

Appropriating State Techniques for Effective Rituals: Funerals of the Raglai in Contemporary Vietnam

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Since the relaxation of religious regulations in Vietnam in the 1990s, an increasing number of studies have examined the resurgence of religious practices with the revival of traditions and economic development. Some studies have shown that people accept the authority of the state in the religious realm, suggesting that such acceptance is intended to restore people's religious legitimacy. However, they tend to limit their understanding of legitimacy to the context of the state order. In contrast, this article demonstrates how the state serves as a source of knowledge to be appropriated in reforming religious practices that reflect and reconstruct local values.

Based on ethnographic research, this article examines the impact of state policies on the Raglai people's funerary rituals in upland South-Central Vietnam, which are integral to their cosmology and customs (known as *adat*). These rituals have undergone modifications because of the socioeconomic changes brought about by sedentarization. To legitimize these modifications and maintain the rituals' efficacy, people have appropriated rhetoric and techniques from the state authorities. This article argues that this is not an attempt to gain recognition from the state but a creative way to reconstruct practices in a manner that aligns with local values that are continuously recreated.


Keywords: Raglai, ethnic minorities in Vietnam, upland Southeast Asia, religious policy, cultural policy, sedentarization, funerals

Introduction

For the Raglai hill peoples in coastal provinces of South-Central Vietnam, funerals are the largest rituals. These are closely connected with the Raglai cosmology and customary practices, known as *adat*. However, the Raglai people in my research site are undergoing rapid socioeconomic change caused mainly by sedentarization, and their religious practices—including funerals—are being modified. The transformation of

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funerals appears to align with the current state cultural policy, which promotes the restoration of ethnic minorities' traditional rituals but requires their retention in a manner that avoids wasting resources. However, this article argues that the Raglai's intentions in transforming their funerals are not only to comply with the state cultural policy or gain state recognition but also to adapt to the rapidly changing environment by creating new ways to organize them. The state authorities provide a framework for transformation and its legitimation based on the Raglai's conventional perspective.

Before delving into the ethnographic description, context is provided to this discussion by exploring the current research on religious practices in socialist Vietnam. To understand people's religious activities in contemporary Vietnam, the influence of the state cannot be ignored. Several scholars have explored how, and to what extent, the socialist state regulates, represses, modifies, and utilizes the people's religious and ritual activities (see, for example, Matthews 1992; Malarney 1996; 1997; 2002; 2007; Salemink 1997; 2003; 2007; 2008; Ó Briain 2014; Århem 2015). Some studies have pointed out the limitations of state control, although they also recognize the state's influence on religious activities (Luong 1993; 2007; Malarney 1996; Kitazawa 2021). Others have argued that the religious activities of ethnic minority groups enable them to negotiate their identities and autonomy under the state control and socioeconomic conditions that marginalize them (Lewis 2002; Salemink 2003; Taylor 2007; Ngô 2016; Nakamura 2020). Against the general view of the socialist state's top-down and authoritarian statecraft, these works successfully portray the dynamics of state-local relations and people's agency in contemporary Vietnam.

As the above studies have illustrated, the Vietnamese state regulated people's religious practices during the revolutionary era. However, after the economic reforms known as *Đổi Mới* in the late 1980s, the state's regulation of religious activities was reduced. With this shift, the state authorities came to be seen not as an active agent that intervened in people's religious practices but as a backdrop to modestly situate them. The resurgence of religious practices in Vietnam is interpreted as a revival of the traditions that were suppressed by state control or a reaction to the increased economic instability caused by exponential commercialization, which the state was not able to control (see, for example, Taylor 2004; Lê 2007; Kwon 2008).

While the above studies have focused on mitigation of the state's religious control, some other studies have shown the state appearing to be an effective agent that authenticates religious practice. For instance, Shaun Malarney has pointed out that in villages in North Vietnam, people began worshipping Ho Chi Minh as the government legitimized the worship of national heroes and relaxed regulations on religious practices in the 1990s. He argues that such worship is a deliberate attempt by local men to maintain their com-

munal house as a space for male rituals since the restoration of village rituals and ritual spaces, which were male domains before the revolutionary era, allowed female residents to participate in rituals or organize Buddhist rituals in the 1990s (Malarney 2002, 189–204). Meanwhile, Nguyễn Thị Hiền introduced the case of a group of spirit mediums in North Vietnam who worshipped Ho Chi Minh as a god, even though the government restricted spirit mediumship and local officials repressed the group's activities (Nguyễn 2007, 545). While the authors explain that the worship of Ho Chi Minh is rooted in the Vietnamese tradition of venerating national heroes who have contributed to the country and its people, they also mention the expectation among the people that the contemporary socialist state will validate the legitimacy of this religious practice (Nguyễn 2007, 545) or help residents address gender issues in the local religious realm (Malarney 2002, 204).

Oscar Salemink's (1997) analysis shares similarities with the above studies when he examines the attitude of a potential successor to the King of Fire, which is a position held for performing crucial rituals in the Jarai community of the Central Highlands. The future King of Fire's acceptance of the Vietnamese authorities' plan to film the succession ceremony, his preference for official attire in photographs, his saving of distinguished visitors' business cards, and his expectation of receiving medals from the state authorities demonstrate his interest in gaining recognition from the state for his religious legitimacy. Salemink interprets the future King of Fire's attitude as a willingness to become a museum character for the benefit of Vietnamese and foreign consumers. He also sees this attitude as necessary when seeking permission to conduct the ceremony for certifying the King of Fire's ritual status, given the increasing number of Jarai converting to Protestantism. The future King of Fire's subordination to Vietnamese cultural politics is understood as an attempt to gain official recognition to bolster his religious status (Salemink 1997, 529–530).

The above studies have successfully illustrated how people attempt to leverage the state's authority to legitimize their religious practices. However, they have not explored the possibility that people may be seeking more than just recognition from the state. In contrast, a case study by Oscar Salemink and Phan Dang Nhat suggests that the state's recognition is not always necessary when people borrow its authority. The authors argue that people view official status and an administrative formula as helpful for planning successful and effective rituals. They explain how the ethnic majority Kinh followers of an ethnic Dao woman who conducts a possession ritual have contributed to the formalization of this ritual. Those who take part in the formalization are experienced leaders, often from the ranks of political and administrative cadres despite the government's discouragement of spirit possession rituals. They adopt administrative formulas

for the ritual procedures and refer to administrative divisions in the chants.

The authors argue that this formalization, combined with other religious traditions, ensures the success and effectiveness of relatively unscripted and uncharted ritualistic practices. Salemink and Phan's argument sheds light on the phenomenon of people adopting a formula or framework derived from state control not to seek recognition from the state but to maximize the efficacy of a ritual (Salemink and Phan 2007, 92). The study indicates that people's interest in the adoption of state-like formulations into a religious practice cannot be reduced to a pursuit of recognition from the state authorities.

In the last couple of decades, the Vietnamese state has shown more interest in recognizing religious institutions and traditional rituals. Against the backdrop of such circumstances, previous studies have illustrated people's attempts to worship Ho Chi Minh or to establish contact with the state authorities as a means of seeking state recognition. These studies have interpreted such actions as a pursuit of legitimacy within the state's political order. However, Salemink and Phan's research sheds light on the possibility that the authority of the state is appropriated to enhance the efficacy of religious practices. Drawing inspiration from Salemink and Phan's perspective, this article investigates how the Raglai appropriate the techniques and rhetoric of the state authorities to explain and legitimize the transformation of their funerals. Consequently, this article argues that the Raglai seek legitimation from their own conventional point of view rather than conforming to the state's political order.

James Scott's (2009) work highlights how highlanders in Southeast Asia imitated lowland state forms such as architecture, funerals, and regalia, which did not result in the lowland state exerting political power over them. Rather, highlanders simulated these elements to assert their autonomy or rebellion. Symbolic subordination to the state allowed highland leaders to claim authority over their own communities (Scott 2009, 111–116). This article draws on Scott's discussion and illustrates how the modern socialist state can serve as a source of authority that people can appropriate for their religious practices; however, it does not explore whether the Raglai are attempting to achieve autonomy from the state. For the Raglai, mimicking state symbolism supports the validity of their recreated rituals in reflection of local values.

