A Triad of Confrontation: State Discipline, Buddhist Purification, and Indiscipline as a Local Strategy in Central Vietnam

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Abstract

In the village of Sa Huỳnh, state, fishers, and Buddhist clergy draw from semiotic ideologies but often employ a common political language, rarely agreeing on its meaning. Highlighting different structural positions and goals of social actors, I argue that binary oppositions exist but are not mutually exclusive, ever-lasting or antagonistic, as they shift in unexpected ways across the triadic relationship between state officials, fishers, and Buddhist clergy. By exposing the extent of improvisation and legitimation tactics, I show that religious practices are co-produced locally by the state through its diverse agents and agencies, by religious reformers through their purifying discipline, and by various categories of villagers who use indiscipline as a local tactic when acting on behalf of their gods.

Keywords

religion, state, semiotic ideology, purification, indiscipline, Buddhism, Central Vietnam

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Introduction

On a hot summer day in 1978 the district police arrived at the Bồ Tát[1] pagoda in Sa Huỳnh and confiscated all statues and Buddhist objects—with the exception of a two-meter high image of the Buddhist bodhisattva Quan Âm[2] that stood outside and was too big and heavy to take to the district People's Committee in Đức Phổ. The policemen, who carried out the task of vacating the local pagoda, had to quickly decide what to do with the troublesome object. Reluctant to destroy the statue themselves, they ordered villagers to smash the figure. Taking advantage of this situation, a group of Sa Huỳnh fishers[3] interfered. The Buddhist bodhisattva Quan Âm is particularly worshipped by fishers in Sa Huỳnh who believe that she is the creator of the Whale Spirit and offers them protection during storms. Risking punishment by the police, the fishers transported the statue by boat to Forbidden Hill (*Cấm Núi*) where the South China Sea pushes the water into the channel of a small bay known as the "sea gate" of Sa Huỳnh. This dangerously rocky section of coastline, lying on the margins of the community, was considered to be very treacherous for passing boats and junks and for a long time was symbolically protected by the divine couple of the goddess Thiên Y A Na [4] and the Whale Spirit, whose temples were built on the cliff top. Access to these temples became more difficult when the US Army appropriated Forbidden Hill as its military base during the Second Indochina War. In the late 1960s, fishers separated the divine pair by moving the Whale Spirit temple to Sa Huỳnh.

The police intervention against the Bồ Tát pagoda in 1978 was viewed by the fishers as an unexpected chance to fill the spiritual void caused by the departure of the seafaring spirit of the Whale. However, the whole operation needed a subtle tactic on the part of the head of the fishing community, who negotiated the rescue of the Quan Âm statue with the police. Reluctant to destroy the Buddhist statue themselves, but wanting to convey the impression of a properly fulfilled task, the policemen latched onto the fishers' proposition to take her away. Both sides saw Quan Âm's translocation as an opportunity to act in accordance with state policies and their own personal preferences. However, thirty years later, the presence of Quan Âm on Forbidden Hill created a problem for the new head monk of the Bồ Tát pagoda, who considered the placement of a Buddhist statue in a non-Buddhist space inappropriate and demanded that the fishers return the statue to its original location. Neither villagers nor representatives of the Commune People's Committee shared the new head monk's reformist zeal to suppress local devotional practices though they had nothing against his aspiration to promote the ethics of modern Buddhism.

The relationship between state, religion, and society is not a new debate in anthropology, especially in the context of an authoritarian country like Vietnam. However, there are two distinct anthropological approaches that could be singled out when we talk about religion in Asia, which is a home for all "world religions" and a breeding ground for less institutionalized religious practices such as ancestor and spirit worship, to mention just a few among many (Turner and Salemink 2015). Religion in Asia is either approached through a dichotomous and often antagonistic framework of state–religion encounter (Anagnost 1994; Chau 2011; Duara 1995; Salemink 2015; Van der Veer and Lehman 1999; DuBois 2009) or through the framework of embodied and religious experiences that leaves the state out (Tsing 1999; Keane 2003, 2007, 2008; Morris 2000; Pedersen 2011). I intervene in these debates by asking how people engage, localize, selectively accept or subvert the state through their religious practices. Whereas Ashiwa and Wank (2009, 7) define the confrontation between state and religion as "the process of institutionalizing the modern concept of religion in the state and in religion," I tackle the ways in which state and nonstate actors seek to navigate state ideologies by continuously rupturing and rearranging secular and religious binaries. While the state cannot be ignored in Asia, state–religion binaries that reduce the state to its disciplinary apparatus and people's actions to resistance are too simplistic.

The vignette above includes encounters between state and Buddhist authority and between state and fishers, but its particular focus is the encounter between religious authority and fishers. These different confrontations create a theoretical problem because they refer to binaries that are experienced as real, but are neither mutually exclusive nor stable. This article approaches binary oppositions not as absolute, ever-lasting, or antagonistic but as constantly changing and shifting in unpredictable ways within and across triadic relationships between state, villagers, and more institutionalized versions of religion. An ethnographic approach that traces both the recent past in the accounts of people and the present—shared between the ethnographer and the subject in the real-time interaction in the field (Kumar 2016, 54)—proves useful to conceptualize the way in which binary forms of contestations emerge, dissolve, and reemerge at different time points among various groups of actors. Connecting the dots between temporally disparate events, practices, and people allows me to reveal a triad of confrontation that is unstable over time. The value of this ethnographic method lies in the possibility to analyze and theorize these connections at different temporal scales, thereby developing an analytical model that goes beyond a plain top–down demonstration of naked state power on villagers or a straightforward bottom–up resistance of individuals and groups in the village seeking to challenge the hegemony of the state (see Scott 1990, 1998). By mapping ethnographically

different structural positions and goals in the triad of confrontation in various moments in time, I demonstrate the complexity and temporality of these interactions in which the lines of dispute, cross-cutting allegiances, and tactical positions shift constantly.

