later is a human being.

Alfred Gell, Art and Agency, p. 7

I asked the Mother Goddess why my body had been taken over (to serve as a spirit medium). The Mother said, a statue cannot walk or speak. If I did this (in statue form), then people would be afraid, so I chose you for this purpose.

A Hanoi bà đồng, November 24, 2004

In the north of Vietnam, in a temple dedicated to the Four Palaces of the Mother Goddess, the *bà đồng*⁽¹⁾ or spirit medium sits covered with a red cloth in front of an altar heaped with offerings while the musicians sing and play to invoke the spirits. In the words of a *bà đồng*, "Under the red cloth I feel far, far away, light, as though I'm floating, not really inside my body at all. Then I see things, I see the spirits." The *bà đồng* gestures with the fingers of each hand to signal what goddess or god - what Mandarin, Dame, Prince, Damsel, or Child from the domain of heaven, mountains and forests, water, or earth - has come to incarnate her body. The attendants scurry to find the

deity's own silk robe and accessories. They remove the red cloth from the medium's head, dress her, and construct an elaborate headdress around the turban on her head. Once attired, the deity dances, listens with appreciation to the music, receives offerings, showers blessings on the attendants, musicians, and spectators, and sometimes utters an oracle (Ngo 2003, Nguyen 2002, Norton 2000). The goddesses and gods who inhabit the medium during a *lên đồng* ritual also inhabit the wooden statues on the temple altar, carefully carved and painted and animated in a solemn ceremony. In anticipation of this ceremony, a new statue waits on the altar *under a red cloth*, sitting in a suspended state, like the waiting medium.

The medium, away from the *lên đồng* ritual, is an ordinary woman or man, but also a potential container for the deity. A medium lives (or is supposed to live) according to this charge, maintaining a personal shrine, serving the Mothers, observing proper conduct, and preparing carefully, purifying her or his body for possession rituals, bathing, dressing in clean clothes, and applying make-up. Similarly, the statue body, unanimated, is

(*) American Museum of Natural History.

(**) Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

(***) Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts.

(1) Male spirit mediums are addressed as "Ông Đồng."

“just a statue” but like the spirit medium, the possible future embodiment of a deity as an agentive presence. Thus for many devotees, even an unanimated image of a divinity is necessarily more than “just a statue.”

In his provocative rethink of the anthropology of art, Alfred Gell offers the radical suggestion that people commonly abduct agency to things, that not just pre-modern “animists” but all of us tend sometimes to “see things (including cars and computers) as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention rather than the mere concatenation of physical events” (Gell 1998: 16, 17-18). In effect, people enter into relationships with things and these relationships can be examined in the manner that anthropologists examine the rights and obligations that obtain in other relationships (ibid). The divine image, “the idol” in Gell’s term, becomes “a locus for person-to-person encounters with divinities... (and) obeys the social rules laid down for idols as co-present others (gods) in idol-form” (Gell 1998: 125, 128).

In Vietnam, “the social rules laid down for idols” begin in the artisan’s workshop where those Vietnamese carvers who pride themselves in maintaining the traditions of their craft produce divine images through a mingling of technology and magic that recalls Malinowski’s descriptions of Trobriand Islanders preparing gardens and ocean-going canoes (1954). Their work suggests the careful preparation of a spirit medium who makes herself or himself pure and beautiful (*đẹp*) in order to receive the deity. Thus, where Tim Ingold (2007) has faulted

the new literature on materiality and agency for ignoring the material properties of things and the processes through which they are manufactured, our conversations with carvers and bronze casters necessarily involved us in discussions of material properties and processes.

Gell’s notion of agency, with its applicability to cars, computers, and other things we buy and sell, also opens a space for the idea of “sacred goods” as objects of commerce. In East Asia, as in Catholic Europe, objects produced for explicitly devotional or magical purposes have inhabited their own corner of the marketplace for centuries. Even so, scholars of East Asian religion have only recently turned their attention to the historical materiality of religious practices and the significance of commissioning temple images and reliquaries as meaningful religious practice (Bogel 2008, Gimello 2004, Sharf and Sharf 2001, Ruppert 2000). In our discussion, we explore how temple images, Gell’s “idols,” fare in the ramped up market economy of contemporary Vietnam where rationalized production and accelerated demand pull new statues into the domain of mechanical reproduction and a global market in Asian antiquities recasts old statues as marketable “art” (cf. Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Myers 2001). In this context, Benjamin’s notion of an “aura” that accrues to objects handmade for religious purposes but is absent from mass produced commodities becomes another foil for our discussion (Benjamin 1969).