Methodology and Research Site

This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted for 16 months between 2016 and 2020. The research site was Bac Ai District, Ninh Thuan Province, located in South-Central Vietnam.

The total population of Bac Ai District was 30,598 people, and 86 percent of them were registered as ethnic Raglai (Vietnam, Tổng cục Thống kê 2019). Residing in the mountains and valleys, the Raglai of Bac Ai historically have had religious and economic connections with the Cham who reside in the coastal areas of Ninh Thuan Province.¹⁾ Although a handful of households in Phuoc Thang have converted to Christianity, the rest conduct a ritual for spirits that is collectively called *yac*, which is similar to the *yang* of the Cham.

Revolutionary forces operated in this area from the 1940s to the 1970s and contributed to the “liberation” of South Vietnam and the establishment of the socialist nation in a unified Vietnam. Many Raglai residents joined the revolutionary forces’ operations in the 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnamese government continues to pay them an allowance and give them other forms of preferential treatment for their contribution to the revolution. Nevertheless, the government finds this region one of the most economically challenged in Vietnam, with nearly 54 percent of households in Bac Ai classified as “in poverty” or “in semi-poverty” (Vĩnh Phú 2018).

I attended 13 funerals, eight of them in Q hamlet, where I spent most of my time during the fieldwork. The rest were in adjacent hamlets and villages such as Phuoc Dai Village, Phuoc Thanh Village, and T hamlet in Phuoc Thang Village (see Fig. 1).

1) Cham peddlers have been active in the region for decades. According to local elders in their seventies, the Raglai in Bac Ai engaged in bartering with the Cham, exchanging forest resources such as water buffalo, betel nuts, and resin for goods such as salt, clothes, jewelry, and bronze and ceramic items such as gongs, jars, jugs, and bowls. Commercial transactions were suspended during the Vietnam War but resumed and continue to this day. The Cham peddlers who sell clothes and ceramic products still ask the Raglai to store the goods in their houses, although the Raglai more often purchase products from Kinh and Cham merchants who have been setting up stores in Raglai hamlets after Đổi Mới.

Meanwhile, the Raglai in Bac Ai have incorporated elements of Cham religions, such as the worship of Ina Lagar, similar to the Cham’s Po Ina Nagar, and Aluah, who is worshipped by Islam-influenced Cham Bani (Shine 2009, 167; Yoshimoto 2010, 226; Sakaya 2013; Noseworthy 2015, 120). Further, a structural similarity can be observed in funerary practices between the Cham and the Raglai (see note 9).

Compared to the Raglai in Binh Thuan Province and the southwestern Ninh Thuan Province, identified as Southern Raglai in Vietnamese ethnology, the Raglai in Bac Ai and Khanh Hoa Province, identified as Northern Raglai, have had relatively tenuous commercial and religious connections with the Cham. This is likely because Dai Viet took over Khatuhara (today’s Phu Yen-Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa Province), which was one of the religious centers of Champa in the seventeenth century (see Sakaya 2013, 628–629). Some Southern Raglai worked in the paddy fields of Champa’s royal families until the 1960s. They also protected the treasure houses of the Champa kings and continue to perform rituals related to these houses (Shine 2007, 115, 141–146). In Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan Province, the Southern Raglai play a symbolic role as keepers of a Cham garment during the Kate Festival, at which the Cham worship the divine beings of Champa.

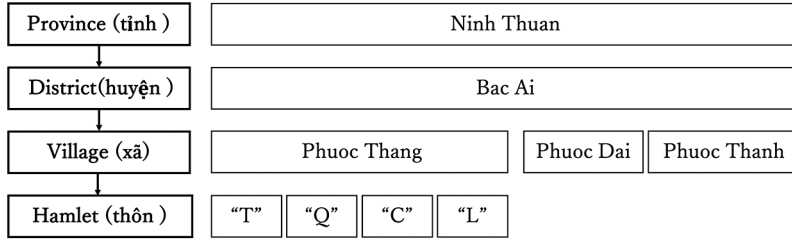


Fig. 1 Administrative Division of Ninh Thuan Province and Villages and Hamlets Addressed in This Article

Q hamlet is one of four hamlets in the Phuoc Thang administrative village.²⁾ Prior to their relocation in 2005, Q and C hamlets in Phuoc Thang District were relatively isolated from the surrounding communities in comparison to T and L hamlets. This was mainly because of their distance from the district center and a national road. Although T hamlet has a small population, its residents have maintained a strong relationship with the Communist Party, resulting in high-ranking political positions for their family members within local government and Party cells in Bac Ai District. On the other hand, residents of L hamlet have not been deeply involved in the network of state institutions but have established connections with the Christian Raglai living around the city of Cam Ranh due to marriage. This affinal tie has brought relative economic stability to L hamlet by facilitating successful cash crop cultivation. Notably, L hamlet is the only hamlet in Phuoc Thang with Christian residents.³⁾

While residents of T and L hamlets found ways to establish a political presence or economic stability, Q and C hamlets were left behind in terms of economic development, even after their relocation resolved the issue of their remoteness. However, since the 2000s, Q hamlet has gained recognition for preserving its “traditional gong culture” (see, for example, Nguyễn 2017), as the government has recognized the importance of preserving the traditional culture of ethnic minorities. Many residents of all ages in Q

2) In this article, the names of my informants and the hamlets they live in have been changed to ensure confidentiality. All the photos in this article were taken by the author with the informants' consent.

3) It is uncertain when the conversion started. According to a retired cadre in Q hamlet, there were at least eight Protestant households in L hamlet as of 1981, but the number reduced to three after “persuasion” by the cadres. I confirmed at least ten households in L hamlet whose members were either Catholic or Protestant, but further investigation was restricted because of the implicit pressure by the local government and state agencies cautious of foreigners contacting ethnic-minority Christians. A few of my informants in L hamlet told me that they had converted to Christianity after marrying a Christian Raglai from Cam Ranh City, with the aim of evading the ritual burdens imposed by traditional customs.

hamlet possess gong-playing skills as more descent groups there inherit a set of gongs compared to other hamlets and villages in Bac Ai. Some of them have even been selected to represent the region in trans-local cultural festivals. Notably, as of 2016, two of the four “meritorious artists” (nghệ nhân ưu tú) in Bac Ai came from Q hamlet.⁴⁾ Conversely, residents of C hamlet do not actively participate in cultural programs.

It is worth noting the basic structure of the Raglai’s kinship as it is closely intertwined with their ritual practices. Their language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family, and their society is matrilineal and matrilocal. Each household, called a *sac*, represents the basic socioeconomic unit of Raglai society and typically comprises a married couple and their unmarried children. Married couples each have their own house and agricultural land and manage their own property, except for the youngest daughter and her husband, who live with her parents and are responsible for caring for them.

The matrilineal descent group is a fundamental unit for the practice of *adat*, which the Raglai explain their ancestors established to ensure the descent group’s succession. *Adat* regulates property rights and mandates religious practices and life-cycle rituals to manage the animistic flow of potency in material forms to ensure health, fertility, and prosperity (see Schrauwers 2019, 743). Although state law is enforced in most of Raglai life, the Raglai retain their customs through life-cycle and religious rituals and the constitution of kinship and affinal relations.

Procedure and Efficacy of Funerals

This section illustrates the procedures and efficacy of Raglai funerals. A Raglai funeral is conducted mainly at the house where the deceased spent the last days of his or her life, and the household members who took care of the deceased at their house cover most of the funeral expenditures. The deceased’s sisters, nieces (sisters’ daughters), and children—even though they may live apart from them—are encouraged to provide a pig to express their affection for the deceased. In addition, distant relatives of the deceased, along with the villagers, bring cash and offerings such as eggs, rice, liquor, incense, and sometimes chickens.