A Triad of Contested Categories: State–Religion–Village

The diverse interpretations of past events and the rightful place of the Quan Âm statue in Sa Huỳnh deserve particular attention. Not only do they shed important light on the interplay between the state and society in understudied Central Vietnam (but see Kwon 2006, 2009), they also imply changing and shifting binaries across and within the triadic relationships between state agents, religious authorities, and diverse categories of villagers, which in Vietnam need not always involve antagonism between state and nonstate actors. Instead, I propose to look at the state–religion–village relationship as a triad of contested categories that do not need to "collapse into dichotomies of domination versus resistance" (Harms 2012, 737) but bring a proliferation of shifting binaries, such as one type of discipline versus another, discipline versus indiscipline, secular state versus religion, or local ritual versus Buddhist doctrine. While confrontations do occur between different sides, they do not involve monolithic entities with a singular agency, like state and society, but occur between heterogeneous actors representing different and often conflicting ideas and disciplines (Salemink 2013, 173; see also Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Day 2002; Harms 2011, 2012; Herzfeld 2016; Luong 2003; Malarney 2002; Subramanian 2009; Taylor 2007). In this article, I argue that binary oppositions do exist in Vietnam between the state, village, and the more institutionalized versions of religion like Buddhism, but they often shift and realign in unexpected ways. They are flexible but temporary and spatially limited as different social actors might subtly deny or selectively use, accommodate, and modify authoritative religious and cultural languages that legitimize their various, often contradicting, interests and goals. Three analytical concepts—*semiotic ideology, purification*, and *indiscipline*—help me to explain the kind of shifts in binaries required by state officials, different categories of villagers, and doctrinally minded religious authorities to navigate secular and religious rationalities.

I employ the idea of *semiotic ideology* to analyze the words, signs, and meanings that various social actors use to achieve their goals. Webb Keane (2003, 2007, 2008) employs semiotic ideology to denote the dynamic interconnections across authoritative religious languages in the context of the cultural encounter between Protestantism and local ancestor worship practices

in Indonesia. However, my use of semiotic ideology captures the words, signs, and meanings that build on both religious and state ideologies. In Vietnam, the appropriation of religion as a representation of culture and nation transgresses political, linguistic, and religious boundaries and has generated a vast repertoire of religious traditions and practices that compete with state semiotic ideology (Salemink 2015). Buddhist doctrine, vernacular expressions of religion, and the ideologies of the post-socialist state are mediated, interpreted, and rationalized across different social fields by political and religious semiotic ideologies. The ability of state and nonstate actors to navigate these semiotic ideologies and "recognize . . . [their] forms as 'the same' depends on certain ways of framing them, since their very materiality means they are always open to other unrealized possibilities" (Keane 2007, 21). The ways in which semiotic ideologies respond to the materiality of religious practices and objects—such as the Quan Âm statue—allow us to see how the binaries across and within the triad of contested domains of state–religion–village are continuously drawn, interrupted, and rearranged in everyday life experience (cf. Harms 2012).

One of the ways in which state and religious semiotic ideologies respond to the materiality of religion is through *purification*. According to Mary Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution situated in a Durkheimian dichotomy of sacred and profane, purification means "separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions . . . to impose system on an inherently untidy experience" ([1966] 2001, 4). If, in the late 1970s, a religious object such as the Quan Âm statue in Sa Huỳnh appeared to the policemen as "polluting," this was because their state semiotic ideology rejected the Buddhist statue as "matter out of place," to use Douglas's ([1966] 2001, 41) words. Almost thirty years later, the new head monk of the local Buddhist pagoda saw the presence of the Buddhist object on Forbidden Hill as matter out of place because his religious semiotic ideology strictly separated Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices. Thus, purification works through demarcation and sharpening distinctions among different categories and domains of social life, as Keane argues (2007, 83).[5] Building further on Keane's notion of purification, in this article I understand purification as rejecting or cleansing those elements from religious practices that do not conform to orthodoxy and orthopraxy in modernist political or religious semiotic ideologies.[6] Such purification includes the institutionalization of religion—an exclusionary process in which religion assumes a highly organized form—as exemplified by the village monk who promoted a modern version of Buddhist discipline that rejected vernacular religious practices in Sa Huỳnh. Working through separation, demarcation, and cleansing of various categories, purification therefore sharpens binary oppositions within the triadic relationship of state–religion–village.

While state and religious semiotic ideologies draw boundaries between binary categories, they are undermined by *indiscipline* that blurs such binaries (Mbembe 1992). Rather than center my analysis on Foucault's (1975, 1991) approach that privileges the apparatus of power and the strategies through which state discipline is produced and internalized by the population I track the exact procedures and means used to obscure those binaries by focusing on the ways in which different players in the triad of contested categories—state, religion, and village—rework semiotic ideologies. Assuming that agency is located within rather than outside structures of power (Giddens 1979; Keane 2003, 2007; Ortner 2006), I show the way that state and nonstate actors in Sa Huỳnh use indiscipline as a common tactic in response to forms of religious and state discipline (De Certeau 1984; Mahmood 2005; Mbembe 1992; Harms 2012). By indiscipline, I mean the use of improvised tactics by different players—not to resist or reject but to draw on selected political and religious repertoires in order to pursue their own agendas. This has the effect, however, of subverting the dominant semiotic ideologies as well as rupturing, rearranging, and blurring binary oppositions. Denoting *in*subordination through continuous bargaining and reinvention, indiscipline stands in contrast to Foucault's (1975) concept of discipline, and thus better captures the temporality and unpredictability of everyday interactions and practices through which individual actors are transformed (Mbembe 1992). However, the idea of indiscipline cannot be considered without the idea of discipline as both are part of the same dialectical relationship.

By bringing together these three analytical concepts in my ethnographic material—semiotic ideology, purification, and indiscipline—I examine how different players locate and redefine their positions in binaries that change and shift across and within the triadic relationship between state officials, villagers, and religious modernizers. Focusing on how state agents, fishers, and the Buddhist monk imposed and subverted rules, not by rejecting but by invoking the dominant semiotic ideologies, I argue that binaries between state and villagers, between state and religious authorities, and between religious authorities and villagers are realigning all three categories. Yet, diverse religious practices, including their material articulations, exist simultaneously in the local community and indicate shifting allegiances in which state and nonstate actors in Sa Huỳnh sometimes align with the selected categories of the state or religious semiotic ideologies and sometimes not.

