



## Manikin-Ship: Value-added relatedness in Vietnamese museums, 1996–2005

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Objects are telling of identity and difference, through possession, exchange, and display, but this dynamic must be historicised and socially situated. In this article, I focus on the signification of ethnicity in Vietnamese museums, particularly on an apparent distinction between historically ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ matter. The earliest displays responded to the previous hegemony of French colonial significations. Subsequent national exhibits consistently enable Vietnam through assemblies of objects and images, but suggest—when examined over time—fundamentally different configurations of the nation, ethnicity, gender, and historicity. Object assemblies, where a centrepiece signifies the surrounding objects, indicate repeated prospecting for new social assemblages, most recently situating Vietnam in post-Cold War networks through the Southeast Asian kinship implied in the nation’s ethnic diversity.

### INTRODUCTION

When ethnic minority peoples in the Central Highlands of Vietnam staged protests against agricultural and religious marginalisation in early 2001, the authorities swiftly suppressed the agitation and blamed the unrest on ‘foreign instigators’ (Salemink 2003: 300). A few weeks later, thousands of ethnic minority youth in that region were assembled for a two-day festival of ethnic song, dance, and dress that commemorated ‘the 70 anniversary of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and the 26th anniversary of national reunification’ (Jonsson & Taylor 2003: 179–80). The two-part episode meant different things to diverse players and observers. My interest is in the shape of the resolution, where explicit ethnic markers were aligned with the nation–state’s unity and temporality. Ostensibly atemporal traditions of dress, dance, and song were woven into national biography as social life went from protest and suppression to a celebration of unity and patriotism through the iconography of regional festivals.

The celebratory closure to the unrest is mythical, in the sense that it is already entrenched in narrative structures that are on display in several national museums. As Vietnamese myths go, this one is not particularly old; it dates to re-unification in 1975. But it was already a French myth that was manifest in the writing of customs-manuals (*coutumier*) as they imposed their rule on the Central Highlands and drew particular ethnic lines that, in some ways, are still considered a guide to the area’s peoples (Salemink 2003).

My point is not to vilify the contemporary Vietnamese authorities as somehow inherently oppressive of their ethnic minorities or as replicating French rule. It is rather to insist that ethnologies, such as the definition of who are the peoples of the Central Highlands, are akin to what Aristotle (1987; Halliwell 1998) called *mythos*: plot-structures that cast characters or identities in ways that determine what can happen in their interaction. Ethnic dress is of fundamental importance for Central Highlanders' identity within Vietnam, but this is less because of how it defines them and more because of the way it enables 'the Vietnamese' to come into identity and agency through particular relations with them—as it also had earlier enabled 'the French'.

How do objects tell identity and history? What makes a manikin in ethnic dress into a particular signifier, what stories is it made to tell, and in what ways do the narratives and ontologies change over time? While I wield the 'ethnographic present' in writing, my study is limited to three periods of museum visits in Vietnam, in 1996, 2000, and 2005. Museums and their exhibits change, and some of the exhibits I discuss have expired. Instead of aiming for the most up-to-date account of museum displays, my concern is with comparisons and contrasts among the museums to arrive at historically specific national configurations within which one may come to know individuals, gender, ethnicity, and the nation from objects.

In Vietnam's museums, ethnic diversity is squarely national; the fifty-three officially-recognised minorities belong as members of Vietnam, but there are important differences in how people belong and how objects mark belonging—a display of baskets is marked as a feature of ethnic peoples who are not named or otherwise individualised, whereas a basket that was used for concealing political documents is displayed as having belonged to a named individual: it is not on display as a basket but as the material manifestation of political activity. Individuality, gender, and ethnicity are signified through objects as national, but simultaneously differentiated in unambiguous terms as either historically 'hot' or 'cold'—actively part of national history or inertly part of national diversity. Borrowing an image from science, the museum objects can be viewed as making up a Periodic Table of National Elements. I am concerned with how the whole and parts relate, what distinguishes active from inactive elements, and how the shape and direction of the assembly avail a look at national ontology from objects that mediate national belonging and significance as they tell time—define history as they also refract historical moments. In part, I situate the specificity of Vietnam's national narratives by comparisons with the museum imagery of other Southeast Asian countries, particularly Indonesia and Thailand.