Each ritual procedure during a funeral is conducted by three men, called *jalat cadjaq* (those who lead the road), who take the role of ritual masters to lead the

4) Since 2002, the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists has been recognizing Vietnamese citizens who contribute to preserving intangible cultural heritage as “folk artists” (nghệ nhân dân gian) (Oizumi 2015, 258) and awarding some of them the title of “meritorious artist.” In Ninh Thuan Province nine people have been recognized as meritorious artists (Phượng Vỹ 2016).

prayers. They are identified as “the leader of the dead” (*po atau*) or “the one who leads the road of the middle” (*jalat cadjaq khrah*), “the one who leads the road of the head” (*jalat cadjiaq acoq*), and “the one who leads the road of the feet” (*jalat cadjiaq takai*).⁵⁾ In this article, these individuals are referred to as the “leader of the dead,” “leader of the head,” and “leader of the feet,” respectively.

During the funeral, the deceased undergoes a process of symbolic decomposition into three elements—a head, bones, and skin—that correspond to the three integral social relationships in Raglai society: the matrilineal descent group, the household, and the community. Each element is represented by a material object: a bowl, corn, and chicken. Subsequently, these material objects are recombined into the material flows that reproduce the three social relationships.

A Raglai funeral consists of four phases: burial, a period of mourning, feasts called *vidhi*, and a post-funeral procedure. Following is a generalized description of the procedure at each phase, based on my observations of funerals in Q hamlet.

Burial

Burial is performed a few days after a person dies. Before that point, relatives and villagers visit the deceased’s house with offerings and say prayers led by the ritual masters. During this period, the corpse is wrapped in white clothing and laid on the floor. At night the ritual masters wear the traditional male costumes of the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) and dance along with the sound of gongs to ask permission from the deceased to have a small feast for the visitors.

On the day of burial, the leader of the dead prepares a wooden stick called *gai tuah* to direct the “spirit of the dead (*yac atau*),” which is in a liminal state of losing its soul and living body. The family members prepare a ceramic bowl called a *jalut acoq*, which translates to “bowl of the head.”⁶⁾ This bowl is considered to represent the head of the deceased, and it is believed that the soul of the deceased will follow it.⁷⁾

5) In Q hamlet, at most funerals, except those of married men, a “leader of the dead” is chosen from the matrilineal descent group to which the deceased belonged, while distant relatives or villagers take on the roles of “leader of the head” and “leader of the feet.” If the deceased is a married man, a non-relative assumes the role of leader of the dead, and a man from the deceased’s matrilineal descent group takes on the role of leader of the head. The leader of the feet is selected from the descent group of the deceased’s wife.

6) It used to be made of copper (Nguyễn 2000, 170).

7) In Phuoc Thang, the customary use of *jalut acoq* was abolished and substituted by ceramic bowls and cups called *caya kir*, which the two descent groups in an affinal relationship exchange after the funeral. I include *jalut acoq* in the description of the procedure to clearly show the way the funeral addresses the three different kinds of social relationships, but the transformation itself is not discussed here because it is beyond this article’s scope.

The corpse is placed in a wooden coffin and brought on a trolley to the cemetery outside the hamlet, followed by the ritual masters, family members, relatives, and villagers. The coffin is buried in an unmarked grave. A small prayer is offered on the grave to promise the deceased that feasts will be held in the near future. This marks the end of the burial, and the wooden stick and bowl are kept in the house until the feasts are held.

Period of Mourning

Burial is followed by a period of mourning that can last for months or even years, although this phase is sometimes skipped in cases where the death is considered inauspicious. During this period, it is forbidden for the deceased's widows/widowers to remarry and for the deceased's family members to marry. Furthermore, additional sacrifice is required for the spirit of the dead when family members conduct any ritual during this period.

Feasts

The mourning period ends with feasts for the deceased. Once the dates of the feasts are decided, the family members of the deceased start brewing beer, called *tapai*, made from cassava or banana; ask skilled people in the village to construct a tomb; and go to the fields to collect firewood, fruit, and rice.

The tomb, known as the "house of a spirit of the dead" (*sac atau*), consists of six to 12 wooden poles and a roof made of wood or galvanized iron (see Photo 1). An additional wooden decoration (*kagor*), curved in the shape of a ship with a dragon and birds, is prepared according to the household's economic situation and placed on the top of the roof (see Photo 2). The day before the largest feast, a small prayer is conducted to inform the deceased of the completion of the tomb-preparation process.

The following day, the largest feast is conducted after the tomb's completion. In the morning the ritual masters and family members visit the grave to offer a small prayer for the deceased, and the tomb is set up on the grave. In the afternoon the masters, family members, and relatives head again to the cemetery to inform the spirit of the dead about the tomb's completion and invite the spirit to the feast, bringing the wooden stick, the bowl of the head, and offerings such as pigs, chickens, beer, liquor, rice, and incense. During the visit to the cemetery, the masters, wearing the male traditional costume of the Kinh, dance and go around the tomb, followed by four to seven gong players striking gongs (see Photos 3 and 4).

After 15 to 20 minutes of dancing the prayer begins, followed by another dance sequence. At the end of the dancing at the cemetery, the leader of the dead stops on the west side of the tomb and throws a chick over the roof toward the east end. A handful



Photo 1 Tomb at the Cemetery of Q Hamlet



Photo 2 Decoration to Be Placed on the Top of the Tomb (*Kagor*)



Photo 3 Ritual Masters Dancing and Walking around the Tomb



Photo 4 Gong Players Striking Gongs at the Cemetery



Photo 5 Daughters and Grandchildren of the Deceased Waiting to Catch the Chick

of the closest family members of the deceased—possibly children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents, nieces, and aunts—wait at the other side of the tomb and catch the chick on a piece of white cloth (see Photo 5). One of them will raise the chick later in their garden.

Hy, a respected shaman in his fifties who often takes on the role of a ritual master in Q hamlet, explained that the purpose of the prayer after the construction of the tomb was to “allow the deceased to accept one’s dead body.” The subsequent act of throwing a chick is meant to prevent the deceased from taking all their vitality to the afterlife. Vitality (*so*) is said to be lost with the skin of the deceased and reincarnated as offspring, while the bones remain in the grave and become a ghost who lives alone in the tomb and looks after the activities of the offspring (see Nguyễn 2000, 142–144, 254). These procedures at the cemetery indicate the bodily transformation of the deceased.

After the tomb-building procedure is complete, the spirit of the dead is invited to the house of the deceased’s family in the hamlet. When people return to the hamlet, another group of three old men (not the *jalat cadjaq*), chosen from among the relatives or villagers, wait outside the house to welcome the spirit of the dead and the ritual masters back from the cemetery. The groups of men chat and share cigarettes and beer with each other, surrounded by audiences made up of relatives and villagers (see Photo 6). After a while, these men start dancing along with the sound of gongs, enter



Photo 6 Group of Men (right) Welcoming Ritual Masters Who Have Returned from the Cemetery

the house, and go around the pole built in the middle of the ritual space. After the dance, offerings are prepared around the pole and the deceased is offered prayers. During the intermission following the prayer, several plates filled with pork and chicken are prepared for the spirit of the dead (see Photo 7). The largest feast begins with the dance of the ritual masters and is followed by prayers. During the prayers, the family, relatives, and villagers who prepared the offerings enter the ritual space and throw cooked meats, rice, and bananas into the basket made for the deceased.

The next morning, the final feast is held to bid farewell to the deceased. The procedure is the same as in the previous day's feast, except for the last sequence, where the basket filled with offerings from the previous day is taken outside the house. After a prayer outside the house, the leader of the dead breaks the wooden stick that was used to direct the spirit of the dead and places it in the basket. From this point onward, it is forbidden to grieve or mention the deceased's name, and the relationship between the living and the spirit of the dead is terminated.

Prohibiting the mention of the deceased's name is related to the personhood of Raglai society. First, calling the deceased's name could cause the spirit to return to the world of the living and attack their family or relatives, because the spirit misunderstands himself/herself to be alive. Second, it could cause newborn children to become sick as the deceased inherent in them is able to "view" the world of the living. In Raglai society a newborn is understood to be the reincarnation of a relative from the



Photo 7 Ritual Masters, Managers, and a Female Relative of the Deceased Preparing for the Largest Feast

previous generation, and it is dangerous for a child to remember their previous life because it confuses their social identity, which happens when the name of the deceased is mentioned.

