Bones of Contention: Technologies of identification and politics of reconciliation in Vietnam

Bones of Contention: Technologies of identification and politics of reconciliation in Vietnam is a research project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research under the Innovational Research Incentive Scheme Vidi from 2020 to 2025. The aim of the project is to gain thorough empirical and theoretical knowledge of the processes of war dead identification and postwar reconciliation in Vietnam.

In the course of the 20th century alone, Vietnam has endured three large-scale regional wars: the First Indochina War (1945-1954), the Second Indochina War (1955-1975) and the Third Indochina War (1978-1989). These wars took millions of Vietnamese lives among whom 1.2 million who died fighting for the Vietnamese communist state were recognized and honored as *martyrs*. Nearly half of these martyrs are either buried as unknown combatants in state designated martyr cemeteries or are reported missing. War martyrs play a key role in Vietnamese nationalism. Until the 1990s, the Vietnamese state honored its military dead with memorial holidays, public ceremonies, commemorative rituals and the construction of memorial statues to inscribe their sacrifice for the nation in the national landscape (Ho-Tai 1996; Malarney 2002; Kwon 2008, 2015; Schwenkel 2008; Bayly 2013). However, while soldiers of the Northern Liberation Army and their southern partisan fighters are honored and memorialized as heroes, their South Vietnamese ARVN counterparts are dismissed. Cemeteries of fallen soldiers and Tombs of Unknown Soldiers of the Liberation Army and their partisan partners have become the center of postwar communal ritual lives and a part of the village moral landscape (Kwon 2015). Those who died belonging to the opposite side, however, continue to be officially banned from receiving any consoling ritual.

This key objectives of this research project are to examine two different procedures to find the war dead.

Spiritual forensics

The economic and political reform (Đổi Mới) set in motion in 1986 led to a change in commemorative politics in Vietnam (Bradley 2001). From the 1990s onward, bone-finding missions have taken place all over Vietnam. Vietnamese people traditionally believe that the living and the dead can contact each other. Spirit possession and soul calling are ways to be in contact the dead. Legally, these practices, considered superstition and anti-science, were banned by the communist state, but, secretly, spirit mediums have continued to serve families in need of their services. Although officially bound to an atheist anti-superstition ideology, the Vietnamese state eventually had to shift its position about allowing spirit mediums to search for its own missing soldiers (Sorrentino, 2017). The early success of these experiments became an excuse to call for the legalization of the use of spiritual methods to locate the remains of missing Vietnamese. In November 1996, the Center for the Study of Human Potentiality was established under the indirect administration of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment. The state has since tolerated spirit mediums, though it renamed them "persons with special ability" (*người có khả năng đặc biệt*) or "persons with extrasensory ability" (*nhà ngoại cảm*). Since then spirit mediumships and other traditional methods for contacting souls and searching for bones have been

granted scientific legitimacy through the terms 'extrasensory', 'telepathy' and 'parapsychology' (Schlecker and Endres 2011). The state's official recognition of this center's contribution has opened a niche for many grave-finders in the country and soon gave birth to spiritual forensics, defined as a science of finding and identifying the dead through spiritual means.

DNA forensics

The growing popularity of Vietnamese grave-finding spiritual experts, a number of whom became leaders of new religious cults, concerned the authorities. In 2013, partly as a response to this, the Vietnamese government announced a national program, named Project 150, to import the most advanced DNA-based forensics to find and identify the remains of half a million missing and/or unidentified martyrs. With an initial investment of 500 billion dong (€21.5 million), Project 150 aims to train scientists and upgrade 4 DNA testing centers. In 2016, an international consortium of leading genetic and DNA experts from the Hamburg-based-medical-diagnostic company Bioglobe, the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP, Sarajevo and Den Haag), and technical experts from the European forensics company QIAGEN won a contract to provide consultancy and training for scientists from the Institute of Biotechnology in Hanoi which runs one of Vietnam's four DNA labs. In order for the plan to work, in Bioglobe's estimation, at least 1.4 million DNA samples from bones need to be identified to be matched with DNA samples of living relatives, which could be three times as large. The matching of samples is planned to be carried out using the DNA matching software Bonaparte, developed by SMART Research BV, a spin-off company of Radboud University in Nijmegen.

Treating missing and unidentified bones of Vietnamese war dead as an analytical lens on the problematic relation between state sovereignty and people's cultural autonomy, this project poses two questions.
1) How are the two technologies of identification, spiritual forensics and DNA-based forensics, applied and discussed by families of the war dead and by state institutions?
2) How does the differential use of these two technologies and respective discourses relate to the politics of postwar reconciliation in Vietnam?