Vietnamese efforts at depicting ethnic minority Highland peoples in museums drew to some extent on pre-existing French notions and practices, but also emphasised objects to show ethnic minority participation in the (violent) independence struggle. Ethnic dress repeatedly manifests femininity and inert traditions, which suggests bi-temporality among the nation's peoples. While Vietnam was divided into North and South, between 1954 and 1975, one northern museum focussed on ethnic minority peoples in the northern region. After re-unification in 1975,

museums were made explicitly national and began to narrate national stories that celebrated the struggle against foreign enemies and overlords. At that time, the politically significant ethnic minority objects were all moved to museums in the capital, and these objects are becoming increasingly anomalous within current frames of display and identity. After economic liberalisation in 1986, the end to Cold War alliances and support networks, and particularly with integration into global capitalist markets by the 1990s, the imagery of museums has changed as the nation and state have been defined in relation to new contexts. Ethnicity, gender, kinship, and objects tell different stories and different ontologies in historical context—make particular identities and relations imaginable and real through object displays.

The anthropological concern with minority representation in national museums or in social life may import undue essentialism about the character of society and politics; it may reify the difference that it seeks to challenge. Following Latour (2005), it may be more reasonable ethnographically as much as politically to suspend such convictions (about ethnicity and politics) and instead trace what connections make particular social assemblies. My interest lies in historicising the different plot-structures of museum displays, with an eye to connections among the nation's 'inalienable possessions' (Weiner 1992) in different contexts, how objects become 'biographical' of people and nation (Hoskins 1998), and how kinship is made at a societal level (Carsten 1997). My focus on objects is a matter of choice; an alternative research strategy emphasises engagements with museum staff and visitors (see Nguyen 2002; MacLean 2008; Bodemer 2010).

This study draws on five museums in northern Vietnam. These are the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME, founded in 1997), the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution (1959), the Vietnam Museum of History (1958), and the Women's Museum (1995), all in Hanoi, and the Museum of the Cultures of Vietnam's Ethnic Groups, in Thai Nguyen city, about eighty miles north of the capital. This last museum was founded in 1960, but its collection and display were changed in some fundamental ways after national re-unification in 1975. All are state-run institutions, but the VME is unusual among them for having received considerable financial and curatorial assistance from foreign agencies, including the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History, the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and the Rockefeller Foundation (Nguyen & Kendall 2003; MacLean 2008; Bodemer 2010). The networks that VME has been involved in—with considerable success—became an inspiration for others. SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency, financed the revamping of the museum in Thai Nguyen, and more recently the VME and various international agencies, including the Canadian International Development Agency have sponsored or aided the redoing of the Women's Museum.

## **ANTI-COLONIAL RESIGNIFICATION**

Anderson (1991) shows how colonial regimes in Southeast Asia took to restoring ancient monuments during the nineteenth century in an attempt to create

legitimacy that sidestepped the brutalities of conquest and rule. Central to Anderson's discussion of archaeology is a triangulation between the museum, map, and census as the 'grammar' through which nation states later emerged from, and in opposition to, their colonial precursors (1991: 163–64). Categories of space and of peoples increasingly assumed bounded, national territories and racialised or ethnified identities. Archaeological monuments became indexical of nationally identified terrains. The logo-isation of an archaeological monument and of the nation's geographical outlines 'brought census and map, warp and woof, into an inseparable embrace [by its emptiness, contextlessness, visible memorableness, and infinite reproducibility]' (1991: 185). The 'anti-conquest' imagery of the colonial era is compellingly described by Pratt (1992: 38–85). Commentators frequently disconnected the archaeological record from colonial subjects; 'contemporary natives were no longer capable of the putative ancestors' achievements, [or] the builders were actually not of the same 'race' as the natives'. By implication, 'natives' were 'incapable of either greatness or self-rule' (Anderson 1991: 181; cf. Pelley 2002: 149–50).

A different but related dynamic was at work in ethnographic exploration and classification, which was performed in tandem with pacification and the establishment of colonial control (Pels & Salemink 1999; Aragon 2000: 47–156). French colonial ethnography classified and ranked people in evolutionary terms as it mapped out the administrative terrain and created internal divisions that came together as Indochina (Goscha 1995; Salemink 2003: 40–99). French control over Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) incorporated hinterland areas and peoples that had not been formally part of lowland kingdoms in pre-colonial times, and simultaneously insisted on the separation of these ('savage', 'tribal') non-Viet ethnic groups from the lowland Vietnamese (Jonsson 2001). The reasons ranged from evolutionism to paternalism and reinforced the Civilising Mission that was the discursive trope of colonial rule.

The re-charting of Vietnam by the nationalist movement and its successors—the reconfiguration of census and map and its expression in museums—is on display to varying degrees in all the national museums. Central to this process was 'the idea of national essence [manifest in the struggle against foreign aggression, that] was linked to landscape and place' (Pelley 2002: 144–45). This involved the establishment of national origins in the Hung Kings, who are 'traced to the third millennium B.C.E. [and the simultaneous effacement of their traditional, China-related] origins and meaning' (2002: 7). The revolutionary movement and its project became the inheritor and guardian of this national legacy, through invention and reinscription. Several of the national museums are housed in colonial-era buildings. The successful erasure of the buildings' previous symbolism was an act of power that rewrote the parameters of time, space, identity, and agency. This reinscription conflated the national terrain and sovereignty with ethnic diversity, a long history, and the Communist Party's inheritance and stewardship of national identity.