As necessary background, we describe how Vietnamese popular religion renders statues as animated, sacred, and agentive

and how devotees experience and describe statue agency in and through their own relationships with divine images. We show how production methods are implicated in the creation of powerful images and consider how these understandings and processes have and have not been compromised in the contemporary marketplace. In other words, while anthropologists have done significant work in analyzing popular religious responses to the commodification of human relations under capitalism,⁽²⁾ students of popular religion can profitably extend Gell's work to ask how markets affect the relationship between people and sacred goods. This question assumes, following Ingold, and with nods to Malinowski and Benjamin, some attention to how these potentially agentive goods are made and how that process is changing. Indeed, we suggest that in the marketplace of material religion, attention to both object agency and artisanal process can be mutually enriching.

The power and danger of divine images

If Gell's notion of abducted agency is sometimes a hard sell for American anthropology students, Kendall found that a seminar of Vietnamese anthropologists liked the idea, particularly as applied to statues. Where Gell's description of the personality and will he abducts to his family's Toyota offers the European or American student a bridge from recognizable behavior into a seemingly exotic premise, one senior Vietnamese scholar opined that the idea of a relationship with a car was just plain silly but human engagement with statues could be deeply meaningful, closer to his own experience than the elusive dream of a family car. In

Vietnam, a ritual master performs the rite of *hồ thần nhập tượng*⁽³⁾ or "calling the god into the statue," to induct the deity into the statue body and awakens its senses.⁽⁴⁾ The rite has much in common with Gell's (1998: 143-153) description of the ritual animation of a Hindu statue and with equivalent practices described throughout the Hindu (Davis 1997, Eck 1998: 51-55) and Buddhist world (Groner 2001; Swearer 2004; Reedy 1991, 1992) and in Chinese popular religion (Robison 2007). Animation makes the divine image a more potent locus of worship than other sacred objects found on Vietnamese altars - incense burners, pictures, ancestor photographs, deity tablets, and spirit chairs - most of which are ritually activated, but not animated with the immediate presence gods or Buddhas. In proper context, these things can be objects of veneration and media for transmitting petitions to gods and ancestors; people venerate pictures, tablets and chairs as an indirect connection to the divine, something in the manner of a spiritual cell phone. Devotees similarly

⁽²⁾ Comaroff and Comaroff (1992, 1999), Kendall (1996, 2003, 2009), Meyer (1998), Pels (2003), Sanders (2001), Taussig (1980), and Weller (1994) describe situations where entrepreneurs or laborers respond through popular religious idioms to their experience of the market as exploitative, capricious, or otherwise irrational.

⁽³⁾ For a more detailed description of the animation ritual, see Nguyen and Pham (2008). We exchanged interview information with Nguyen and Pham in our mutual efforts to reconstruct the animation ritual as part of our collaborative project on sacred objects in the collection of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

⁽⁴⁾ Strictly speaking, *hồ thần nhập tượng* sacralizes all of the statues in a temple. When statues are added sequentially, a smaller temporary incarnation might be held.

venerate prototypes for future statues as a gesture of respect for the deity they represent much as the photograph of an ancestor, placed on the family altar, represents the ancestor. By contrast, the animated statue is the deity. Spirit mediums described the profoundly efficacious potential of a temple with a full compliment of properly animated statues: the supplicant makes a direct petition to the gods who, facilitated by their statue bodies, come to the supplicant's aid - much as deities descend into the ritually purified and appropriately costumed body of the spirit medium.

In anticipation of the animation ritual, the sculptor carves a small cavity in the back of a temple image where, in an auspicious hour, a ritual master installs an amulet bearing the god's name, a protective Buddhist amulet, colored threads to expel malevolent spirits, and a fragment of gold dust. Depending on the ritual master's own tradition and his client's economic circumstances, he may include other precious elements: scraps of gold leaf, silver, vermilion, cinnabar, coral, amber, agate, gem crystal, mother-of-pearl, and pearl as well as coins or folded bills of small denomination and a small human figure made of twisted threads.⁽⁵⁾ With its cavity filled and sealed, the statue sits on the altar covered with a red cloth pinned with a protective amulet, sometimes for several months, until the ritual master performs the animation ritual, ideally in the magically potent hour of the rat, or deep midnight.