The proposed research builds on the academic background of the Principle investigator (PI), Dr. Tam Ngo in anthropology and religious studies; her being a native speaker of Vietnamese, her extensive experience conducting politically highly sensitive fieldwork in Vietnam, and on her pilot fieldwork of the training of Vietnamese scientists in Hamburg (2016) and on the set up of the project 150 within the Vietnam People Army, the Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Welfare (MOLISA) and at the Institute of Biotechnology in Hanoi (2018).

Urgency

The urgency of this research project is related to the urgency of the search for and identification of Vietnam's war dead. Four decades after the war, while the bones of the war dead degrade due to climatic conditions, their living relatives are aging and dying. It is urgent to collect DNA from both the living direct relatives and the dead. Given this urgency, Project 150's progress is alarmingly slow. Since its launch, the project has generated worldwide attention. According to a publication in *Nature* it is the "the largest ever systematic identification effort" (Abbott 2016). Moreover, it "pushes the limit of DNA technology" (Farr 2016). Two years have passed since, but

the project has yielded embarrassingly little result. *Bones of Contention* provides solid research necessary to identify socio-cultural and political factors crucial for project 150 to work. This knowledge is of direct relevance for a number of international institutions, such as the SMART Research BV at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherland Institute for Forensics, the ICMP Den Haag headquarters, the Bioglobe in Hamburg, who are important stakeholders in the project. In Vietnam, the central government committee coordinating the implementation of Project 150 between the state and families of the missing has expressed a keen interest in supporting *Bones of Contention*.

Originality and innovative character

The historical relation between science and spiritualism has been central to scholarly debates about modernity and secularization (Van der Veer 2008; Pels 2003).This research project is theoretically highly original in taking this debate into the ethnographic present of Vietnam. Empirically, despite some fine ethnographic studies on aspects of the topic (Kwon 2008; Sorrentino 2017), the more recent developments have not been studied. The central scientific aim of this project is to illuminate the ontological and epistemological grounds for the application of spiritual forensic from Vietnamese perspective. How do the users of spiritual forensics justify its scientific base and their choice for it, even after the state has decided to replace it with DNA-based forensics? What can the spiritual enterprise do for the bereaved people in their search for consolation that natural sciences cannot?

To date there has been no study of the introduction of DNA-based technology of identification in Vietnam. This allows the researcher to make another highly innovative and original contribution, namely an understanding of the social and cultural embedding of a sophisticated scientific technology (DNA forensics) in a highly politicized field. This understanding is much needed for both common people and for institutions, in Vietnam and beyond.

Scientific relevancies

War dead and military cemeteries are important aspects of modern nationalism (Mosse 1979, 1990; Weingrod 1995; Verdery 1999; Wagner 2013; Ngo 2013). The nation as an imagined community, according to Anderson (1999), has its roots in the nationalist concern with death and immortality, which links the dead and the yet unborn. War and the control over the war dead and their memory has been shown to be central to the legitimacy of modern nation-states (Lomnitz 2005). The war dead and their burial are sites for the performance of sovereignty of various political, religious and cultural entities (Stepputat 2014). In her work on Romania Verdery (1999) makes a compelling argument for reading the politics around burials and dead bodies as a sign of larger forms of post-Soviet transformation. She shows that debates over particular bodies and their burials are mobilized in support of land claims and to create national audiences of mourners. Similarly, Gal (1991) demonstrated how the debate over the composer Bela Bartok's re-burial evoked different conceptions of Hungary's place within Europe.

Missing and/or unidentified bones of war dead constitute what Douglas (1966) has called "matters out of place", and are therefore the source of unpredicted risk and danger (Ngo 2013). Finding, identifying and placing them in the right social and political order are crucial processes of healing, normalization and reconciliation in almost any postwar society. Wagner (2013, 2015, forthcoming) argues that the search and accounting for an estimated 2500 Americans Missed in Action (MIA) in Vietnam, not only illustrates the "exceptional care" by the United States for its

missing service men and women but also promotes the development of a related DNA forensic industry. More importantly, the search for these MIAs has resulted in a significant transformation of the U.S's remembrance of its war dead, namely from aggregated unknowns or anonymous bodies, "buried where they fell", to the individual home coming and burial as the final act in the nation's proper care for its war dead. To ensure this end, an "*ethos* of exceptional care" has emerged, providing the U.S government a narrative to push past the war's embittered divisiveness and instead direct attention to its unparalleled efforts to bring its fallen home.

The Vietnam War was a turbulent and agonizing experience for many in the USA (Burns and Novick 2017), but it was unquestionably a much more destructive, divisive and violent event for people in Vietnam. In this research project, we investigate the ways in which the Vietnamese deal with their violent past and their deep divisions (Kwon 2008, 2012, 2015). Our objective is to obtain an improved understanding of the enormous proliferation of bone-finding movements in Vietnam (Ngo 2013) in the 1990s in the search for the remains of war dead.