In the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, an enlarged French photograph from the colonial era shows shackled women. The English label is neutral, stating

that these are ‘three women taking part in the Ba Dinh uprising (Thanh Hoa), captured by the French in 1886’. The original French label on the photograph is revealing about the classificatory mindset of the colonial authorities; it declares that the arrested are bandits’ wives (‘femmes de pirates’). In contrast, the museum’s own post-colonial French label declares them to be women resistance fighters (‘femmes résistantes’). The arrest of the three women was also a classificatory act, one that made them bandits at the same time as it reinforced the agency of the French colonial rulers and the identity of their terrain as Indochina.

The relabeling of the colonial-era photograph in the museum erases the logic of Indochina as a project. As the museum redefines the identity and agency of the parties involved in the arrest, it situates the event within a different temporality. No longer does the picture serve as evidence for the upholding of law and order in the colony. It now resides within an assembly of items in a room that displays ‘the Vietnamese people’s resistance against the French invasion in the second half of the nineteenth century’. In the centre of this room, behind glass, is one ‘Hoang Ha [bronze] drum, in the culture of Dong Son, 2400 years ago’. This object plays with time and identity: as a marker of Bronze Age societies in the region, situated in the centre of objects displaying the nineteenth century anti-colonial struggle, it evokes the historical mission of fighting foreign aggression as integral to millennia-old identity and society. The object and its age historicise Vietnam to emphasise indigeneity and brush aside the parallel story of interactions with Chinese domains—cultural exchange as much as political control and contestation. To some extent, a distinction from China is foundational to Vietnamese identity—against the Chinese view of Vietnam as An-nam, ‘the pacified south’, and rightfully theirs (Taylor 1986). History was inherently national, and the national could only be threatened by foreign aggression, not internal tensions, rivalries, or diversity. The success of this vision enabled modern Vietnam. It served to erase colonial collaborators, the imperial and feudal legacies of Vietnamese kingdoms, internal colonialism, and other features of history that did not tell a national story that aligned with the communist nationalist movement (cf. Goscha 1995; Taylor 1998).<sup>1</sup>

In the second room of the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, several objects are attributed to ethnic minorities’ fights against the French in the north of Vietnam (then Tonkin). Text captions give ethnic labels, dates, and province, and in some cases the individual names of people using the weapons: ‘the crossbow used by Hoang Dinh Kinh (of Tay ethnic people) to fight the French in Lang Son in 1914’, ‘a horn used by insurgents of Dao ethnic people to fight the French in 1914’, and ‘the javelin used by Meo ethnic people to fight against the French in Lao Cai Province, 1894–1895’. In the rest of the museum, there are no displays highlighting ethnic diversity.

In a room devoted to ‘economic rehabilitation in the north, peaceful struggle for national reunification, 1954–1957’, photographs identify people as ‘peasants’ and ‘workers’. Some photograph captions refer to the American-supported ‘puppet government’ in Saigon. One hall is devoted to the anti-American struggle, which was

also a struggle against other Vietnamese, between the then-separate countries of the North and the South—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam (1954–1975). It features a photograph of ethnic minority men from the Central Highlands standing next to a row of rice–wine jars: ‘guerillas at Gia Rai before departure for attack’. In the same room, another photograph shows a loin-clothed ethnic minority man with a crossbow next to a uniformed soldier with a machine gun: ‘guerillas in the Central Highlands fought enemy with self-made weapons in 1959’.

The identification of peasants, workers, and guerillas suggests the ontology of the revolutionary government; its emphasis on classifying people in relation to the state’s wartime mission overrode ethnic difference. During the Second Indochina War (1954–1975, the ‘Vietnam War’), the allegiance of Highland ethnic minority peoples was of considerable strategic importance, to the American-supported south as much as to the Communist north. Within the Central Highlands, minority people also formed an interethnic alliance ‘for the struggle of oppressed races’ that tried, unsuccessfully, to bargain for autonomy and recognition of their separate politics (Hickey 1982). Following Communist victory in 1975, various policies of resettlement, sedentarisation, and socialist transformation changed the social, cultural, and agricultural landscape as highland areas were incorporated into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Hickey 1993; Saleminck 2003).