At the climactic moment of the ritual, the lights go off and in the pitch black room; the ritual master calls the god into the

statue. The ritual master and his assistants toss 100 coins or small bills folded into boats or butterflies, 100 needles (usually stuck into the folded cash) and seeds of five grains - rice, corn, beans, peanuts, and sesame seeds - to exorcise malevolent spirits and bring good fortune. Participants scramble in the dark to secure these things as lucky talismans, empowered by their association with the statue deity and the ritual master's work: the coins, placed on the family altar, carry a prayer for luck and business success, the needles exorcise malevolent spirits, the grain can be sown to bring a bountiful harvest or fed to livestock so that the animals will flourish. Participants rip the red cloth that so recently covered the statue and use the scraps as personal talismans. The amulets that were attached to the cloth reappear in domestic settings.

Some followers of the Mother Goddess religion say that once the ritual master pulls off the red cloth, the revealed statue is more beautiful than the original carving, just as spirit mediums claim that they become more beautiful when they incarnate a deity and are keen to exhibit photographs that validate their incarnations. One renowned statue carver, who is also a spirit medium, claims that sometimes he cannot recognize his own work in the animated statue that emerges from under the cloth.⁽⁵⁾

The ritual master completes the animation

⁽⁵⁾ Some ritual masters spoke of inserting fragments of the seven precious substances - gold, silver, coral, amber, agate, gem crystal, and pearl - which they also place inside the incense burners on temple and family altars in rituals that are less elaborate than a statue animation.

of the statue body (after additional procedures to send off attending Buddhas and expel imprisoned wandering ghosts) when he takes up a small mirror, a tree branch, and three incense sticks. With the incense he traces three words, "*Quang minh kinh*" (bright, clear vision), first on the mirror, and then in the air in front of the statue, awakening the statue's eyes with the words, "The left eye is shiny as the sun. The right eye is shiny as the moon. The left and the right eyes must become five eyes to see all things." He also reads an incantation to set the image/deity's mind at ease.

Empowering a statue carries risks. To perform the animation ritual, the ritual master must be in a state of absolute purity, having abstained from sexual relations and observed a day-long vegetarian fast. A ritual master who performs an animation ritual should not have experienced a death in his family for the last forty-nine days, no births in the family within three days, and no dog or buffalo should have been butchered in his home before his departure for the ritual. The youthful but experienced Ritual Master Thuy described headaches or a possible traffic accident as the consequences of ignoring these prohibitions. A ritual master also tries to avoid inauspicious encounters with pregnant women or cats on his way to an animation ritual.⁽⁶⁾ Ritual Master Thuy explained that if the ritual master is inept or does not keep himself pure, his clients will suffer misfortune and bad business, a magical "infelicity" in Tambiah's (1973) terms. In the words of an older ritual master: "if the ritual is not done carefully

and the statue is still 'dirty,' the gods will not animate it." He spoke of a temple that had animated its statues in the early morning and in the afternoon, the family's motorbike was stolen. Shortly thereafter, someone in the family became ill. Eventually, the unlucky family called upon our conversation partner to correct the situation and properly animate the statues.

The unanimated statue body is also a source of potential danger, its hollow cavity inviting malevolent spirits. For this reason, the statue travels to the temple altar under a red cloth and remains covered until the animation ritual, with a demon-repelling amulet attached to the cloth for good measure. Indeed, careful people paste amulets on the head, mouth, eyes, nose, ears, belly, chest, and on the back of the statue above the cavity. According to Ritual Master Thuy, the danger of infiltration by evil spirits persists until the moment of animation, and during the animation ritual, "security is very tight." The ritual master takes precautions to fortify the ritual space against evil spirits and ritually "imprisons" any lurking malevolent entities, sending his captives away before opening the statue's eyes.⁽⁶⁾

The cavity that is the focus of so much caution before and during the animation ritual can also be a site where ill-intentioned persons introduce inappropriate material, usually before they present a statue to a

⁽⁶⁾ According to Ritual Master Thuy, pregnancy and birth are dangerous conditions where misfortune could rebound on the ritual master's work. Cats are generally inauspicious and have the power to wake a corpse.