Reincarnation occurs in the form of various social relationships: one may be reborn as a member of one's matrilineal descent group, one's relative, or even the child of a widow/widower who has remarried. In Raglai society, a name is significant as it is recognized by the community and it is necessary to have a personal identity in the world of the living.

Post-funeral

Immediately after the final feast, a post-funeral procedure is conducted. The leader of the feet and the young male relatives take the basket filled with offerings to the tomb. At the cemetery, the leader of the feet picks up an ear of corn hanging under the roof of the tomb. The corn is used in a humorous skit later performed in the hamlet. In this skit, the ear of corn is treated as a little child found in a forest and handed to the deceased's family to raise. The corn is considered to be part of the deceased, and the family actually plants it in their field later, and this is believed to help the fertility of the household.

The skit is followed by a few additional rituals. First, a procedure to terminate an affinal relationship is required if the deceased is married. Representatives of the two

matrilineal descent groups of the deceased and their spouses exchange items such as bowls, dishes, jars, and clothes and sing an impromptu reciprocal song to express affection toward each other. Both the act of singing and the sharing of items confirm a peaceful termination of the affinal relationship between the two descent groups that have been temporally connected through the marriage of their members. If the deceased is a married man, the bowl of the head is handed over to his sister or niece (sister's daughter) along with other items. Then, one of the female members of the deceased's matrilineal descent group brings back these items to her house and conducts a small ritual involving the sacrifice of a couple of chickens to affirm the items' connection to her house. According to Raglai cosmology, a house is linked to the world of ancestors and other spirits. It is believed that the soul of the deceased follows these items and is subsequently integrated into an ancestor spirit of one's matrilineal descent group after this ritual procedure, while the items are passed on down the generations as ancestral objects of this descent group.⁸⁾ Following the procedure, a small prayer is conducted at the house of the woman who stores the bowl of the head. The prayer involves the sacrificing of a couple of chickens to complete the merging process.

A Raglai funeral involves separating the deceased into three elements—the head, bones, and skin—and subsequently recombining each element into cycles to reproduce each social unit, such as the matrilineal descent group, the community, and the household. The deceased's soul follows the bowl to be merged into the world of the matrilineal descent group's ancestors, thereby securing the succession of the descent group. While the skin is lost with the deceased's vitality, part of it, represented by a chick, returns to the world of the living. The descendants of the deceased keep the chick to sacrifice for spirits that help give birth to a new human in the community. The deceased remains in the form of bones in the grave, separated from the household to which the deceased belonged, but the part of the deceased represented by the corn returns to

8) One of the ritual masters in his late forties from Phuoc Thang told me that the soul of the deceased is divided into three after the final feast. The three parts are called the feet, middle, and head, corresponding to the identification of the ritual masters. The ritual master also explained that "the soul of the feet" stays in the cemetery, "the soul of the middle" returns to the village, and "the soul of the head" goes back to one's matrilineal descent group. Although this kind of explanation is not popular in Phuoc Thang, I found similar beliefs in different villages. In Manai hamlet, Phuoc Thanh Village, Chamalea Lip, in his seventies and respected by the villagers for his knowledge about customs, told me a human consists of three souls. Nguyễn Thế Sang (2000, 52), who conducted fieldwork in Khanh Hoa Province in the 1990s, also introduced an understanding similar to Lip's. Despite the diversity of conceptual understandings about Raglai's personhood, Raglai funerals share similar sequences to reproduce the three social relationships: the matrilineal descent group, the household, and the relationship between the living and the dead.

the household and helps to improve its fertility.⁹⁾

In addition to specific procedures, the aesthetic and technical aspects and scale are crucial for a successful funeral (see Tambiah 1985, 135). People often repeat the word *laghe* during rituals, which means “good,” “effective,” or “beautiful,” thus implying auspiciousness. The number of offerings and participants, the general mood of the rituals, and the aesthetics of the ritual performances, such as chanting, dancing, striking of gongs, and acting, determine the perceived success of the funeral. A successful funeral is supposed to help with the health, fertility, and prosperity of those who contributed to it.

All the people participating in funerals strive to take their roles seriously. The deceased’s family ensures that the guests have plenty of food and drink, while managers are required to check that the offerings are adequately prepared. The role of each guest is to boost the mood by chatting in a friendly manner with other guests. People often discuss the correct way to conduct funerals according to their conventional understandings.

A funeral is the life-cycle ritual to which the largest amounts of time, labor, and expense are dedicated. The largest feast during a funeral often draws more than seventy people from within and outside the hamlet. The ritual usually takes more than four days, while other life-cycle ceremonies take two days at most. Approximately five pigs are sacrificed at an average funeral. A grown pig costs over VND 5 million (approximately USD 210), while the monthly wage gained through seasonal labor in Lam Dong Province is some VND 3 million (approximately USD 130). Additional expenditures for beer, liquor, rice, and incense are required as well.

The Raglai devote enormous amounts of time, attention, and material resources to funerals, but many people at Q hamlet, regardless of their sociopolitical position, emphasized that they had simplified the procedure. The following two sections examine the influence of cultural policies and sedentarization, which have had a significant

9) Structural similarities can be identified in the funerary rituals of the Cham and the Raglai. The Cham Ahier bury the body of the deceased and conduct a secondary funeral several years later. During the secondary funeral, the skull of the deceased is chopped into nine pieces and placed in one box, while the other bones are put in a separate box. These boxes are then placed in a family graveyard called a *kloang*. Approximately 15 years later, the box containing the skull pieces is transferred to the *kut*, the graveyard of the matrilineal descent group. While the Raglai divide the dead body into three symbolic elements, the body of a dead Cham person is physically separated into three components. During the period between the first and secondary funerals, the skin of the body decomposes, the bones are interred in the family graveyard, and the skull, representing the deceased’s head, is placed in the matrilineal descent group’s graveyard (based on the author’s observation of a Cham secondary funeral from April 7 to 11, 2018, in Chat Tuong hamlet, Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan Province, and the description in Jatrai [2013]).

impact on the traditional ways of life of upland ethnic minorities in socialist Vietnam, to explore how state policies have affected the transformation of Raglai funerals.

Cultural Policies

This section highlights how the cultural policies of socialist Vietnam have evaluated ethnic-minority culture and how they have influenced the Raglai's religious and cultural practices.

During the revolutionary era in Vietnam, leaders purged religious and cultural activities that interfered with the socialist reform project. Spirit worship, geomancy, divination, and mediumship were prohibited as “superstitious” (*mê tín*), “backward” (*lạc hậu*), and “outmoded” (*hủ tục*) practices and were considered to be socially exploitative (Imai 1994, 157–158; Taylor 2004, 38). Additionally, communal house sacrifices and temple festivals were regulated, and wedding and funeral ceremonies were required to be downsized and modified in ways that matched the socialist ideology (Malarney 1996; Taylor 2004, 38). These reforms were aimed at avoiding waste of resources and reproduction of feudal social relations (Imai 1994, 162; Taylor 2004, 38). The Raglai's healing and agricultural rituals, involving the worship of non-human spirits, were categorized as superstitious practices under the ideology of the Vietnamese socialist state (Nguyễn 2000, 307–308), and this caused the agricultural rituals of the community to fade.

However, as the nation became more deeply engaged with the global market economy, the Party came to realize the value of indigenous ethnic cultures, viewing them as a resource to support national unity (Taylor 2004, 43; Salemink 2008, 276; 2007, 580–582; Oizumi 2015, 257). The Party's attempts to enforce its new cultural policy recognizing the value of indigenous ethnic cultures intensified during the 2000s in the Central Highlands and surrounding regions. One of the underlying causes was the political tension that built up in the Central Highlands in the early 2000s. Beginning in 1975, Central Highlanders in Vietnam increasingly abandoned their traditional religion, which required intensive resources to fulfill ritual duties, and converted to Christianity. This drive accelerated as communities were rapidly drawn into the global economic circuit after Đổi Mới (Saleminck 2016, 328).