Ethnographic Background

Sa Huỳnh is a coastal settlement of twenty thousand people comprising fish and shrimp farms, salt marshes, rice fields, and sandy dunes stretching along

the sea in Quảng Ngãi Province of Central Vietnam. Before 1975, Sa Huỳnh was part of the Republic of Vietnam—commonly known as South Vietnam—and served as a base for the US Army. During the war, the villagers were trapped between two forces: the National Liberation Front, which ruled the countryside at night, and US troops, who assumed control during the day. After the unification of the country in 1975, Forbidden Hill was appropriated by the Border Police as a military observation post and access to the place was totally denied until 1990. The period of High Socialism (1976–1979) during which the Vietnamese Communist Party unsuccessfully attempted to pursue a policy of collectivization in the South entailed the most severe suppression of religion. [7] In Northern Vietnam, antisuperstition campaigns and state attacks on religious institutions and practices (temples, sectarian organizations, geomancers, spirit mediums, etc.) took place after French colonial rule in the name of modernization. According to the Party's Marxist-Leninist ideology, religion would disappear when humankind entered the period of communism and scientific modernism. In the effort to make Vietnam a secular society, Party ideologists blamed religion for the backwardness of the masses, saying that people wasted time and money that could be better spent on education or national production (Endres 2001; Kleinen 1999; Luong 1994; Malarney 2002; Taylor 2004). In Northern Vietnam, already during the periods of land reform (1953–1955), war mobilization (1960–1975), and collectivization (1975–1986), sacred spaces were converted into granaries, storehouses, and schools, while priests, monks, and nuns were forced to disrobe and adopt secular lives. After 1975, this process was imposed on the South—albeit in a milder form—and lasted until 1986 when the state relaxed its enforcement of antisuperstition laws (cf. Taylor 2004).

When I first arrived in Sa Huỳnh in mid-autumn 2006 for twelve month's ethnographic fieldwork in Quảng Ngãi Province based on participant observation, friendly conversations, and open-ended interviews, with follow-up visits in 2011 and 2014, the climate surrounding religion in Vietnam was totally different from 1978. The economic reforms of *Đổi Mới* or Renovation initiated in 1986 by the Communist Party had brought economic liberalization, privatization, and commercialization of everyday life. Since the Communist-led Vietnamese state integrated the country into the global economy and abandoned collectivist policies, the threat of contagion by foreign culture was considered a challenge to the state's legitimacy. To fill the void created after withdrawing from socialist modernity, the Party-State attempted to create its own version of modernity, in which national identity played a dominant role and, as a result, took a more favorable attitude toward not only formal religions (*tôn giáo*) but also "folk beliefs" (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) (Endres 2002; Luong 2003; Taylor 2001, 2007; Salemink 2013). This allowed

for the reinterpretation of flourishing religious practices throughout Vietnam as an expression of Vietnamese "culture" and, above all, "national heritage"— a process I have described in detail elsewhere (Roszko 2012).

Forbidden Hill is an example of such a process in which the local worship of seafaring gods like Thiên Y A Na and the Whale Spirit and the Buddhist deity Quan Âm was reinterpreted by Sa Huỳnh commune authorities in terms of traditional culture. Forbidden Hill was the very first place where a representative of the Commune People's Committee, whom I call Lợi, took me to teach about the beautiful Vietnamese coastal culture. Pointing to the two-meter high statue of the female bodhisattva Quan Âm that stood at the foot of a cement Bodhi tree, Lợi praised the new usage of sacred space that, in accordance with the state's concerns, was properly developed as a place of scenic beauty. With the confidence of someone knowledgeable about coastal culture, Lợi pointed out the difficult location of the port and the hazards of the sea and argued that the presence of the statue had a positive psychological effect on fishers who pinned their faith on the Buddhist deity. For Lợi, a young, energetic, and devoted agent of the Department of Culture (*sở văn hóa*), Forbidden Hill was a scenic place enriched by a harmonious cultural crossover between "folk" beliefs and Buddhism.

For fishers also, the place was picturesque but for a different reason. By placing the Quan Âm statue on the cliff top in 1978, the men and women were confident that the place had become both sacred and beautiful. After Quan Âm was moved to Forbidden Hill, narratives about the transformation of the goddess Thiên Y A Na from a fierce into a benevolent spirit started to circulate among villagers. In the past, most fishers were afraid to approach her directly in the temple because she was considered a fierce deity quick to punish even minor unintentional misconduct. Passing Forbidden Hill on board their vessels, the men bowed their heads from afar out of respect and asked for safe passage. Fishers told me that in the early 1990s the goddess had lost her potential to control the sea. They believed that inspired by the compassionate and merciful nature of Quan Âm, she "entered the nunhood for intensive self-cultivation" (*đi tu*) and became a bodhisattva. At that time fisherwomen began to approach the goddess, making offerings of fruits and sweets in her temple every month during the new and full moon.

State Purifying Discipline

During my ethnographic immersion in Sa Huỳnh, I never heard villagers using the term *tôn giáo* (institutionalized religion) to describe their belief in spirits but I often heard them using the term *tín ngưỡng* or "religious beliefs" to describe their personal and intimate relationship with specific spirits.

Following the state, Vietnamese people make a distinction between "religion" and "religious beliefs" based on the presence or absence of doctrine (cf. Dror 2002). As in other parts of Southeast Asia, in Vietnam a separate term that could refer to religion (*tôn giáo*) per se only emerged in the context of European colonialism (Van der Veer and Lehman 1999; Turner and Salemink 2015). Its entry into common usage has resulted in religious practices being labeled and controlled but also understood as separate from the "secular" and juxtaposed with science (for China, see Sutton and Kang 2009). In the imperial encounter, both colonized countries and those that had successfully resisted Western hegemony coined a new concept of religion based on terms understood within Western narratives of modernity (DuBois 2009).

Such a process involved a kind of purification that reconfigured the concept of "religion" both for those groups of people who identify themselves with religion and those who do not (Keane 2007, 83). For example, during the period of High Socialism in Vietnam, "religion" was often combined with the Sino-Vietnamese term "superstition" (*mê tín dị đoan*) under which religion appeared archaic, unscientific, and heterodox (Salemink 2013; see also Sutton and Kang 2009, 193–94). In the *Đổi Mới* era, the Vietnamese state gradually abandoned the interpretation of religion as "unscientific" and "irrational" while still attempting to draw a line between those informal, vernacular religious practices that were assigned as having a "national character" (known as *tín ngưỡng*) and those considered superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*) and against the modern project of building a "progressive nation" (Roszko 2012; Salemink 2013; Taylor 2007). This led the state to reformulate meanings connected with diverse religious traditions in line with the new, "purified" category of religion and to design new measures for controlling such practices (Keane 2007, 84–88; Sutton and Kang 2009).