temple. Although most spirit mediums and ritual masters we spoke with were familiar with stories of sorcery worked by introducing maleficent objects into consecrated incense pots and some described finding such material in their own or other pots, most felt that attempting sorcery on a Mother Goddess statue was an extremely dangerous act whose consequences would rebound on the sorcerer's own family. Even so, suspicions do arise. An elderly spirit medium in Hanoi's old quarter described how she had divined that another spirit medium's illness came from a statue of General Trần Hưng Đạo, gifted to her temple by a client. To avoid similar mishaps, she refuses her devotees' offers of statues, suggesting that they contribute cash instead. She and other cautious mediums have their statues refurbished or new ones made in their own temple where they can supervise the artisans. Nguyen and Pham (2008) describe how a village quarrel over the installation of a statue of the tutelary god in the village's communal house provoked rumors that the donor, a relative newcomer to the village, had smuggled his own ancestor's ashes into a position of veneration via the statue's animation cavity. Such rumors persisted for more than ten years after the statue had been removed from the altar, deanimated, and the ritually appropriate contents publicly examined and recorded. Master medium and temple keeper Ông Đồng Đức allowed that a statue could lose its power if a maleficent amulet were secretly placed on it or if a nail were driven into the statue, but in these cases, the temple keeper would have neglected his or her sacred duty of

protecting the statues and would suffer the consequences.

The danger of magical infelicity also persists when the ritual master has the statue "sit in place" (*yên vị*) on the altar, procedures similar to the installation of incense pots on a family ancestral altar.⁽⁷⁾ Correct placement is, in Gell's terms, a part of the code of proper social relationships between people and statues. One of the spirit mediums we spoke with cited bad business and bad health as the sorts of consequences that result from misplaced statues and incense pots and another was stricken with a mysterious illness when she inadvertently moved a statue, ever so slightly, from its proper place while cleaning it.

Some temple keepers described an annual ritual to bathe the statues in their care. They would purify their own bodies for several days and bathe themselves before beginning the task of purifying the statues in the steam of boiled water infused with fragrant spices, using an immaculately clean piece of cloth to swab them. In addition, careful temple-keepers clean their statues regularly, usually before the first of the lunar month, and give them fresh offerings. In a traditional Mother Goddess temple configuration, the most sacred space is the backmost forbidden room, off limits to ordinary worshippers who regard the Mother Goddess images through

⁽⁷⁾ Although ritual masters are almost exclusively male, one of the female spirit mediums we spoke with claimed that she was empowered to do the work of setting a statue on the altar and subsequently animating it. She does this both for the statues on her own altar and for statues in her disciples' home temples.

a wooden lattice. At the Tiên Hương Palace at Phủ Dầy, a renowned Mother Goddess temple, the temple keepers frequently clean and vacuum the forbidden room to keep it spotless, keep the door closed, require anyone who enters to remove their shoes, and purify visitors at the threshold with a spritz of perfume from the temple keeper.⁽⁸⁾ Ông Đông Đức explained how even inside the forbidden room, a temple keeper should not stare at the Mother Goddess images in his or her keeping. Although he had tended them for many years, he claimed “I don’t dare to really get a good look at the images. They are frightening!” When he saw the photographs of statues he himself had commissioned as replicas of the three Mother Goddesses in the forbidden room of the Tiên Hương Palace, he did not recognize certain details of their dress.

Temple keepers are also expected to observe propriety in their own conduct. The Đức, who keep the Tiên Hương Palace, maintain that they are careful in their speech, dress, behavior, and family life. According to Bà Đông Đức, the temple matriarch, if someone sets up a private temple, they must make a clear distinction between ritual space and family space. A temple keeper claimed that when his predecessor had been careless about eating dog meat and had conducted an adulterous relationship in temple space, his family fell apart and he went insane. Another temple keeper spoke of how she had gone to a temple fair and eaten street food in a “dirty place.” She came back home compulsively slapping her mouth and cheeks. Bedridden,

she heard the Mother Goddess say, “I brought you here to this temple to work for us. What do you mean by going out and eating in such dirty places? You are being punished now, but if you follow my commands you will follow me when you die.” The temple keeper subsequently avoided street food.

Propriety also governs the circumstances of a temple-keeper’s removing the statue from an altar, a matter never undertaken lightly. A statue may be removed and destroyed when it has lost its power through sorcery or when it has been eaten by bugs or damaged by the elements, and some statues are removed to be replaced by larger ones. In all of these cases, a ritual master releases the deity from the statue and returns it to its pre-animated state in a ritual that is similar to but less elaborate than the animation ritual. After invoking the Buddhas and gods and reading appropriate texts to release the deities from the statues, the ritual master removes the amulets and precious materials from the statue’s cavity, recycling them in a new statue if they are in good condition, carefully burning them and casting the remains into clear water if not. We found a range of opinion about how to deal with a deanimated statue body, the consistent theme being a respectful and in some sense “pure” disposal: burning, casting the statue in clear running water, burning and casting the ashes in clear running water, or ceremonious burial. Temple keepers claim

⁽⁸⁾ At the Tiên Hương Palace, the Đứcs have generously allowed researchers access to the temple’s forbidden room.

that they donate intact statues to other temples, but many old temple statues have appeared on the antiquities market.