The Vietnamese socialist state has been cautious about the highland population's conversion to Christianity, suspecting that it may have connections to imperialism or foreign agents. The state also sees it as a social problem that could lead to the destruction of traditional culture, weakening of ethnic solidarity, and impoverishment (Ngô

2016, 208–212). In particular, the Central Highlanders’ riots demanding freedom of religion and land rights in the early 2000s, articulated by the anti-Communist diaspora, shocked the Vietnamese state’s leaders, and the leaders took multiple actions to handle this “threat.” One of their strategies was to recognize ethnic minorities’ religious and ritual practices as distinctive cultural heritage, whereas in the revolutionary era they had been suppressed as “backward” and “superstitious” (Salemink 2016, 333).¹⁰ The most significant symbolic outcome was the inscription of the highlanders’ intangible cultural heritage. In 2008, UNESCO recognized the gong culture of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and inscribed it on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization n.d.).

Following the implementation of the new cultural policy, Vietnam’s Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism recognized the funeral ceremonies of the Raglai in Khanh Son District in Khanh Hoa Province and Thuan Bac District in Ninh Thuan Province as Vietnam’s intangible cultural heritage in 2012 and 2018, respectively (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and Viet Nam National Institute of Educational Sciences 2020, 150). The gong performances and funerary rites of the Raglai in Bac Ai are excluded from these lists, but the selections affect the way the Raglai in Bac Ai are involved in cultural preservation campaigns at both the local and national levels. Music performance groups are organized and occasionally invited to cultural ceremonies across Vietnam and to the tourism village of Vietnamese ethnic minority groups in Dong Mo, on the outskirts of Hanoi. Members of these troupes perform traditional music and demonstrate funerary rituals. At the local level, the authorities organize seasonal cultural ceremonies and educational programs for local students.

The new cultural policy, however, does not guarantee ethnic minorities autonomy in cultural representation. Although the Party and the government encourage the preservation of the distinctive cultural traits of every ethnic group, the state authorities often take the initiative, deciding what should be preserved, transformed, or eliminated. Any practices considered to endanger state unity and the socialist progress of the nation may become a target of regulation or reform (Nguyen 2016, 175). Other practices considered culturally distinctive, such as music, dance, and crafts, are decontextualized from conventional values, commodified as a resource to attract tourists, and “folklorized” as a veil to cover up the socioeconomic marginalization of ethnic minority groups (Ó Briain 2014; Nguyen 2016, 175; Salemink 2016).

10) Other attempts involved, for instance, planning to enact the new “ethnic law” to control the ethnic minority population and permitting officially registered religious activities of ethnic minority Christians (Ito 2009; Ngô 2016, 215).

In my research site a few individuals reacted to the contradictions inherent in cultural policies, but most residents accepted the state's recognition of Raglai customs.¹¹⁾ Those who actively participate in such programs are often members of the local Party cell, along with their families and relatives. However, this does not mean that the influence of policies is limited to cadres and their families. Those who are not cadres or related to them occasionally participate in or observe gong-teaching classes in the villages and instruct children. Additionally, educated younger people in their twenties to forties, regardless of their political position or involvement in cultural preservation programs, are interested in preserving the "distinctive culture" of the Raglai.

Despite appreciating their own culture, some residents insist on downsizing their funeral rituals. This can be seen as accepting another aspect of the state's cultural policy that continuously instructs them to avoid organizing large-scale rituals that could impoverish their households (Directive 05/CT-TTg, dated February 9, 2018).¹²⁾ However, as discussed in the following section, the decision to downsize rituals does not necessarily stem from compliance with the cultural policy; rather, it can be traced to socioeconomic changes since the 2000s.

Sedentarization and Authority of the State

Residents of Q hamlet informed me that the decision to downsize funerals was made not during the revolutionary period but after their relocation in 2005. This section investigates how the relocation that took place in 2005 resulted in changes to both the traditional land system and the livelihoods of residents in Q hamlet, providing a contextual background for the transformation of funeral practices.

Residents in Q hamlet were originally from the four different traditional villages in the mountains on the border with Khanh Hoa Province. After 1975, when the Vietnam War was over, residents were required by the local government to relocate to the base of the mountains, and the area was claimed to be the Phuoc Thang administrative village. However, the socialist reform had only a limited effect on the land system and livelihoods. Residents in Q hamlet continued swidden farming in the mountains by following *adat*, which requires moderate segregation among matrilineal descent

11) Gen, a knowledgeable peasant in his fifties who was not a Party member, was critical of the staging of cultural ceremonies; he said that staging a mock funeral was considered taboo (*ukhi*).

12) Despite the official policy, certain households in Bac Ai, including those of cadres, continue to organize large-scale rituals. During my fieldwork I witnessed magnificent funeral feasts and splendid tombs in T hamlet and Phuoc Thanh Village, specifically among those where the deceased or their families held district-level cadre positions.

groups when cultivating the land. According to Trat, a man in his sixties and a “reputable person” (người có uy tín)¹³ in Q hamlet, the local government ordered the creation of a farming group to initiate cooperative farming as part of the socialist reform project in Q hamlet. However, it did not draw much attention and was disbanded around 1982, four years earlier than the end of centrally planned state-led agricultural cooperatives in Vietnam. Unlike the Central Highlands, Bac Ai was exempt from the “New Economic Zone” program and saw only a limited number of migrants from outside the region until the early 2000s.

In 2005, residents in Phuoc Thang experienced drastic socioeconomic changes. The residents had relocated to the new settlement because of a reservoir construction project that aimed to provide flood control and water for industrial, agricultural, and general purposes in Bac Ai and neighboring districts (Trường Đại học Thủy Lợi 2011). With the implementation of poverty reduction and agricultural development policies after Đổi Mới, schools and a clinic were built in the new settlement, houses had running water and electricity, and a road was constructed in the early 2000s, improving access to the village.

The implementation of these development projects led to the transformation of the customary land system in Q hamlet. Prior to the relocation in 2005, households from the same matrilineal descent group cultivated adjacent land, and outsiders were not allowed to enter or cultivate the area without the owners’ permission. Land was considered the descent group’s inalienable domain and was not viewed as a commodity to be sold or purchased. However, after the relocation the local government allocated land to each household for wet-rice farming, making it impossible to maintain segregation by descent groups; the land now belongs to each household as their property. Although the land is still supposed to be passed on through the maternal line, residents are now free to sell or rent out their land at their discretion. Moreover, the land in Phuoc Thang has become attractive to Kinh migrant farmers because of its improved accessibility to the national road. As a result, Raglai residents often sell their land when they are in urgent need of cash.

An increased need for cash has arisen from the recent unstable farming conditions. The sedentarization policy aimed to promote wet-rice farming, but in Q hamlet nearly 75 percent of households are unable to engage in it due to insufficient irrigation and

13) Based on the Party’s resolution approved in 2003 (Resolution 24-NQ/TW 12/3/2003), local governments are to recognize a person respected by local residents from each ethnic minority community and appoint him/her as a “reputable person,” expecting him/her to take on the role of conveying the Party’s point of view and the state’s policy and law to local communities and representing the community’s interests (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2021; Học viện Chính trị Khu vực II 2022). In Ninh Thuan Province, as of 2015 there were 37 appointed “reputable persons” (Nguyễn 2019).

poor soil conditions.¹⁴⁾ Even on land suitable for wet-rice farming, residents struggle to adapt to an unaccustomed way of farming (Nguyễn 2012). Furthermore, their former settlements have been zoned as forest reserves where forestry enterprises are operating. Despite this, some continue to farm in the old settlement, while others cultivate land on steep mountains nearby, which was traditionally forbidden. In most cases, the local authorities permit illegal cultivation as long as farmers do not allow the land to lie fallow or expand the cultivated area. However, farmers sometimes lose their land when they violate either these implicit rules or the business interests of forestry operators. Therefore, these restrictions lead to unsustainable agricultural practices.

The breeding of domestic animals in Phuoc Thang is also a challenge. Cattle became crucial livestock for the Raglai after 1975, replacing water buffalo, which used to be bartered with other ethnic groups. The Raglai used to let their cattle roam in the nearby woods or fields. However, since the surrounding fields of the new village are mostly dry with little grass, the cattle need to roam farther afield. Households with insufficient workers are not able to manage this task.