Not all religious beliefs in Vietnam involve a standardization of religious knowledge and practice as in the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions (Turner and Salemink 2015). Often lacking orthodoxy and orthopraxy, religion in Vietnam is mostly polytheistic in nature and described in terms of the "interconnection and mutual influence between major religious traditions . . . , through a wide variety of rituals and in overlapping cosmologies and pantheons associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism . . . , built on a substratum of ancestor worship . . . and spirit worship" (Salemink 2008, 272; see also Kwon 2009; Soucy 2012; Turner and Salemink 2015). Also, "in Vietnamese Buddhism, there is no systematized, formally imposed, orthodox practice that is required of all devotees" and, consequently, many people who engage in Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices do not necessarily experience them as being in conflict (Soucy 2012, 3–4; see also Taylor 2004). This is no less true for Sa Huỳnh where the existing beliefs, such as ancestor worship,

cult of the anonymous dead, worship of the goddess Thiên Y A Na and the Whale Spirit, as well as geomancy and fortune-telling, interact on various levels and are tied to institutions such as fishing organizations, but these connections are rather loose in nature.[8] Such relative absence of orthodoxy and orthopraxy constitutes a persistent challenge to state officials and doctrinally minded clergy, who wish to purify those forms of religious practices that they do not deem to be in line with their doctrinal interpretations. If we read the antireligious campaigns of the late 1970s as a cleansing of religions from the local village domain, it allows us to capture various local responses that sometimes required objects—such as temples or statues—be destroyed, smashed, or moved across different symbolic and political spaces and subjected to different disciplinary practices and semiotic ideologies (cf. Keane 2008).

An example of state purification was the destruction of the *đình* or communal house in Sa Huỳnh during the period of postunification and collectivization. As in other parts of Vietnam, in Sa Huỳnh local officials were determined to wipe out all forms of social differentiation in terms of class and gender restrictions, seating order, ritual functions, and food distribution that the *đình* reproduced (cf. Endres 2001; Luong 1992; Malarney 2002). Being excluded from the local *đình* system where village founders were worshipped and which represented a hierarchy derived from agriculture, some fishers felt justified in pulling down the communal house that they associated with social inequality and in using its building material to construct their own houses. Fishers had their own fishing organization and territorial unit in the *vạn* with its religious cult of a seafaring guardian spirit—the Whale (Roszko 2016). While the *đình* of Sa Huỳnh was never rebuilt, the Whale Spirit Temple was enlarged with the tacit agreement of local cadres even during the time of antireligious campaigns. The Sa Huỳnh authorities allowed the *vạn* to function because it was more egalitarian due to the nature of the fishing profession, which often involves considerable hazard and requires cooperation, mutual trust, and equal investment of labor from the entire crew on board.

Defense of the Quan Âm Statue

As stated by the villagers, the activities of geomancers and various ritual masters were strictly banned after 1975. Gia (born in 1947) was well known in Sa Huỳnh not only as a gifted healer and exorcist (cf. Endres 2008; Kwon 2009) but also as the savior of the Buddhist statue. During my visit to Gia's house, I learned that in the late 1970s fishermen chose him as the head of the *vạn*. Villagers later confirmed that he was held in high esteem by most people in the village and that he was "talented and virtuous" (*có tài có đức*). He led an ordinary life until the age of twenty-five, when he fell ill. During our

conversation he recalled that at that time an "invisible" (*vô hình*), "spectral" (*huyền bí*) being entered his body, controlled him, threatened him, and prevented him from working or going fishing for one hundred days. When these hundred days had passed the spirit allowed him to resume his daily chores and eat meat again, but on every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month Gia was obliged to serve the spirit and cure people. At the time of the anti-superstition campaigns in 1978, Gia was arrested several times and accused of spreading superstitious practices. He was banned from curing and carrying out exorcisms. He recalled:

> I cannot count how many times the police came here and said that I was spreading superstition and the occult [*huyền bí*], that I was uneducated and lacking conciseness [*vô trí vô giác*].[9] I wanted to save people; I have never taken a single penny, I have been helping the people at large. You, young lady, know the people's level here, they only finished elementary school and even this cannot be certain. During the war, they just learned to spell, that was all. And that was why they called it occult practice!

Gia smiled and continued:

> Once, the provincial police sent a letter and summoned me to the commune office. They detained me for two days. During this time, people gathered, around 300 people from Sa Huỳnh alone. The police officer misunderstood it; he thought that I had alerted them. I answered him: "Honorable officer, I have been sitting here for two days working with the cadres. How could I have asked the people to come here?" Their presence reflected that I worked in their interest and it cost nothing. I wanted to stop healing but the village and the neighborhood did not let me stop; people came in crowds, I had a lot of work to do, [I could not refuse] you know . . . a sense of community spirit [*tình làng nghĩa xóm*].

Gia was someone who bridged political and religious domains and who knew how to use the semiotic ideology of the state to blur the opposing categories in the triadic relationship of state–religion–society. He made himself publicly visible through his healing rituals, his service to the *vạn*, and his ability to deploy various tactics of indiscipline, which made him able to shift his identities and to represent himself politically and professionally as a different persona in official and unofficial situations. When arrested and detained in the People's Committee office, Gia politely mocked local authorities, calling his detention for political reasons "work" (*làm việc*) with "honorable cadres," thereby reproducing conventional political language. Blurring the state–village binary, he revealed the irrationality of the local authorities who

assumed that he was mobilizing while in fact he was preoccupied raising his "socialist moral standards" in detention. The presence of a group of villagers in front of the People's Committee building may have looked like subversion but Gia offered it as proof that his conduct had not been exploitative of his fellow villagers.