In the Red River Delta, where many temples are being refurbished and their statues repaired, refinished, and sometimes gilded, we encountered a range of opinion about whether a temple keeper must sponsor a deanimation ritual when he or she temporarily removes statues from the temple altar. In general, temple keepers reported their intentions to the gods and tossed coins to divine the deities' permission before taking them down. The spirit mediums we spoke with all agreed that statues carried outside the temple should first be deanimated by a ritual master and then covered with red cloths "to protect their sacred energy (*khi*)."
Ông Đông Đức described how, when he had refurbished the statues in the Tiên Hương Palace in 1991, no rain fell during the time when the statues were deanimated. He held the animation ritual on a clear night, and at the precise moment when the ritual master turned out the lights to reanimate the statues, the rain poured down - a lucky sign attributed to the agency of the restored Mother Goddesses.⁽⁹⁾

In sum, spirit mediums and ritual masters describe a careful etiquette in the relationship between people and sacred images, an etiquette that marks the devotee's understanding of the animated image as an agentive and powerful being capable of bestowing blessings but also potentially punitive should the terms of a devotee's relationship to a temple statue, and the deity incarnated within it, be violated. According to a folk saying, "the

Buddha is merciful, but the Mother Goddess resents every little thing."

The statue strikes back

The destruction of divine images during anti-superstition campaigns - an extreme violation of proper behavior toward statues - gave rise to numerous stories of punitive agency abducted to the violated images. In a commune south of Hanoi, villagers describe how, at the height of an anti-superstition campaign in the 1970s, local authorities rounded up all of the statues from the numerous temples along a bank of the Red River. One temple-keeper described how, in great agitation, she had requested the Mother Goddesses' permission to take them down from the altar, supplicating as she cried out, "this is the nation's work, it is the nation that requests this," absolving herself from blame for the sacrilege. Some of the statues were tossed into the village pond and the rest were burned. In a widely circulated story, the wife of the man who drowned the statues went mad, or one of the policemen who carried the statues out of a small family temple that protected the riverbank saw his own son carried away in a flood and died himself within a few months, or in another version, the policeman drowned and his father died a month later. The temple-keeper described how the chastened policeman's wife came to the empty temple to beg the Mother Goddess' forgiveness.

When we asked about this incident at another temple in the same village that had

⁽⁹⁾ Similarly, rain that falls just after a roof pole is put in place becomes a lucky sign.

only recently replaced its confiscated statues, a woman who worked in the district office spontaneously joined the conversation, speaking with great excitement. She described how one of the local policemen gave a small statue to his son as a toy. When the son beat the statue, he felt a shooting pain in his own belly. His father threw the statue into the bushes. A woman passing by recognized the statue as a small rendering of one of the Princes of the Mother Goddesses' Four Palaces. She told the Prince, "Please help me and I will venerate you" and took the statue to a private temple nearby but outside the reach of the campaign. Then she went to the People's Committee headquarters under cover of darkness, hoping to rescue one of the Damsels, but she found another Prince instead and brought the image to the same temple. Both of these rescued statues are venerated in that temple to this day. The policeman's child grew up to become a drug addict but the woman who rescued the statues has a happy life with children living abroad who send her money.

We heard repeatedly how, during the years when the authorities converted temples and communal houses to secular uses, statues were sometimes stored in a temple's forbidden room where they remained because potential thieves were afraid of retribution from the Mother Goddess. One major Hanoi spirit medium temple was untouched even when everyone fled the site for several days during heavy bombing. *Ông Đồng Đức* tells the story of a man from Haiphong who, in 1983 or 1984, passed by the then unmaintained temple and

stole two little Princess statues, thinking that he would take them home and venerate them. He put the statues into his bag but for some mysterious reason he could not move beyond the temple gate. He stood frozen at the threshold until some villagers saw and apprehended him. At the People's Committee Office, the chief of police made a report and then locked the statues into his cabinet, neglecting to return them to the temple. Two nights later, the guards observed that whenever they turned out the light, mysterious noises emanated from the cabinet but ceased once they turned on the light. They reported to their chief who, realizing the situation was beyond his control, called his mother who brought fruit and made an offering, apologizing for the statues' incarceration in the cabinet.