Contrasting ontologies inform the distinction between guerillas and minority ethnicities in the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution. The former resonates with social transformations that leave ethnic specificity behind in an intended shift from ‘traditional man’ to ‘socialist man’ (Evans 1995; McElwee 2004). The latter nationalises history and the terrain. Both projects still linger, as expressions of the tensions inherent in a revolutionary, national movement whose historical identity is, in many ways, not just ethnically Vietnamese but also urban, class based, and northern (Giebel 2004). Political allegiances and their benefits have not been ethnically based or shared, in either uplands or lowlands, but non-national politics were made unthinkable in the forging of a national domain that recognised and transformed ethnic difference in the service of the revolution and the nation.

Annette Weiner proposes the concept of ‘cosmological authentication’ to ‘amplify how material resources and social practices link individuals and groups with an authority that transcends present social and political action’ (1992: 4). Authority derives from and reinforces ‘control over [the] meanings and transmission [of inalienable possessions] from one generation to the next’. Weiner notes that power often rests on claims to the past, sometimes through alleged continuity with it and at other times through its deliberate destruction (1992: 7–10). French Colonial collecting and signification of objects and narratives revolved around the French; it was they who restored ancient glory (such as in the museum devoted to Cham archaeological remains in Danang) and established the colony’s ethnic divisions and their separate traditions. French ethnological collections went largely to museums in Paris, the Musée Permanent des Colonies (1928) and the Musée de

l'Homme (1938), indicating that their value lay in the potential to impress on the French people the value of the colonial enterprise. This 'value-added' dimension to objects from various parts of Vietnam inheres not in the objects, but in their possession, having been moved out of circulation through projects of classification, collection, and display.

## PARTY ETHNICITY

The objects displaying ethnic minority contributions to the struggle against the French were originally in what is now the Museum of the Cultures of Vietnam's Ethnic Groups, in Thai Nguyen. This museum was established in 1960 and was at that time under the governance of six Northern (DRV) provinces. In 1976, after the 'American War' and when the nation was under a single government, the museum was placed under the Ministry of Culture and Information. When the museum was initially established, it was 'to recognise contributions made by the ethnic groups of the northern area to Vietnamese revolutionary history' (Ministry of Culture and Information, Vietnam 1998: 7). An official in this museum told me (pers.comm. June 2000) that there were two components to the original museum in the 1960s. One was a presentation of the ethnic minority peoples and the other concerned their revolutionary struggle.

When the war was over and the museum had been placed under a national government ministry, it was directed to focus on ethnology only and its objects concerning the ethnic minority participation in the revolutionary struggle were transferred to national museums in Hanoi. After this reworking of the museum's objectives, its halls were rearranged to reflect the different language families of Vietnam's peoples. The responsibility of the museum is to represent objects from the cultures of all ethnic groups in Vietnam, and the official expected little change in the future except to make the displays more attractive to visitors: 'We always say that if foreigners visit our country and do not have much time, then they should come and visit the museum to see the entire fifty-four peoples'. After re-unification of the North and South in 1975, ethnic diversity became key to the image of transcendent nationality on the terrain: 'The *List of Ethnic Groups in Vietnam* made known by the General Department of Statistics on March 2, 1979 recognises that the Vietnamese nation officially comprises 54 ethnic groups' (Dang *et al.* 2000: 1). With some notable exceptions, museums tend to use women and ethnic minorities to invoke the atemporality of traditional and ethnic characteristics.

On the entry step to the Thai Nguyen museum, there is a white statue, and the wall behind it has an elaborate picture carved in wood. The statue shows Ho Chi Minh holding three children, who represent the country's north, central, and southern regions. The wood carving depicts 'joyous communal festivities of the three regions of Vietnam: the Sacred Boat Race of the Mekong delta, the Buffalo Sacrifice of the Central Highlands, and the Dragon Dance of the Northern Spring Festivals' (Ministry of Culture and Information, Vietnam 1998: 8). From being a leader of

the revolutionary movement and then the nation's first president, Ho Chi Minh emerges in this statue as a simultaneous originator and unifier of the country.

As with the ancient bronze drum in the room displaying the nineteenth century anti-colonial struggle, the statue may be read as the centrepiece that is the source of its surroundings. The surroundings are a schematic representation of the nation in three parts; both the statue's children and the wood carvings present Vietnam as made up of North, Centre, and South—the regions are somehow equivalent to the children. In this context, it matters that Ho Chi Minh was nationally known as Uncle (*bac*) Ho; he is not father to the children in his lap but avuncular to the nation's peoples.

The imagery of the statue and the carving rework and logo-ise the nation in ways that only became possible after 1975, whereas the original museum display celebrated the participation of ethnic minorities in the north in the anticolonial cause. The national terrain, regional identities, ethnic diversity, and Communist Party leadership come together in these images. Their 'inseparable embrace' (Anderson 1991: 185) is key to the nation–state transcendent relationship to time and space; inscription and description come together in a national ontology where any one element calls up the whole: the map, regions, ethnic groups, festivals, and the revolution's/nation's leader.