This research project wants to further the understanding of the nature of national sovereignty in the Vietnamese case. While recognizing a cultural need to recover bones of the missing war dead, the state authorities continued to be determined to keep their sovereign control over whose bodies can be unearthed and given back to the families and whose cannot. Any practice that commemorates people or events that are seen as challenging this sovereign control are prohibited. The Vietnamese government's discrimination against part of the war dead of the American war, namely the South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians only reinforces the popular need to find their own ways of commemorating (Ho-Tai 1996; Malarney 2002; Kwon 2008; Schwenkel 2008; Salemink and McDegrigorio 2010; Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). The 2016 Pulitzer prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016: 17) argues for an ethical project of creating a 'just memory' in which not only one's own side is remembered, but also the former, defeated enemy, if one wants to go beyond nationalist preparation for war. This, however, is precisely what the state sees as weakening its hold on the people. Although the Vietnamese case can be compared with the literature on Eastern Europe and Spain as well as on Mexico and other societies in Latin America (Ferrandiz 2013; Robben 2005, 2017; Bacigalupo 2018), there is a specificity to the sovereignty of postcolonial Vietnam for it has been only recently wrested from imperial power (French, and later American) in struggles that have deeply and violently divided the population both before and after the so-called 'liberation' of the South by the communist North in 1975. The creation of this postcolonial nation-state has depended on a thorough militarization of society which has produced a population deeply invested in the memory of war and the war dead. In his study of the exhumed bodies of the Spanish civil war, Ferrándiz (2013) argues that societies need to confront the most disquieting elements of the pasts head-on and that political strategies that privilege sweeping such history "under the rug" while potentially effective for a limited period of time, may be destabilizing in the long run. The appearance of new kinds of accountability claims for crimes of the past may well be inevitable as an emerging political cultural experience of what Hilton (2011) calls "transitional frictions' – the tension and discrepancies of handling social and political travails in a post-conflict context (Aguilar 2000; Hayner 2002; Wilson 2003). In the case of Vietnam, however, they are not transitional, since the sovereignty of the state is directly connected to its necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). It is precisely in relation to dealing with the war dead that the Vietnamese state constantly comes up against local memory and meets with popular resistance.

By investigating the search for the war dead we want to go beyond the earlier anthropological preoccupation with the symbolism of secondary burial in South-East Asia, China,

and Madagaskar (Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Instead of seeing the bones as regenerating life and reproducing societies (Bloch and Parry 1982) we consider them as acting objects that actualize human relations (Mueggler 2017: 6; Mbembe, 2003), with their own agency and "social life" (Appadurai, 1986). This relationship can be intense and personal as in daily engagements between the living and the dead, which Kim (2016) refers to as "necrosociality" for the case of Japan, but also can be so subversive and destabilizing that it threatens the founding myths of the sovereign nation.

An important question in this research projects is whether the scientific progress in identifying the war dead leads to shifting modes of remembrance. Wagner (2013, forthcoming) demonstrates that the changing technology of identification, particularly brought about by advance in DNA testing, has enabled individuated memorializing in the US. Whereas memorials of the past, such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers, emphasized collective or anonymous groups of war dead in articulating national identity, the process of identifying each set of remains, no matter how partial or delayed, personalized the ideals of sacrifice and honor embodied in the fallen soldier and invites localized, communal remembrance. This has to be found out in Vietnam, but preliminary findings point in an opposite direction. To what extent is the introduction of DNA technology interpreted as another way in which the state tries to control its population? A pilot study (by the PI) revealed discord and discontent by living relatives of the missing about the intrusive way state officers are handling the process. The PI met Vietnamese families who expressed the fear that they would again lose hold of their missing loved ones, this time as an impersonal number in the state bureaucracy. This raises the question to what extent science can frame Vietnam's commemoration of war, particularly in shaping what recovery efforts and identifications mean to families of the missing and veterans (cf. Winter, 2017).

Research plan

The central research questions are supported by sub-questions that correspond to five work packages (WPs) that compose the entire proposed research project. The research team includes the PI (WP1 & WP4), 1 PhD student (WP2) and 1 postdoctoral researcher (WP3), and a senior academic collaborator, Dr. Sarah Wagner at George Washington University, Washington DC (WP5). The PhD student will focus on the use of spiritual forensics by private families of both martyrs and "enemy dead" to search for and identification of their missing bodily remains. The postdoctoral researchers will conduct research on the use of DNA-based forensics by state institutions and private families also from both sides. Together with the PI, Dr. Sarah Wagner will investigate the politics and practice of collaborative science between the two former combatants, America and Vietnam, in their own quests to solve various challenges of MIA accounting and postwar normalization.

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