Abductions of the literal kind

Tales of temple images inspiring fear and resisting theft in the past often lead to unhappy comparisons with the present, where the market in antiquities encourages temple larceny. The tellers offer a wry awareness that before the radical revision of economic policies 1986, there was little or no market for stolen antiquities. This traffic in temple statues suggests both a lack of respect for the potential agency of divine images as "deities" and their revaluation as "art," abducting the agency of desire for cash or possession (cf. Hoskins 2006: 77). We have seen temple statues in the hands of private collectors, some with empty cavities suggesting proper deanimation, but others of more dubious origins. One dealer told us that he only handles statues that come to

him with the temple's documents authorizing the sale of a properly deanimated statue, but we have also seen divine images, their cavities still intact, purchased by a collector from this same dealer. In the home of another private collector, we examined a beautiful old statue he had recently purchased in an antique shop with its cavity intact. He described himself as a practicing Buddhist and therefore a "good person" who did not fear punishment from the deity resident in the statue; he seemed untroubled by the possibility that the little statue was stolen. His attitude is akin to that of the dealer who described herself as a serious Buddhist who visits the temple twice a month but for whom placing the statues at a respectful height above the floor is a sufficient gesture of respect; she claims to make no distinction between statues with their amulets still inside them and empty statues. Another dealer has a ritual master perform a deanimation when he acquires a suspicious statue. When an ambitious collector experienced a family tragedy, acquaintances thought of the still-potent images in his home. Others told us of a notorious theft from a Buddhist temple where the thieves killed a monk but were subsequently apprehended at the border, a divine retribution. Meanwhile, temple-keepers who can afford heavy bronze statues install them as a precaution against theft. In sum, the traffic in antiquities - the abducted appeal of filthy lucre and beautiful, collectable art - can override fear of the statues' own punitive agency, but not completely where tales of retribution make some dealers and some potential buyers uneasy.

Relative auras

If the government's official encouragement of market activities since 1986 had the unintended consequence of fostering a market in stolen antiquities it was also indirectly responsible for the production of new statues in a climate that tolerated the revival of popular religious activities muted under high socialism. Following the failure of the subsidized economy in the 1980s, an official nod to the open market in 1986 (*Đổi mới*), and a gradual easing of strictures against the practice of popular religion, the market in religious goods is robust today in Hanoi and in the surrounding Red River Delta. Economic resource and marketplace uncertainty have become handmaidens to popular religious expression (Le 2007, Pham 2006, Taylor 2004), most explicitly when entrepreneurs' aspirations and anxieties propel them into Mother Goddess temples to pray for blessings and protection in their work (Endres 2006, Nguyen 2002, Pham 2006). Many devotees become spirit mediums in order to enjoy the Mothers' favor, setting up their own temples and sponsoring their own rituals (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006a.). Sacred goods that for many years had either been unavailable or, like votive paper, produced only simply and furtively, now appear in abundant supply to meet a growing demand and carpenters, sculptors, and lacquer painters are well-employed refurbishing temples and Buddhist pagodas. Although material expenditures for spiritual ends still provoke social and official criticism and occasional interference (Endres 2007; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006b., Taylor 2007a), handicraft

villages in the Red River Delta have revived, expanded, or in some cases, newly adopted the production of sacred goods - statues and altars, spirit medium costumes, and votive paper - to meet contemporary demands (Kendall et al 2008, Nguyen and Pham 2008, Nguyen 2006).

With the swelling market for religious goods, some family workshops in the wood-carving village of Sơn Đồng, near Hanoi, are turning out ready-made statues of dubious quality for sale off the shelves of their own workshops or in the shops on Hanoi's Hàng Quạt Street. How temple keepers and spirit mediums regard such statues, however, is a matter of opinion. Although most of our conversation partners would agree that an unanimated or deanimated statue is "just a statue," not or no longer an agentive divine image, their words suggested considerable ambiguity about what a statue is by virtue of how it is produced.

As cheaply produced Sơn Đồng images proliferate, connoisseurs complain that their quality has been compromised, made with poor materials and carved with less attention to the form and beauty of the product. The increased volume of production seems to have fostered a "rationalized" production style very different from the workshops of traditionalist carvers in Sơn Đồng and other places. Cheap and readily accessible statues appeal to those mediums who are innocent of the complexities of statue production (the statues they buy are likely made of less durable branches rather than the core wood of the tree trunk and may be infested with woodworms) and are less particular about

carvers who observe taboos and perform appropriate rituals when making the statues. In other words, they describe an unanimated statue as "just a piece wood and nothing more."