They also complain about the greater risk of disease to which their other domestic animals, such as pigs and chickens, are exposed. This is partly because of the increased population density in the hamlet, as the People's Committee assigns a living area for each household. In 2019 an outbreak of African swine fever in Ninh Thuan Province decimated the pig population in Bac Ai (Công *et al.* 2019), and the majority of Raglai have refrained from breeding pigs since then. People in Phuoc Thang reluctantly purchase pigs, which are essential sacrificial animals in large rituals, from Kinh breeders. Because of the hardships involved in farming and livestock breeding, the younger generation in their forties or below are having to increasingly rely on wage labor.¹⁵⁾

Given these unstable economic conditions, it is understandable why people have had to simplify their funerals. However, residents do not see the simplification as merely a compromising of their traditions. To rationalize the simplification, they utilize idioms of cultural policies and administrative formulations, as discussed in the following sections.

These conditions also raise a question about how people in Q hamlet perceive the

14) According to the oral survey I conducted with 290 households in Q hamlet from February 20 to April 10, 2018, 229 households did not have land suitable for wet-rice farming. Among the remaining 61 households that did have land fit for wet-rice farming, 11 households rented out the land or kept it uncultivated.

15) Several poverty reduction programs have been implemented, such as microloans from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, a model production program (*mô hình sản xuất*) to support cash crop cultivation, cattle sharing programs, and occasional supplies of rice and livestock. However, these programs do not efficiently contribute to the residents' economic stability, from what I observed during my fieldwork.

authority of the state in everyday life. They often complain about the inability of the local authorities to help them become more economically stable, blaming ineffective and inequitable implementation of poverty reduction programs. Despite their criticism of the local authorities, they rely on state agencies when facing troubles relating to housing, land, and livestock. They go to the local administrative offices and ask them to handle these issues for them. Elderly people report that these problems used to be mediated by men knowledgeable about the customs in each community—known as “the leader of the village” (*pho palei*) or “the leader of the mountain” (*pho cho*)—before the revolutionary state was established in the South, but the state (*nhà nước*) and cadres (*cán bộ*) have now taken over their roles. Administrative officers are perceived as agents of the state authority, and residents expect them to secure their property rights.

Furthermore, official affiliation is sometimes perceived as evidence of spiritual abilities. For example, a famous Raglai shaman who is active in Ninh Thuan and Khanh Hoa Provinces was a chief of the local women’s union (although she resigned amid accusations of embezzlement). Sau, in his forties, a peasant who hired her for his son’s healing ritual, attributes her former affiliation to her credibility in divination. While people are not fully content with the state’s policies, they selectively avail themselves of the authority of the state. This tendency is found also in people’s ways of organizing and legitimating changing funeral rites.

Legitimizing Modifications

The funeral changes in Q hamlet can be classified into the following two types: (1) the omission of certain traditional funeral procedures, due to changes in the ritual organizers’ relationships with specific spirits or spiritual entities; and (2) a shortening of the time dedicated to funerals. In this section, I discuss the former by examining how people legitimize the change in their relationship with spirits and how it affects the ways in which they conduct funerals.

People in Q hamlet used to sacrifice a pig and chicken yearly for a spirit of corn and rice (*yac ghilo, yac padai*) and periodically for spiritual entities internal in the human body to help with farming and raising domestic animals (*aluah ghilo padai, aluah un manyut*), but some villagers discontinued these rituals after the relocation in 2005. This led to a discontinuation or modification of the chick-throwing sequence as well as humorous skit in funerals. In five cases in Q hamlet, the humorous skit was not performed or the corn was substituted by a piece of crumpled cloth, and in three funerals the chick-throwing sequence was omitted.

The motive for skipping or modifying these sequences is sometimes attributed to inauspicious incidents. For instance, at the funeral for Khai, a veteran soldier who died in his early seventies, the chick-throwing sequence was omitted. I asked some women in their late forties who were guests at the funeral why this was done. They were not sure about the reason but inferred that “something might have happened” to the family with regard to the ritual. One of the women told me that a long time ago, when they were performing chick throwing at a funeral for her relative, a wildcat cut in, caught the chick, and ran off with it to the forest. After that, her relatives decided not to perform the sequence. She speculated that a similar incident might have happened with Khai’s family, and other women agreed with her. A few weeks later I met one of Khai’s four sons, Triet, a peasant in his late thirties, and asked him about the reason. He answered that his family had had an incident in which the chick that had been thrown in the funeral did not grow but instead died. Since then, his family has not performed a chick-throwing.

Similar inauspicious incidents are used to justify the modification of ritual processes. They are used also to legitimate changes in a relationship with an ancestor spirit. In Q hamlet, residents reportedly stopped worshipping an ancestor spirit in 2005. The residents used to pray to an ancestor spirit at the beginning of the year, when they started cultivating land, and at funerals and weddings, but they said that they had abolished the custom. At funerals in Q hamlet, the practice of praying to an ancestor spirit and offering foods to it is no longer observed.

According to residents in Q hamlet, the decision not to pray to an ancestor spirit was led by a respected shaman who lived in the hamlet and passed away years ago, and every descent group in the hamlet followed his instruction. The shaman also instructed the residents to stop praying to spiritual entities within human bodies that help with farming and raising domestic animals.

Pon, a peasant in her fifties, explained to me why they no longer prayed to their ancestor spirit. She recounted an incident where an ancestor spirit allegedly “killed” a person who could not afford a sacrifice to compensate for premarital sexual intercourse, which angered the spirit. Pon stated, “We are poor, so we got rid of it. It’s too late to get rid of it after everyone dies.” Her husband, Thap, a peasant in his sixties, told me that many residents in Q hamlet had stopped praying to certain spirits: “We threw away what is ‘backward’ because [spirits] could kill people and are dangerous.”

This change led to the abolishment of the custom of using a bowl of the head. According to Gen, a peasant in his fifties and knowledgeable about the custom, the shaman told residents in Q hamlet to stop using a bowl of the head, claiming that keeping it in an improper manner brought calamity to the descent group.

While the residents of Q hamlet described the termination of relationships with

an ancestor spirit in a somewhat mythological manner, residents in other hamlets denied the possibility of severing connections with an ancestor spirit even under the influence of state religious regulations. Rat, a veteran soldier in his sixties, admitted that most residents in L hamlet continued to pray to an ancestor spirit. He said, “The state allows us to pray to ancestors but prohibits us from praying to God (*thần*)” (implying the Christian God). Lip, a retired cadre and respected elder in the Phuoc Thanh District community, remarked that the Raglai people put an end to agricultural rituals because the government deemed them “superstitious,” but that they could not stop praying to an ancestor spirit as the spirit “controls (*quản lý*)” the Raglai: “Without ancestors, how do we exist? Doing away with an ancestor spirit means abolishing the entire ethnic group. It is just that people in Phuoc Thang don’t know how to explain it.”

During the revolutionary era, the Party and the government dismissed village-level ceremonies as practices of the old regime, while allowing ancestor worship as a means of controlling households (Imai 1994, 158–161). More recently, the government and the Party have increasingly accepted and promoted ancestor worship among the highland people, as the leaders are concerned about the highlanders’ potential conversion to Christianity (Ngô 2016; Salemink 2016). The statements of Lip and Rat reflect this position.

Despite the above situation, residents of Q hamlet claim that they have abandoned ancestor worship. One of the factors underlying their decision was a change in the customary land system. An ancestor spirit is closely tied to the customary land system (Phan *et al.* 2003, 447–448), and a bowl of the head was used as a ritual object at the beginning of each year when the Raglai cleared the fields to pray for the fertility of the land, indicating the connections among the ancestor spirit, the descendant group, and the land. The destruction of the traditional land system influenced their decision regarding ancestor worship.