He earned credit not only among his co-villagers as a ritual master and head of the *vạn* but also demonstrated capability to devise a solution for the Buddhist statue. Gia clearly remembered that it was a hot summer day in 1978 when the district police arrived at the pagoda and ordered villagers to smash the figure of Quan Âm, which stood outside and was too big to transport elsewhere. He recounted:

> During the subsidy period [*thời báo cấp*] revolutionaries did not rely on any religion [*tín ngưỡng*], any superstitions [*mê tín dị đoan*], they were in the process of eradicating all of them. . . . I had the opportunity that year to represent the fishers of Sa Huỳnh and gained the people's trust and confidence. Hence, I came to the pagoda and stood face to face with the police. I showed comradely spirit [*tính đồng chí*] and said: "This is a statue, in fact, cement and plaster only, if you want to smash the statue you have to hire people. Instead, please give it to me, I will take it to the hill to beautify the place!"

> "Did the police agree?", I asked. "The police were unanimous in their decision; they said that it was urgent that I transport the statue as soon as possible. I called folks together and, first, we transported it close to the Whale Temple. Then we took a boat, crossed the channel and carried the statue up the cliff. I also planted a small Bodhi tree in the place where the statue was erected. It took five to ten years to grow. But it withered and later people made an artificial tree of cement. They wanted the Quan Âm statue to look important and older and to make it more dignified."

When Gia used the semiotic ideology of the state to defend the Buddhist statue, it was not an act of resistance against state rule but of desire to participate in local religious life which was important for him and his co-villagers. Other villagers stated very clearly to me that "if Gia had not interceded for the statue, if it had remained without worshippers, all of us would have been guilty [*mang tội*]."

If indiscipline brings into play a kind of rationalism, it is both an "art of thinking" and an "art of using" (de Certeau 1984, xv; see also Mbembe 1992).[10] Gia's manipulation of the state's semiotic ideology was a tactic of indiscipline that allowed both the fishers and the police to escape this overarching state purification project and avoid the destruction of the Buddhist statue by blurring religious and political distinctions. Gia's simultaneous

protestations and simulation of "comradely spirit" (*tính đồng chí*) presented the police with a dilemma. According to Hồ Chí Minh, "comradely spirit" was a crucial part of the critique and "self-critique" practiced among members of the Party whose aim was "self-improvement." Pushed to his limits, Gia played with this expression in order to convince the policemen to give him the statue. The local authorities were also reluctant to reject Gia's argument on account of his position as the head of the fishing organization. He *practically* represented the fishers—not just ritually—and because of this status it was difficult to counter him. Carrying out the task of desecrating the local pagoda, the police had to decide what to do with the troublesome object that was too cumbersome to take to the People's Committee. Caught in a web of state discipline, the officials could not just leave the statue, since they had received an order to cleanse the village of "superstition," but neither were they keen to dirty their hands by destroying it. Displaying their own indiscipline towards the state's semiotic ideology by accepting Gia's proposition, they entered into a silent form of collaboration. The policemen ordered Gia to remove the statue as soon as possible and, loading the remaining statues onto their truck, they left the pagoda empty, maintaining the appearance that their task had been carried out properly.

Keane (2008) observes that semiotic ideologies respond to the materiality of practices and objects, such as texts, offerings, altars, statues, temples, or rituals, and are conditioned by social actors' experiences. To purify the local pagoda of its sacred aura and show that Quan Âm was nothing more than a powerless effigy, the policemen first had to identify the meaning of the statue with reference to the state's semiotic ideology. Once the statue was defined as a *religious* and therefore *superstitious* object according to the Marxist-Leninist principles of 1978, it could be removed and destroyed. Although Gia regarded the purifying actions of the police as sacrilege, he blurred the categorical boundaries by publicly using the political rhetoric and confirming the legitimacy of the state to save the statue which he felt obliged to protect. Aware of the state policy of preserving places of historical, cultural, or aesthetic interest (Roszko 2012) and of the "socialist beautification programme" (Harms 2012), he used the argument that the Quan Âm statue would beautify the local landscape. By planting the Bodhi tree, he enacted the new political tradition of "National Planting Day"—inaugurated by Hồ Chí Minh during the Land Reform—and his famous saying that "Forest is gold if one knows how to protect it."[11]

In this way, Gia carried out his own counter-purification in which he chose to foreground the aesthetic value of the statue while backgrounding its religious value. Moving between the opposing poles of a secular-religious binary, he displayed his "secular" rationality by pointing out that in fact, the statue

was matter out of place and nothing more than a plaster effigy, not worth the effort of smashing and, for that reason, it belonged to a secular space. Purification is never a finished project, not because of resistance but because it creates endless "hybrids" across different social fields, mixing objects and categories (Keane 2008, 289; see also Douglas [1966] 2001; Latour 1993). Gia's work of counterpurification created such a hybrid object of beauty, culture, and religion as it shifted the function of the statue from religious to aesthetic and hence moral, by using the Communist semiotic ideology to ensure that the Buddhist statue remained in the local village landscape, albeit outside the pagoda grounds. In this sense, the Quan Âm statue on Forbidden Hill became a hybrid by-product of the state's semiotic ideology prescribing the cleansing of inappropriate elements from the village space (Douglas [1966] 2001, 36).

Buddhist Purifying Discipline

I often witnessed Lợi (born in 1975) authoritatively instructing villagers on religious policy and superstitious practices. But when I visited the Buddhist pagoda Bồ Tát, in the company of Lợi, and met the head monk Thích Giác Đức (born in 1945), the roles of 'instructor' and "instructed" were reversed. "What's your name *chú* [junior uncle]?" asked Lợi, as usual. At this the monk became indignant: "*Anh* [you] call me *chú*. That's wrong. You call me uncle meaning that I'm an ordinary person, don't you? In [Christian] religion, if you go to church you must call a priest 'Reverend Father' [*cha đạo*]. You are working on culture but you come to a Buddhist pagoda and you call me uncle. You cannot address me properly, huh? If you come to the pagoda you must respect the social status and the religious title of the person here. For example, if one is a Venerable [*đại đức*], then call him 'Venerable'; if one is a Master [*thầy*], call him 'Master.'"