But other mediums and temple keepers disagree. The late temple keeper of the Tiên Hương Palace, Ông Đồng Đức claimed that he would never buy ready-made statues, both because poor quality statues will deteriorate quickly and because, in the words of another prominent Hanoi spirit medium and temple-keeper, "Ready-made statues often bring bad luck." Several of the mediums we spoke with described the care they had taken to choose a good master carver, in one temple-keeper's words "the man whose hand touches the wood in the ritual that initiates carving," and the mediums themselves carefully supervise the carving process. Temple keepers, spirit mediums, carvers, and bronze casters described how statues made according to traditional methods were more *linh* - sacred, numinous, efficacious - than statues mass produced for the market, or bronze statues more *linh* than wooden statues because metal is a higher-order element than wood in five-element cosmological theory and thus a more effective medium for bringing gods into statues and transmitting the petitions of worshippers to the gods. By the same logic, the earth used to mold clay statues is a less effective medium than carved wood (Kendall, Vu, and Nguyen 2008).

A master carver, Mr. Nguyen Ba Ha told us that because the completed statue will become an object of veneration he must do his best to make it "as clean as possible," enforcing workshop taboos intended to

convey respect for the gods and insure a good outcome - a tidy workshop, no bare-chested carvers, no cursing or inauspicious talk, no clothing hung above the statues, no menstruating women touching statues.⁽¹⁰⁾ He also described a production process punctuated by appropriate ritual procedures from the initial petition he makes to his ancestors and patron deity before going to discuss a commission with a potential client to the client's final inspection of the completed statue where the client makes offerings and asks permission of the Buddha, the Mother Goddesses, and his or her own ancestors, to bring the statue to its intended altar on the first or the second day of a lunar month. The client places his payment on the tray with other offerings and thus ritualized, a commodity transaction assumes the form of a devotional act.

Traditionalist carvers like Mr. Ha initiate carving with a rite called *lễ phật mộc* (ritual for cutting wood), choosing an auspicious day for the ritual and allowing only those with compatible horoscopes to participate. *Lễ phật mộc* expels any ghosts or forest spirits who may have taken up residence in the old tree and includes a petition to the Buddhas and Mother Goddesses to support the carvers in their work so that they will make a beautiful statue and avoid workshop accidents or other infelicities. When asked about the consequences of not doing *lễ phật mộc*, Mr. Ha spoke of clients who were unable to pay on delivery, trouble from the police when the statue was being transported, and an incident where the vehicle transporting the statue got into an accident and rolled

over (Kendall, Vu, and Nguyen 2008). A bronze-caster described some of the same workshop taboos that Mr. Ha follows and an equivalent to the first-cut ritual to initiate mold-making and to begin the casting.⁽¹¹⁾ In workshops that produce wooden statues in volume, on the other hand, managers seem less concerned with choosing an auspicious day on which to begin carving and are less likely to perform *lễ phật mộc* when they cut the wood for a statue.

Thus, as our conversations turned to methods of production, *linh* also took on the gloss of "aura" in Benjamin's sense of a numinous or powerful quality inherent in works of art initially produced for contexts of ritual and veneration but absent from mass produced commodities (Benjamin 1969). When we asked Ritual Master Thuy about the porcelain statues that we had seen in a young *bà đồng's* shrine, the *bà đồng* having insisted that all unanimated statues were similarly "just statues," and that hers had become fully efficacious with the animation ritual, Ritual Master Thuy disagreed. Although porcelain is of the element "earth," it is less *linh* than other materials. Wood and clay statues are molded directly by the artisan's hands and inspiration; *linh* is in the material and in the process, whereas porcelain is mass produced through a complex industrial process and because it is fired at a high temperature, the image is, in effect, "already

⁽¹⁰⁾ For a more detailed description of Mr. Ha's workshop, see Kendall, Vu, and Nguyen (2008).

⁽¹¹⁾ He also cited some procedures unique to his profession, in particular a now archaic prohibition against asking for fire during the casting process.

burned” and its sacred energy destroyed, just as discarded statues are burned and destroyed. Although porcelain may be one of the world’s oldest mass-produced commodities, Mr. Thuy considers it “a modern technology, not a traditional one” and therefore inappropriate for spiritual practices, not *linh*. Mr. Thuy was pleased to learn that an early twentieth century German Jewish philosopher might have agreed with him. Benjamin’s specter similarly haunted our conversation with the bronze caster who described how he modeled the molds for his castings on the basis of the visions that came to him in a meditative state, a method some carvers use as well. The bronze caster considered these visionary statues more sacred than the statues of Ho Chi Minh and other national heroes, displayed in public places, which he casts following a rigid prototype and using a mass-produced plaster model, even though these public statues of national heroes similarly receive amulets and precious materials and have animation rituals.