The decision to skip rituals for certain spirits is also connected to the difficult farming conditions in the new settlement and the increased dependence on wage labor.¹⁶⁾ However, the explanations provided by residents in Q hamlet suggest that they are not simply modifying their rituals in response to socioeconomic changes or denying the power of spirits. Instead, they insist that they are acknowledging the power of spirits by pointing out the negative impacts allegedly caused by them. Their narratives demonstrate that changes in ritual practices are their own decision. They use terms and logic

16) The termination of regular worship of certain spirits for farming is not merely a reflection of recent socioeconomic conditions but also correlates with the changing animistic networks among humans, nonhuman beings, and spiritual entities in Q hamlet. A detailed discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper.

derived from the state's religious policy to explain and legitimize their choices.

This section examined how residents in Q hamlet legitimate the recent changes in funeral procedures in relation to spirits. However, not every funeral change is associated with the influence of spirits. The next section focuses on the reduction of time spent on funerals, which people link to conserving resources, and argues that the simplification is seen not just as based on economic rationality or as a compromise of efficacy but as the new way to organize funerals.

Pursuit of a Well-Organized Funeral

Many people in Q hamlet told me they used to dedicate at least a week to burials and funeral feasts. Every preparation process, such as building a tomb, brewing beer, and slaughtering pigs, required prayers along with a sacrifice of chickens. Chanting, dancing, prayers, and the intermissions were much longer, and the feasts continued until midnight. Lien, a peasant in her fifties and daughter of a veteran soldier, shared with me how the recent challenges in breeding domestic animals had impacted the organization of funerals:

Two additional rituals were conducted prior to the feast. But we climbed down here [the new village]. The chickens died. The pigs died. It costs millions [of VND to conduct a ritual], so we discarded [these rituals]. This was slightly better during war. At that time, we were able to raise chickens and pigs.

The duration of mourning has also been shortened. In places other than Q hamlet, it is considered ideal to have a period of mourning to show affection for the deceased. The period of mourning is skipped only when the deceased is young or newly married or when a death is considered inauspicious. In these cases, all funeral procedures are completed in two or three days, with only limited offerings. In contrast, the mourning period was skipped in seven of the eight funerals I observed in Q hamlet, regardless of the cause of death. Many people in Q hamlet explained that skipping the period of mourning and completing the funerary procedures all at once saved money and labor because they could avoid an additional sacrifice for the deceased, which is required during the period of mourning.

However, I wondered whether these changes were made only to save resources, as the villagers insisted. First, an additional sacrifice during this period requires only one small chicken. Second, as a pragmatic explanation, the period of mourning allows people to prepare offerings by going out to engage in wage labor or breeding domestic animals. Therefore, in T hamlet, where people often take one year to mourn, a family in

poverty told me that it took more than five years until they conducted the feast for their father. Nguyễn Thế Sang, who conducted fieldwork in Raglai settlements in the 1990s, also noted that the omission of the mourning period is possible only when the household has sufficient resources for the funeral (Nguyễn 2000, 218).

Third, in Q hamlet I confirmed at least two cases in which people borrowed money at a high interest rate from a moneylender to rush the organizing of the feast. In both cases, the families received condolence money from the government. In one of the cases, the couple in their late twenties who organized the funeral for the wife's grandfather reported that to afford the expenditure for the funeral, they sold a cow for VND 11 million and borrowed VND 10 million from the moneylender at 8 percent monthly interest. The couple were expecting to receive around VND 20 million from the government as condolence money, although they were unsure about the exact amount and date. The couple told me that half the money would be transferred to the niece (sister's daughter) of their grandfather and the rest would be repaid to the moneylender. The couple chose to pay interest to get the funeral over with rather than waiting to receive the condolence money. Their choices made me think there was an alternative purpose for skipping the period of mourning as well as other funeral procedures.

The following incident shows how the omission of a certain ritual procedure is justified by a man concerned with the custom's authenticity. After the funeral of Dat, a veteran soldier who died in his late seventies, I went to his niece's (sister's daughter) house to observe the ritual of merging his soul with the world of the ancestors. The ritual finished around noon, and on our way home my Cham friend So and I met Hung on the street. Hung (in his late fifties) is a member of the Communist Party and a "meritorious artist." He knows a lot about the myths, cosmology, and customs of the Raglai and was managing Dat's funeral as Dat's distant nephew (Dat's wife is a sister of Hung's mother). Hung asked us how Dat's niece had conducted this procedure. We replied that they were praying by offering slices of pork and liquor. Hung replied that there should be an additional sacrifice of chickens in the afternoon. However, we confirmed with Dat's niece that they would not organize additional rituals in the afternoon, and this is what we told Hung. He replied, "That is also correct. Recently, people have kept rituals tidy [*ngăn gọn*]." Responding to Hung's comment, So told him that Dat's funeral was not long compared to another funeral he and Hung had participated in earlier. Hung replied that "they did [the funeral] very carefully. We cannot stand such a lengthy funeral."

Hung, as the respected man in his matrilineal descent group, vigilantly directed Dat's funeral to avoid missing any important ritual procedures. Simultaneously, he legitimated the simplification of ritual procedures as the "correct way," using the word

“tidy,” a word often used by Raglai to describe ritual simplification. This word choice implies people’s intention not to associate a simplification of rituals with a decrease in their efficacy.

A similar statement was made by Binh, a peasant in his late forties. He is a successful farmer who breeds more than twenty head of cattle and is respected for often facilitating funerals in the hamlet. He brought up the simplification of the funeral procedure while explaining the “termination” of ancestor worship:

[Praying to] an ancestor spirit is costly, so we stopped calling [praying to] it. We call it, and it catches [kills] us. For what do we call it? Our kids and grandkids wouldn’t know about an ancestor spirit. The spirit of the dead [funeral] is worse. Now, we dance and strike gongs for the spirit, but it will fade away eventually. Our kids and grandkids won’t do it. . . . [At the funeral], we go back and forth [between the cemetery and the house] for the spirit. At the funeral of my mother[-in-law], we went [back and forth] three times! Oh! It’s easier in C hamlet. They go to the cemetery once, invite the spirit [back to the house], and [the feast] finishes around 5 or 6 [p.m.]. Here [in Q hamlet] it takes longer. But it is more correct. No, C hamlet is also correct. They are just doing it tidy.

How, then, can ritual efficacy and simplification of a ritual be compatible? To explore the question, I focus on people’s pursuit of “well-ordered” rituals that emerge in other aspects of ritual management. One of the ways to formalize a funeral among the Raglai is by appointing literate middle-aged men, usually local state officials or police officers in their thirties and forties, to manage the funeral proceedings. Residents refer to them by the Vietnamese term *bán tổ chức*, which translates to “managing board.” Here again, we can see the importance of state instructions that often require government officials to participate in and direct rituals while simultaneously monitoring residents’ activities (Malarney 1996, 548–549, 554). However, the appointment of state officials for ritual management is not mandatory, so non-officials are sometimes assigned.

One of the criteria applied by the villagers for choosing a manager is whether they are literate. In many of the funerals that I observed, the manager was required to record information in Vietnamese, such as the number of offerings brought by guests, the names of people who brought the offerings, and the division of roles. In Q hamlet, while the literacy rate of those in their thirties and forties is low, all the managers of the funerals, including non-officials, were fully literate.

However, the purpose for keeping records in the notebook was not clear. The notes were not used for accounting purposes since they did not include any information on spending. On one occasion, a literate young granddaughter of the deceased referred to the lists of names in the notebook to invite guests to the final feast of the funeral. Apart from this, I barely observed a situation in which the managers or family members con-

sulted the notebook during or after the funeral.

The following incident illustrates the Raglai's indifference to the use of the notebook. During the funeral of an 11-year-old boy, I was unable to photograph the notebook, so I revisited the house several days later. The deceased's grandmother told me that her son-in-law, Sinh (in his thirties), might know where the notebook was. Sinh had graduated from junior college and used to work at the forestry management office. When he returned home, I asked him to show me the notebook. Sinh appeared uncertain of its location, but he made an effort to search for it in his well-organized home. He went so far as to go to his parents' house to ask his brothers-in-law, who had assisted in directing the funeral, but was unable to locate its whereabouts. We were unable to find the notebook, and Sinh told me, "The Raglai forget everything after the funeral, so we don't really care about the notebook."