Vietnamese kinship terminology is usually used to establish hierarchy but in certain contexts might be also used to circumvent a system of asymmetry (Sidnell and Shohet 2013; see also Luong 1988). Being thirty years younger than the head monk, Lợi did not follow the proper hierarchical order not just because he used the wrong kin term to adress the monk but because he used kin terms at all. Yet, this was not the encounter of a young man who misbehaved as he later shifted to the term "Master," although for most of the time he strategically avoided using person-referring forms while asking questions. Rather, it was the encounter between a "political official" representing secular authority and a Buddhist monk representing religious authority. Framing their interaction differently, the monk claimed a higher religious status over the state official while Lợi sought to escape this confrontation by his refusal to use

the surname "Thích" reserved for the Buddhist clergy or a more proper term in this context, *thầy* or "Master" (cf. Sidnell and Shohet 2013). To negate the religious authority of the monk, Lợi strategically began the interview with the monk by using the kin term "junior uncle" in the interaction outside of the kinship domain and, thus, implied more proximity then the monk tolerated.

In his study of discursive practices and power structure, Hy Van Luong (1988, 251) shows that the diverse use of linguistic forms is not "a passive reflection on the social differentiation" but "an active part of the historically specific and power-embedded construction of reality." This is why the monk warned the young official that he was visiting a sacred place and that he was obliged to recognize religious authority. However, instead of seeing this relationship as an example of the antagonism between state and religion in Vietnam, I look at the two sides as representing semiotic ideologies enacted through different power-embedded disciplines of state and religious authority. In the previous section I analyzed an example of confrontation between state, religion, society, and the tactics Gia used to position himself within and across this triadic relationship. The binary opposition is not limited to state versus religion or state versus village, but can also be extended to the encounter between villagers and religious authorities.

During the period of High Socialism, some pagodas were considered historically significant and for that reason villagers and cadres refrained from destroying such places (Malarney 2002, 46; Roszko 2012). According to official directives, these pagodas qualified as sites of historical interest or scenic beauty and came under the direct management of local authorities, which decided on their possible renovation. However, Bồ Tát pagoda did not have the good fortune to be rated as a place of historical importance, nor could the local authorities discern any aesthetic qualities. Although in the southern parts of Vietnam the removal of religious statues and objects from pagodas and their destruction were not as widely enacted as in the northern parts of the country, the new communist government considered Buddhist pagodas belonging to the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) as dissident and shut them down.[12] In most cases, their clergy was arrested and forced to disrobe, and Bồ Tát pagoda and monks, who belonged to the UBCV, shared a similar fate in 1978. From Bồ Tát pagoda's chronicle, to which the head monk kindly gave me access, I learned that there was no clergy in the pagoda from 1980 until 1999, when the current monk was appointed. In 1984 the pagoda was officially admitted into the Vietnamese Buddhist Association. In 1981, the Vietnamese Party-State formed the Buddhist Association of Vietnam, which remains the only official Buddhist umbrella organization with legal status in Vietnam (Soucy 2012). The UBCV is still present in Central and Southern Vietnam albeit not in Sa Huỳnh proper.

After the Reforms, the People's Committee of the district returned all confiscated statues, except the statue of Quan Âm, and ever since Thích Giác Đức sought to return the Quan Âm statue to the pagoda but the villagers insisted on leaving the statue on the hill. Aware of the state's policy that expected Buddhist clergy to support the official propaganda of protecting places of historical and cultural interest, beautifying the landscape and promoting tourism, the monk was more interested in advocating so-called reformed Buddhism—a modern version of Buddhism cleansed of non-Buddhist elements and propagating ascetic forms of self-cultivation. The monk explained that when he came to Sa Huỳnh the village pagoda did not have a qualified monk. A lay person was in charge of the building, and the only Buddhist practice taking place was the chanting of the *sutra*, which supposedly could not substitute for the teaching by a qualified monk. Thích Giác Đức described his role in the following words:

> The war was over, but after the miserable time of restrictions and at the hands of people who destroyed the building, at the end the temple fell into ruin. Then came the years in which the state expanded religious freedom and Buddhist activities could spread in the region. Without a monk there cannot be any development. . . . Since I have been here, the pagoda has been renovated and became spacious. There are facilities to accommodate any group of Buddhist pilgrims who are passing by. I mean, they come to bring relief to flood-hit central regions; doing their duty, they stop over here. This is the closest point for the South and the North to meet each other. That is why I need to have a place for them when they are on their return journey. The purpose of Buddhism is to bring prosperity and peace to all people, this is what the Buddha teaches.

The monk did not share Lợi's interest in the state's effort to convert temples into places of historical and cultural importance or into tourist sites. Such a policy aroused reluctance rather than enthusiasm. Instead, he stressed his role in recovering secular notions of Buddhist practice in Sa Huỳnh. Eloquently and carefully constructing his critique of the presence of the Quan Âm statue on Forbidden Hill, the head monk sought to purify not just the Buddhist pagoda but also the village landscape from non-Buddhist elements.

Listening to the monk, Lợi asked him whether he considered the headquarters of the Buddhist Association at the Quán Sứ pagoda in Hanoi as the administrative head of all Buddhist sects in the country. Lợi was aware of existing Buddhist pagodas around Sa Huỳnh that belonged to the dissident UBCV and discreetly tested the monk. The monk answered directly that in his opinion, rather than being a place of Buddhist devotion, the northern Quán Sứ pagoda was just a central secretariat in which the state monitored the religious congregation, approving and publicizing new administrative rules.

The monk continued his critique of northern pagodas by claiming that they remained under strong Chinese cultural influence, which is why people selfishly prayed for wealth, health, passing exams, and the like instead of engaging in self-cultivation, as is practiced in the South. He then more overtly expressed his disapproval of those northern pagodas that, according to the state's vision, had become "beauty spots" and destinations for sightseeing tours and for doing business rather than being places for practicing Buddhism—a criticism also shared by the UBCV. Lợi listened patiently, but in more awkward moments tried to interrupt the monk and asked me to switch off the recorder. However, the monk continued his tirade, stating that for him many temples had nothing to do with Buddhist cultivation and only pretended to be places of Buddhist practice; in reality they were simply earning money from tourism. The monk believed that such places could not develop as sites for Buddhist religious cultivation, similar to Bồ Tát pagoda which, left without clergy, was doomed to decline.