Some of our interlocutors linked sacredness and ritual efficacy to the beauty (*đẹp*) of the image but this was an area of ambiguity. The bronze caster told us that if the statue is not beautiful, it would be less sacred after animation than a beautiful statue because the gods would want to reside in a beautiful statue body (on the same logic whereby mediums primp, purify, and perfume themselves before performing a *lên đồng* ritual to attract the Mothers’ favor). He felt that when devotees look at a beautiful statue, they sense the presence of the god inside it. A male spirit medium said, “Spiritually

speaking, gods do not care about whether a statue is beautiful or not, since this is just a matter of appearance [not substance], but beautiful images make the temple more beautiful, and as a result, devotees are more attracted to it;” in other words, the agency of beautiful statues works on the devotee rather than the god. When we asked Mr. Ha, the master carver, if a beautiful statue was more pleasing to the Mothers he responded first with denial, then with contradiction. If the Mothers favored more beautiful statues, this would mean that the Mothers favored the rich who could commission more expensive statues, and the Mothers were not like that. But in almost his next breath, Mr. Ha stated that careless carvers make ugly statues that look unreal and are consequently less *linh*. Mr. Ha takes pride in producing beautiful statues according to traditional methods so that their future owners can sense their sacredness. For Mr. Ha and carvers like him, rituals and workshop prohibitions, along with good wood and careful technique, are a necessary prelude to the statue’s transformation, a part of its “aura” in Benjamin’s terms.

Mr. Ha describes his craft as a quasi-religious act, “doing the gods’ things;” in his view, carvers must not only love their work but also have a strong moral sense of it. This includes using the right wood - quality core wood, well tempered and free from woodworms - careful carving, and following workshop rituals and traditions. If carvers are not honest about their products’ quality and price, they will soon become jobless, either owing to dissatisfied customers or divine

retribution (Kendall, Vu, and Nguyen 2008: 226). In Mr. Ha's words, "If human beings do not punish them, the gods will." But the gods and Buddhas reward a carver who performs well. At the time of this interview, Mr. Ha, a spirit medium as well as a carver, was building himself a spectacular multi-story house.

Dealers, carvers, and spirit mediums recognize a clear distinction between statues mass produced for the market (*hàng chợ*) with little attention to quality or tradition, statues made to order (*hàng đặt*) which can be commissioned through the shops but are better quality than the mass produced statues on the shelves, and statues made according to old and authentic processes (*hàng thật*) which are much more costly. In the revived markets of Vietnam, properties that make even a pre-animated statue more *linh* enhance its value for the experienced spirit medium and temple keeper who are willing and able to pay the extra cost (ibid.: 233).

Conclusion

Where a long tradition of social science writing since Marx describes the commodification of human relations in systems of advanced capitalism and more recently, a variety of popular religious responses to the market, we have been asking, following Gell, how these same processes affect the relationship between people and religious things, in this case divine images in the Red River Delta of Vietnam. With Ingold's caution, we acknowledge the importance of production methods and materials for any meaningful discussion of wooden and bronze statues in Vietnam, but counter to Ingold, we do not

see these concerns as antithetical to our interest in statue agency; indeed they have become the very stuff of it. The revived market for temple images in Vietnam permits a hierarchy of value and a range of consumer choice that one would expect of a sophisticated market; rationalized production places relatively inexpensive but not-yet-enchanted statues into the hands of a thriving community of spirit mediums including those who in poorer times would have used cheap woodblock images in their shrines as shadow images of a divine presence. Statues produced with attention to both ritual and technique have greater value in every sense. The well-crafted statue becomes a mark of distinction among those mediums who pride themselves in traditional knowledge and have the wherewithal to maintain well-fitted temples, temples that are more *linh* by virtue of their statues and consequently more efficacious places to petition the Mother Goddesses. For temple thieves and collectors, the abducted lure of an artful antiquity bests fear of image agency - at least some of the time - but tales of divine retribution also circulate. In a complex market, popular religion simultaneously resists and succumbs to the commodification of relationships between people and sacred goods - a not uncommon project.

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