It is important to note that Q hamlet residents generally take great care in storing their important documents. During my research on a microcredit project, I observed that every household I visited stored their bank passbook in a plastic case along with other official documents. However, in the case of funeral records, once the funeral is over, little attention is paid to the notebook, despite it being considered essential for managing the funeral. Even though the notes are forgotten or paid little attention after the funeral, the act of taking notes is still considered important in managing the funeral.

A similar feature can be found in the following aspect of funeral management. Guests who bring a chicken are allowed to chant during the feast, holding the cooked chicken with them. In order to conduct the ritual, the manager jots down the guests' names and lets them come up to the area where the cooked chickens are prepared in baskets. The guests form a line, and the manager calls out their names one by one. Each person walks forward, receives a basket, and walks down to the ritual site. The procedure for preparing the ritual is highly formalized and stark, as if the guests were obeying orders from a teacher or a higher official. This contrasts with other ritual performances that attract audiences with their aesthetics and liveliness.

What is the purpose of recording information in notebooks and giving commands? I argue that the managers are adopting actions derived from state institutions to formalize funerals. They are not only concerned with the faithfulness of the rituals to customs but are also open to imitating actions introduced by external actors who hold power in the current political order, and whose authority they occasionally rely upon. In this sense, skipping a period of mourning or other ritual procedure is aligned with this disposition. While imitating state institutions and simplifying funerals may contribute to facilitating the logistics of ritual management or conserving resources, it also leads to the establishment of a new style of organizing funerals.

Extending the State's Rhetoric

While many Raglai are attempting to shorten and downsize funerals, some people are skeptical about oversimplifying them. Some of the younger educated residents are more committed to the preservation of customary ways. One day I met Sinh (who was introduced in the previous section) just after he had returned from a funeral in Phuoc Dai. He was not pleased with how the funeral had been conducted and told me that “they [the people in the other village] don’t know how to chant. They don’t play gongs either, although they have them. They’ve lost our customs!”

Triet (who was introduced as a son of Khai in Section entitled “Legitimizing Modifications”) has been seeking ways to contest the recent trend of simplifying funerals. Triet is a peasant and the son of a veteran soldier. He is neither a Party member nor an official, but he is periodically employed by a local public corporation because he is literate. He was one of my informants who was knowledgeable about Raglai customs.

Triet’s attempt at contestation was observed at his father’s funeral, where his eldest brother, Luyen, was in charge. Luyen is in his early forties, an independent house contractor and a trusted man whom the villagers often ask to perform the role of ritual manager. In the process of deciding what sequences to conduct for the post-funeral, Luyen’s mother, Vy, hoped to sing a reciprocal song. Luyen accepted his mother’s request but decided not to perform a skit so they could save some time. After the final feast, Triet and other young men were preparing to go to the cemetery to take the final offerings to the deceased. Luyen reminded Triet that they would not perform a skit and told him to come back to the hamlet as soon as possible. Luyen was inclined to avoid a prolonged and old-fashioned ritual.

I followed Triet to the cemetery. After the group made the offering, they moved to the nearby river, sat under a tree, and began drinking. Triet told me that they would perform a skit, so they needed to wait for a while in the field until the soul of the deceased had returned to the hamlet. Triet said, “It’s our custom, so we need to do it” (even though Luyen had decided against it). While they were drinking, Luyen kept calling Triet, and Triet kept replying that they were on their way. Approximately an hour later Triet and the others headed back home, and they started the skit without prior notice as soon as they arrived. As the skit required a response from the ritual masters and elderly people waiting at home, the latter had no choice but to respond to the younger relatives and join in the skit because ignoring the call would be considered inappropriate. The skit was successfully completed, but Luyen decided to skip the reciprocal song although his mother wanted it.

Triet's quest to contest the call for simplification was seen at another funeral where he was appointed as manager. At this funeral, I was joining people to paint a tomb at the cemetery. The painting was finished around 4 p.m., but the ritual masters and the relatives of the deceased had not arrived. One of the people at the cemetery made a phone call to Triet, and Triet replied that they were still cooking pigs to be offered at the later ritual. In most funerals that I observed, the prayer at the grave was conducted in the early afternoon, but the people at the cemetery explained to me that it used to be conducted in the late afternoon or evening. Despite their explanations, I thought that the delay was simply caused by Triet's inexperience in managing funerals.

The ritual masters finally arrived at the cemetery around 6 p.m. and began the prayer, surrounded by the audience. After the prayer, everyone returned to the hamlet and began another sequence, where the ritual masters and the older relatives of the deceased sat on the ground, invited each other over for beer and cigarettes, and enjoyed themselves. This sequence was like an improvisational play where these men acted as if they were truly enjoying the moment. At this funeral, this part took longer than usual. After around forty minutes, the "leader of the deceased" finally told the gong players to start striking their gongs so that the masters could start dancing and move on to the next prayer. However, despite the request, the masters did not start dancing for a while as they were still preoccupied with drinking and smoking. Finally, one of the gong players urged them to start dancing, saying that his hand hurt!

After the dancing, the masters took a break while the managers prepared the offerings for the final feast. However, the break took so long that I had finished two bottles of beer while chatting with the gong players. I looked for Triet so that I could photograph his notebook. He was in a hut, drinking and playing cards with friends. Eventually, around 8 p.m., the prayer started. The ritual masters spun around seven times very slowly inside the house, to the sound of gongs. Many people, both young and old, surrounded the house to watch the performance. Another intermission followed, and the next prayer did not begin until 9 p.m. Triet entered the ritual site at every intermission to make sure the offerings were prepared correctly, but he did not try to control the time schedules.

Then, Binh—in his early thirties, an official of the People's Committee of Phuoc Thang, and a distant relative of the deceased—came to the ritual site and shouted to the ritual masters, "What time is it? It's already 9 p.m. We need to keep the ritual tidy." Female relatives sitting next to the ritual masters told Binh, "The ritual masters are now smoking." However, the final prayer started almost immediately. I was surprised because people had often told me that the masters' decisions must always be respected. However, no one at the site complained about Binh, and the rituals continued as if

nothing had happened.

I initially thought that Triet was inexperienced in ritual management. However, I later realized that he was deliberately stepping back from controlling the ritual procedures. I noticed that the masters' performances were attracting many spectators, including myself, who were taking in the atmosphere. I realized that Triet was trying to avoid the newly introduced ways to manage funerals that were becoming increasingly popular and involved time-saving and somewhat bureaucratic formalization. Even though the Raglai do not deny their customs or the power of spirits, the newly adopted ways of management inevitably damage the aesthetic aspect of the rituals, which is an integral element of a successful funeral. Ironically, the state's rhetoric of the "preservation of distinctive cultures" legitimizes what Triet was doing. Triet was not ignoring or denying the state's principles; he was interpreting the state discourse differently from the state's ideology and showing the virtues of a slower, less-disciplined ritual.

Conclusion

The socioeconomic transition caused by the implementation of state policies has had an impact on the religious life of Bac Ai. This has taken the form of a simplification of funerary procedures. However, the changes are not seen as a compromise but rather as an alternative way to organize funerals that is more in line with people's current way of life. To legitimize these changes, people adopt the discourse that was disseminated during the revolutionary era and justify their changing relationship with spirits while still recognizing and sustaining the power of the spirits. Moreover, to ensure the simplified rituals' efficacy, they have adopted administrative formulations such as designating managers as the "management board," appointing literate personnel to take notes, and incorporating a management style that resembles that of a military or a school. Furthermore, those who opposed the modifications sought to extend the ritual to restore its aesthetic elements, which had been compromised by the changes, and used the state's discourse on preserving distinctive ethnic cultures to justify their claims and efforts.

Although the state continues to be an actor that controls people's religious practices in Vietnam, after the relaxation of regulations in the 1990s its authority is perceived to support the validity of religious practices. Previous studies have shown how people integrated or accepted elements derived from the state authority into their religious practices and viewed this as an act of ensuring the legitimacy of their religious practices under state control. In contrast, this article illustrates how an ethnic minority group

borrowed and imitated the state's idioms, techniques, and rhetoric to reform their religious practices in negotiation with conventional perspectives and local values. This imitation does not solely signify the pursuit of state recognition but represents a creative approach to the construction of religious practices.

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