Inside the museum, the entry hall has pictures of archaeological finds, establishing the antiquity of the nation. The halls of 'peoples' that make up the museum indicate sibblingship; each hall has 'closely related' peoples. 'The Museum displays are organised in five exhibition rooms based on the main language systems of Vietnam: the Viet-Muong linguistic group, the Tay-Thai group, the Mong-Dao groups and the Mon-Khmer, the Chinese (including the Tibeto-Burman), and the Malayo-Polynesian groups' (Ministry of Culture and Information, Vietnam 1998: 8). The emphasis on ethnolinguistic classification derives from the French colonial project but is, in many ways, its transformation. Pelley (2002: 105–06) suggests that this categorisation helped re-situate Vietnam within Southeast Asia and to disassociate the country from China. It also contributed to erasing the markers of previous lowland hegemony and chauvinism that was manifest in the terms *Man* ('barbarians', from Chinese) for highlanders in the north, and *Moi* ('savages', a Vietnamese term) for the inhabitants of the Central Highlands.

Ethnic Vietnamese identify as both Viet and Kinh. The latter literally means 'city' or 'capital' and has many connotations of civility that rest on explicit and implicit contrasts with what are now highland minorities. French colonial rule reproduced the terms *Moi* and *Man* in reference to hinterland populations. Judging from the titles of ethnographic publications, the French used these terms somewhat interchangeably with their own 'montagnards', 'groupes ethniques', and 'tribus sauvages' (Jonsson 2001: 63). The evolutionism and inequality inherent in the French 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2003: 7–28) reproduced concepts that had been constitutive of state control and ethnic landscapes in Southeast Asia and southern China for a millennium (Jonsson 2005: 16–43; Fiskesjö 2006: 28).

As a classificatory device, language families facilitated the deliberate erasure of the inequalities inherent in the binary of Kinh and Man or Moi. But it is notable that museums place the Viet-Muong language family at the beginning or otherwise very prominently. The sibblingship of language families and of the nation can be understood in terms of the hierarchy inherent in Vietnamese notions of kinship, where the basic units are *anh* and *em*; ‘older’ and ‘younger’. The Vietnamese-language text of a guidebook to the country declares the persistent unity of the fifty-four peoples ‘in the great Vietnamese national family’, adding that the older, ‘ethnic Vietnamese (identified as Kinh) naturally guide their younger siblings and teach them to comport themselves in a civilised way’ (Pelley 2002: 160–61).

When the museum in Thai Nguyen was initially established, it was to recognise and celebrate the contributions of ethnic minorities to the DRV cause. Vietnamese victory over French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, decisive for national independence, was attributed to the support of ethnic minorities (McAlister 1967). This is a national more than a historical fact. Recent scholarship suggests that Chinese military support played a very significant role (Salemink 2003: 129). The image of fifty-four peoples is productive of particular national acts of silencing history, past, and present, as it maps the terrain. History becomes an expression of national identity, while the image of national unity serves as a filter on what can be recognised and publicly endorsed.

The Vietnamese notion of the country as made up of fifty-four peoples also serves to fill in the national terrain beyond areas of the lowland-based ethnic Vietnamese, with groups that are united (only) through the government. The imagery evokes the socialist government as a unifier of a country that would otherwise fall apart or would never have come together. As minorities are included in a national narrative, their ethnic distinctiveness is persistently emphasised in the public sphere (Taylor & Jonsson 2002). The emphasis on ethnic dress conjures up a certain timelessness that is very different from historically transcendent national identity. The current display is fundamentally shaped by post-1975 official policies. Once in place and on display, the conflation of the nation and its fifty-four peoples contributed to making unthinkable the country’s division and internal warfare during parts of the twentieth century. Ethnic diversity became an inalienable feature of national identity.

Kinship, social position, and identity are continually being fashioned in particular circumstances. Carsten (1997) discusses in detail the case of Pulau Langkawi, where people become relatives and locals and equals over time, through exchanges, (mutual) feeding, and various other relations—with social creativity as much as coercive incorporation. There was a general emphasis on playing down genealogies and parental or grandparental origins in other places, which also served to erase memories of whatever obligations peasants might have owed to their overlords. The French, with their classifications, insisted on racial ‘origins’ as the real reference for people’s identities. This project, too, expresses social creativity and coercive incorporation but of a significantly different kind, as it motivated and enabled French command over social life and ethnic ways.