Eventually, Lợi changed the subject and brought up the issue of the Quan Âm statue and its current location above Sa Huỳnh port. Although both Lợi and Thích Giác Đức must have known the reason why the statue was moved to the cliff top instead of remaining in the grounds of the pagoda, this issue was avoided by both of them. Instead, Lợi talked about the villagers' beautification and decoration of the place on the cliff and the role of Quan Âm in granting fishermen a peaceful passage at sea and safe return home. Describing Quan Âm as simultaneously representing "Buddhist beliefs" (*tín ngưỡng Phật giáo*) and "folk beliefs" (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) he stressed that the two sides complemented each other rather than clashed. At the same time, by not using the term *tôn giáo* (religion) with reference to Buddhism and emphasising "beautiful Vietnamese customs," Lợi denied the authority of the Buddhist monk to decide about the statue.

For the monk, Quan Âm in the non-Buddhist space of Forbidden Hill was matter out of place but in Lợi's view the statue was an example of the merging of "beautiful Vietnamese traditions" and Buddhism, which—enriched with local flavor—entered the reality of everyday life and expressed itself in daily practices. Lợi declared that he did not identify with any of the main religions (*tôn giáo*), including Buddhism, and in his view, as a "worker of the state" he ought to represent a secular orientation. However, he disclosed that this had not restrained him from honoring his wife's ancestors during his wedding. In Loi's discussions with the monk Thích Giác Đức, he stressed that he saw no contradiction in claiming to be secular and following ancestor worship (*thờ ông bà*), which for him was a "beautiful Vietnamese tradition." Asking for the monk's opinion on the beautification of the cliff and whether he identified himself with the people's project, the monk replied curtly that

whatever the villagers were doing had nothing to do with him and in this way strictly separated their *tín ngưỡng* (religious beliefs) from Buddhist *tôn giáo* (religion).

Lợi decided to delve further into the subject and asked the monk whether he would agree to carry out a ceremony on the cliff, given that people might consider him better qualified to perform rituals. In making this invitation, Lợi, who was knowledgeable about local culture, granted a form of authority to the monk who, in his view, understood religious procedures more clearly than the villagers, who had a weak understanding of Buddhist beliefs and teachings (*tín ngưỡng giáo lý đạo phật*). The monk diplomatically answered that he did not have a clear understanding of the matter but in the last two years he had refused to lead village ceremonies for local gods because he found them to be in contradiction with Buddhist teaching, since villagers butchered pigs and prepared elaborate feasts. He then used pre–*Đổi Mới* rhetoric that associated superstition with the peasant class and distanced himself from the official agenda that prioritizes "folk" religious beliefs as "pure and authentic Vietnamese traditions." Playing with the political language of the state's semiotic ideology, he called the "folk" beliefs "superstition" (*mê tín gọi là tín ngưỡng dân gian*) and in contradiction to Buddhist religion (*tôn giáo chỉ là Phật giáo*) and at the same time he disagreed with Lợi's vision of a cultural crossover between "folk" beliefs and Buddhism. In contrast to the local state official, Thích Giác Đức sought a radical break from local traditions and, in that sense, he was more dismissive of the villagers' beliefs and practices as heterodox and heteropractic than Lợi. Note that when he stressed his role in recovering "pure" Buddhism, he mentioned pilgrims and North–South reconciliation as his project but not the villagers who, apparently, remained outside of his main concern.

Thích Giác Đức's purifying efforts to redirect his followers from devotional to more sophisticated practices such as self-cultivation or meditation resulted in Sa Huỳnh villagers' losing control over the village pagoda. However, they were not willing to lose control over the cliff which— "enchanted" by the rescued statue of Quan Âm—became even more potent. Circumventing the monk's purifying discipline, they funded a new statue of Quan Âm so that the old one could remain on the cliff top where it was better suited, even though the monk considered the local pagoda as a more appropriate place for the Buddhist statue. Here we need to consider the semiotic ideologies of state and religion together with their competing disciplines aiming to control local religious practices. The monk's attack on Lợi undermined the latter's authority and beat the state at its own game of wielding its doctrine as the only legitimate one. The monk implicitly sought to prove that the Buddhist discipline that he had propagated since he came to Sa Huỳnh was doctrinally

more correct than that of the state-sanctioned Buddhist Association. His protest against the state's appropriation of Buddhist spaces for tourism rather than for Buddhist pilgrimages reflected the wider struggle of the modernizing movement, to bring Buddhism back to its imagined original core (Soucy 2012). In his insistence on a hardline Buddhist doctrine of self-cultivation, the monk sought to purify the villagers' everyday ritual life and space.

Ironically, the monk's efforts provided fuel for heterodox rites as villagers continuously reenacted their religious practices in a more holistic and unpredictable way than the monk wished, making the work of purification unfinished business—just like the state's efforts in 1978. On the first and fifteenth day of a lunar month, Sa Huỳnh fisherwomen usually made offerings first to deities on Forbidden Hill and afterwards to Bồ Tát pagoda, where they listened to sermons given by the monk, prepared vegetarian meals, and chanted sutras together with other villagers. Knowing the monk's rigid views on their religious practices on Forbidden Hill, the fisherwomen were careful not to mention to the monk their prior visit to the cliff. Despite Thích Giác Đức's orthodox ideas, these fisherwomen saw nothing contradictory in leaving the Quan Âm statue on the cliff top in the vicinity of the Goddess Thiên Y A Na. Similarly, fishermen felt that they had fulfilled their moral obligations by saving the statue from destruction and, following Hồ Chí Minh's instruction, beautifying the local landscape. For them the Quan Âm statue made the cliff—a transitional point between Sa Huỳnh and the open sea—more sacred and powerful.

Shifting Binary Oppositions

By underlining the modes in which the binary poles of diverse contestations are foregrounded and shift in the localized encounters between community, state, and religion, I suggest that they are not entirely determined by the grid of purifying disciplines to which they are subjected (De Certeau 1984). The ethnographic examples of Gia and the monk show that there were real confrontations but also temporary and pragmatic coalitions and manipulations of semiotic ideologies allowing various categories of actors to achieve often contradicting goals within the same ideological frame. If the defense of the Quan Âm statue in 1978 put the fishers and policemen on opposite poles of the state–society binary, the state-initiated process of purifying the religious domain and of beautification made them "move between those poles" as they explored the situation with an eye to "maximize their positional advantages" (Harms 2012, 6).