The post-reunification classification of people as from any one of the fifty-four ethnic groups points not so much to racial origins (although these are implied) as to the national map. The nationalist and anti-colonial resignification of objects and identity to show and celebrate ethnic minority participation in the struggle against the French and the Americans suggests something like kinship, in that relations and national equivalence are seen as the product of people's participation in armed struggle. These are definitions of people through objects that define parameters of how people can relate and what can happen through their interaction. Hoskins (1998: 161) points out that 'biographical' objects may be 'imposed and attributed' rather than chosen by the subjects they somehow define; this is equally prevalent in ethnographic and other museums as in everyday social life.

### **ETHNIC AND GENDERED ANONYMITY AND AHISTORICITY**

Kinship is never static, and the national scheme of relatedness that created certain equivalence between Vietnamese and their ethnic-other allies has been replaced by a bi-temporal framework wherein ethnic minorities are largely presented as feminine and historically inert. And as with the French earlier, there are signs of recovering origins that are more authentic than contemporary people's objects and expressions. Among the Vietnamese government's policies against 'feudal superstitions' after 1975 was the destruction of longhouses, common among some groups in the Central Highlands, in the service of socialist development (Salemink 2003: 275–76). However, an Ede longhouse has been erected on the grounds of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. Nearby stands a community house, identified as 'the most important building in a Bahnar village'. Because such architecture and attendant forms of social life were actively suppressed and demolished, these buildings stand rather unambiguously as (empty) signs that derive their meaning from the assembly of a multi-ethnic Vietnam inside museums. The text caption hails the structure as the recovery of origins: 'To create a traditional communal house untouched by modernisation, museum researchers worked closely with villagers and consulted old photographs to better understand the traditional model. The house you see here has restored many of the traditional features that have been lost in today's village houses.'

The museum's replica is somehow more original than any house in rural areas. Architecture that used to be read as an obstacle to socialist modernity is emerging, via museums, as regalia of the secular nation state. The tensions inherent in the double impulse of transformation and preservation are suspended by moving the markers of difference (dress, architecture, ritual paraphernalia) out of the sphere of circulation and practice and into the museum space of inalienable possessions. There they represent (only) national membership and belonging. Inside the VME, there are displays of the dress, material culture, and ritual objects of the nation's fifty-four ethnic groups. There are few, if any, signs of history or agency being attributed to ethnic peoples.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they are presented like national logos: empty

and visually distinctive. Gone is the revolutionary resignification, replaced by something akin to the classificatory impulse of French colonial scholars but explicitly identified as of Vietnam.

Through multiple displays on two floors that are devoted to women who have contributed to national defence and progress over two millennia, the Women's Museum conveys the trope of a national struggle against foreign aggression (Tai 2001: 186–88). The third and top floor of this museum was devoted to manikins in ethnic dress.<sup>3</sup> A text panel explains that 'Through clothes, we can understand the diligent work of women, their creative mind, their optimistic spirit, their responsibility toward the family and the community ... Those women clothes (sic) have contributed importantly to creating the cultural characteristic of each ethnic group and the whole Vietnamese nation'. Whatever the local significance of textiles and embroidery, the museum conveys it as the simultaneous expression of ethnicity and the nation, and as the opposite of historicity.

The national appropriation and celebration of women's weaving and embroidery can be compared to the selection of tradition in highland villages during the early 1970s. Ethnographer Be Viet Dang describes Zao society as having been 'in a state of serious stagnation [during] colonial and semi-feudal Vietnam' (Be 1975: 62). But, he continued, 'superstitions have been successfully fought' and a campaign for sedentarisation was bringing social progress. Indicative of the state's role as the arbiter of ethnic culture, he mentions that 'good traditions [especially those which are related to the community spirit] are piously preserved' (1975: 77–78).

In the Women's Museum, there are several smaller displays—on baskets, on straw hats, and on the stimulant betel: 'Women of various ethnic groups have played an important part in the preservation of this custom; the practice of chewing betel has become one of the cultural characteristics of the life of the Vietnamese woman'. The gendering of betel-chewing is not an ethnographic fact, but may simply indicate that the museum is invested in signifying women on a national scale. In contrast to the commemoration of the anti-colonial struggle, the displays of hats, baskets, betel-chewing, and ethnic dress seem curious, but I think that the difference is about the bifurcation of temporality between historically 'hot' and 'cold' matter; the nationalist struggle in contrast to the making of tradition and diversity.

One indication of this bi-temporality is that people engaged in historically 'hot' activities have individual names, others are anonymous. Text captions about embroiderers, hat-makers, the chewers of stimulants, and the like do not mention people's names, whereas the other exhibits usually do: 'Girls of the Mong ethnic group (Mu Cang Chai district, Yen Bai commune) use baskets to harvest upland rice'. In contrast, there is the 'hand basket that Mrs. Pham Thi Ranh (Hiep Thanh commune, Co Dan district, Tay Ninh province) used to carry betel nut and documents during political struggles from 1954 to 1968'. The woman has a name, and there are dates to her use of the basket, because along with the betel, she carried 'documents'. She was involved in the (political) activity that the museum (and the nation) not only commemorates but identifies with. The logic of that identification

also informs the signification of what might otherwise be a regular hat: ‘The conical hat worn by Mrs. Nguyen Thi Suot in Bao Ninh (Quang Binh) while rowing boat to transport soldiers across the Nhat Le River from February 1965 to April 1966’.

Tradition, as national or ethnic characteristics, involves anonymous girls, women, and the unmarked members of (minority) ethnic groups. The logo-isation and serialisation of some categories is both gendered and ethnicised in relation to national time, space, and agency. As is the case with Schein’s (2000: 100–66) argument about the Miao and China, the feminisation of minority identities naturalises the state’s leadership, its modernisation efforts, and attendant rural-urban inequalities as relationships of gender, where one part of the binary is active and the other is not. It is their coming together that creates and reproduces the subject of Vietnam. The anonymous ethnic manikins engender and express a plot structure where identity and tradition stand in a particular relationship to nation and history. They have produced a distinctiveness that has a place on the map in terms of the state’s provinces or regions, but it evokes neither a time nor a name, and this is the fundamental break in museum significations after 1975. ‘The shirt worn by Doan Hung, a miner at Hon Gai Colliery (Quang Ninh) during the time of the French domination’ (Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution), is the opposite of the ‘women’s costume, Mong ethnic group, Ha Giang province’ (Women’s Museum). Both pieces of clothing define Vietnam through objects, but one implies active history and the other inert diversity.

The project of rendering people anonymous as ethnic groups dehistoricises rural people and disconnects their own links to place—their link becomes that of the state through the collection. In the French colonial projects of ethnology and museums, examples of dress, material culture, and architecture stood as signs for the diversity of peoples in the French colonies (Sherman 2004; Dias 2008; Demissie 2010). Such objects were only identified by the name of the person who collected the object, and the ethnic label it came from (see Hemmet 1995 for examples). Agency resided with the collectors of culture; ethnic people were inert types. Museum representations of ethnic Vietnamese index them by region; north and south, or north, centre, and south, again presenting people (feminised, exclusively, and obliterating their histories and connections to place) as pieces of a puzzle that come into being in relation to the national map.

An exhibit about prehistory in the Vietnam Museum of History is focussed on stone tools. The centre of the room has a display concerning human evolution: again, a central display is made to illuminate its surroundings by radiating a particular identification and differentiation. Busts of five male figures show the progression from *Australopithecus* to *Homo sapiens sapiens*, which is also graphed on the panel behind them. On the other side of that panel, there is an almost life-size figure of a woman making a clay pot. On her side of the wall, an illustration shows the designs she might have used in completing her work. The attributed design patterns express the characteristics of a traditional people and ‘predict’ the displays of ethnic women in the other museums. The contrast between the evolving men and the

tradition-bound woman expresses the gendered division of history and agency that is implied in female manikins in other museums. Power operates through the simultaneous inscription of temporality and ontology; men and women become temporal contrasts, and as such they have different historicity (Fabian 1983; Scott 1988; Haraway 1989). This configuration need not express 'the' Vietnamese worldview. Rather, it expresses a consensus that is anchored to a particular view and institutions, silences a range of voices, and presents itself as national culture (Bhabha 1990).<sup>4</sup>

The VME displays the Viet-Muong language family prominently on the ground level, and the other language families on the floor above. Ethnic objects stand as manifestations of the nation's official composition; the sacred union of census and map, and the inalienable possessions of Vietnam. The museum evokes the contemporary state's leadership in a series of text panels regarding ethnic minorities. One relates that 'there were no markets in the highlands' until recent times. Another states that it was only after a governmental policy of economic restructuring that the people in the hinterlands became prosperous, educated, and reasonable in their farming practices; 'the level of knowledge is [by now] continuously increasing'. The third and final text panel declares: 'Preservation of the unique cultural identities of every ethnic group is deemed a necessity'. Significantly, this rests on minority identities as essentially national: 'The cultural garden of ethnic populations has to be forever Vietnamese, rich, and diverse, by the crystallisation of all the communities in the great family of the Vietnamese nation, even while it accepts the cultural essence of people all over the world'.

In the VME, there is a further dimension to the national display of ethnic traditions. An exhibit, 'Shared Traditions', was organised to open in time for the Hanoi meeting of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in 2000. Text panels with the objects (textiles, spirit paintings, tools, and wooden statues) mention ethnolinguistic categories to suggest an affinity among Vietnam and Laos, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, and the Philippines. This is a significant reworking of the colonial-era notion of language groups that had provided a scientific tool to correlate racial features with migrations, origins, and levels of civilisation. Now it makes Cold War animosities unthinkable as it maps out a multi-national region of related peoples, which is similar to the way domestic ethnic diversity maps out Vietnam. But 'Shared Traditions' does explicitly more than map out Vietnam in its diversity: the exhibit becomes a centrepiece that displays Vietnam as it radiates the naturalness of its belonging with ASEAN through images of inter-ethnic kinship.