Nearly thirty years later, both the state official and the monk asserted their modernist rationalities but they let each other know that there was a strong

divide between their competing doctrines. While the effects of this divide involved villagers, those like Gia did not identify themselves with either form of this top–down modernist discipline. As I have shown, the villagers' attachment to spirits and their insistence on leaving the statue on the cliff was a deviation from the monk's version of Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy cut off from local cosmologies. On the other hand, fishers shared Thích Giác Đức's idea of a pagoda as an important place but not his doctrinal view, according to which Buddhism had little to do with their devotional practices. In that sense, they oddly allied themselves with the state official Lợi who declared himself to be secular. Still, this required them to learn how to use political language that would be difficult for the other side to defy. In this sense, the shifting contest between the monk, the fishers, and the state agents for control over sacred places was an ideological struggle between competing purifying disciplines of state agents who transformed local religious practices to align with the present realities of post-Socialist Vietnam and monks who held that neither cultural interest nor local customs had a place in "pure" Buddhism. State and religious semiotic ideologies exist simultaneously and do not exclude each other, but evoke continuing tensions between villagers, state representatives, and religious authorities, which take the form of temporary binaries that proliferate, shift, and blur over time. In *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, Adam Chau (2011, 8) characterizes the relationship between the Chinese party-state and religion as a "politics of articulation" where a "diverse array of religious ideas and activities—articulate smoothly with the main body politic of the nation-state." Chau uses a visual metaphor of a centipede that represents the central state while its legs stand for diverse actors and their often contradictory visions and desires. This powerful metaphor presents the state as a monolithic body even when it synchronizes a multitude of visions. Looking more closely at local practices of state and nonstate actors, I imagine the state–society–religion encounter as a beehive composed of a well-organized and hierarchical colony of bees that can shift their roles in the hive as they enact various complex relationships. In this sense, rather than as one monolithic body, the state functions like a multiplicity of bodies that enact different types of directions and relationships without losing the hive as a whole from their perspective.

Moving from the metaphor of the beehive to the frame of state–religion–village as a triad of contested categories and dominant semiotic ideologies, I argue that religious practice is a coproduction of the state—through its diverse agents and agencies—and religious reformers through their purifying discipline, as well as of various categories of villagers who use indiscipline as a local tactic when acting on behalf of their gods. Focusing on local-level confrontations, a wider purpose of this article was to show that binary oppositions

between various types of (religious and secular) discipline, discipline versus indiscipline, or rationalized religious doctrines versus vernacular religions, exist but they are not clear-cut or perennial. By exposing the extent of improvisation and legitimation tactics I showed that these binaries are mutually constitutive, as various categories of social actors compete to gain advantage against the backdrop of processes of purification and blurring of religion. Various local protagonists actively sharpen, interrupt, shift, or blur the state–village–religion binaries but, at the same time, continuously seek to maximize their tactical positions within and across those binaries by selectively accepting, purifying, and subverting state and religious semiotic ideologies in ways that best serve their specific locale and interests.

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Notes

1. The name "Bồ Tát" for the pagoda and all personal names are pseudonyms.
2. Quan Âm (Guan Yin) is the Chinese form of the Indian Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, whose cult spread throughout Asia. According to Buddhist teaching, bodhisattva refers to someone who, motivated by great compassion, refrains from entering Buddhahood in order to help people.

3. To avoid the highly gendered language that privileges male and excludes women, I use the term *fishers* as the "best gender-neutral plural for people working in the fishing industry" (Subramanian 2009, xiii). When I refer specifically to males and females, I use the term *fishermen* or *fisherwomen*.

4. Thien Y A Na is a Vietnamized Cham deity particularly worshipped in Central Vietnam (Nguyen The Anh 1995; Salemink 2015).

5. In his critique of modernity, Bruno Latour (1993) uses the term *purification* for the process of ontologically separating the categories of human (culture) and nonhuman (nature) in science in contradistinction to religion. In contrast with Latour, Keane argues that purification does not necessarily exclude the modernity of the category of religion (2007, 23–25), which is congruent with my own ethnographic material, as shown in my discussion of religious purification. Moreover, whereas Keane draws on Latour's concept of purification as sharpening boundaries between things and persons he criticizes him for not explaining how purification really works.

6. In his study of the Empress of Heaven cult, known also as Tian Hou or Mazu, James Watson proposes the model of cultural unity in Chinese imperial society that operates through *orthopraxy*— an array of shared practices or rites—and that supersedes *orthodoxy*—a system of shared beliefs and values (Watson 1985; Barbalet 2017, 93). The main point of Watson's (1985) argument is that through orthopraxy, the same symbol may attain different meanings given by different classes of people in diverse locations despite a shared ritual and symbolic form. For a discussion of the limits of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, see Pomeranz (2007).

7. In 1979 the Vietnamese Communist Party retreated from its collectivization policy and from enforcement of its centrally planned economic system by setting out new measures that would help to enhance production. However, this shift became the Communist Party's new policy only in 1986 when the *Đổi Mới* program of socioeconomic reforms was officially announced at the 6th Party Congress (Kerkvliet 2005).

8. While monotheistic Christian religions were not present in Sa Huỳnh, a Cào Đài temple served a very small number of followers.

9. The antonym for *vô gíac* (lacking consciousness) is *giác ngộ*, a Buddhist term used to describe "Buddhist enlightment" that has been adopted in Marxist practice to denote "class consciousness."

10. De Certeau does not use the term *indiscipline* but he speaks about antidiscipline, which he contrasts with discipline (1984, xv).

11. The Party-State sought to replace local village traditions with more profane celebrations. Hồ Chí Minh invented a new tradition of a National Planting Day in order to replace more traditional festive occasions in village ritual life (Kleinen 1999; McElwee 2016).

12. In the 1960s, the conflict between Buddhists and Catholics unified Buddhists to emulate the highly organizational form of the Catholic Church. As a result, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was established at the An Quang pagoda in Saigon in 1963 (Soucy 2012). After 1975, it was suppressed as a dissident Buddhist sect.

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