In Indonesia, most, if not all, provincial museums have a room devoted to the twenty-seven provinces that make up the nation. This is the *nusantara* ('archipelago') room, 'where visual comparisons are made between local artifacts [e.g. swords and wedding costumes] and those from elsewhere in Indonesia' (Taylor 1994: 79). In these archipelago rooms, the architecture and dress of one ethnic group stands as emblematic of the province—to the chagrin of many other candidates (Adams 2006)—but there is no effort to achieve a full count of the nation's ethnic groups

as there has been in Vietnam. Similar confluences of the nation and its territory with a selective multi-ethnicity are common in Malaysia, Laos, and Singapore (Benjamin 1976; Kalb 1997; Evans 1998). Thailand, the one among these countries that was not directly colonised, is, in contrast, publicly mono-ethnic and has been persistently reluctant to grant some ethnic groups citizenship. The Thai museums that feature hinterland ethnic minority peoples also display a map showing the purported immigration routes of the Mountain Peoples into the national terrain, making them inherently foreign to Thailand (Jonsson 2005: 59). The museum displays express discursive formations related to the uneven allocation of basic rights and recognition within national territories, in tandem with the ongoing fashioning of the past through plot structures that define identity as they determine how people can relate in terms of objects that have been made 'surrogate selves' (Hoskins 1998: 7) for genders, ethnic groups, regions, nations, or colonial projects.

## CONCLUSIONS

This historical examination of museum displays as plot structures that define identities and relations through objects shows repeated changes in how objects become meaningful, what histories they tell, and what silences they produce. An object from the ethnic minority hinterlands of Vietnam acquires different significance in Paris or Hanoi depending on who displays it and at what historical moment. Objects enable their possessors, and what makes them inalienable or biographical must be ethnographically established and checked against history. Museum displays that show the same social reality in fundamentally different ways are analogous to a scientific experiment that produces different results when performed by different people in separate circumstances (Latour 1987). Any such display makes kinship and other relations and sets particular worlds in motion with plot-structures that define who people are and what can happen through their interactions. If objects do, in fact, enable identities and relations, including inequalities, it seems pertinent to suspend any certainty regarding society or ethnicity and instead focus on the assemblies through which these are made both real and inevitable (Latour 1987, 1993, 2005).

Both Hoskins (1998) and Weiner (1992) argue that comparisons regarding how objects are exchanged, signified, and sometimes removed from circulation undermine the old certainties of economic anthropology about a fundamental divide between primitive exchange systems and modern possessions and, by extension, between traditional and modern identities. Neither scholar argues that there is no difference or that people are everywhere the same, but rather that the anthropological binary of peoples and exchange is untenable and must be replaced by historicised ethnography and comparisons that trace the interplay of exchange, objects, people, and social signification.

Carsten's work on Malay kinship concluded that, for the people involved, kinship 'was part of a process of speculation as well as a process of becoming' (1997: 292). The VME displays manifest processes of both speculation and becoming and

produce a range of values for the ethnic groups on display and the nation it implies, as well as for the museum staff and international collaborators involved, and their visitors. Viewing museum assemblies from this angle indicates the potentially infinite and ever-changing world that happens around museum displays.

Vietnam does not put its minorities on display. It may seem this way at times, but this is because the object displays enable Vietnam and its minorities as they project how they (the two (majority and minorities), three (regions), five-to-eight (language families), or the fifty-four ethnic groups) relate and where things can do between them. As creative social experiments, the displays produce and naturalise endangered tradition, national patrimony, military glory, and even the nation itself as easily as they show that a post-Cold War regional economic and political alliance is the natural extension of the ethnic diversity that inheres in modern Vietnam. The issue points not to some peculiarity of Vietnamese post-war politics, but to the human predicament: any representation (mimesis) involves both ‘appropriation and expropriation’, but it is only through representation that people come into ‘complete coincidence with [themselves]’ (Ijsseling 1997: 55)—selves that are made and manifest through objects, others, relations, and exchange.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for a portion of this research was provided by a Faculty-Grant-In-Aid from the Institute for Humanities Research, Arizona State University. I am grateful to the Editor of *TAJA* and three anonymous reviewers for their generous, critical, and constructive engagement with an earlier version. Any remaining deficiencies are exclusively my responsibility. Over the years, I have had helpful conversations with Oscar Salemink, Frank Proschan, and Nora Taylor, but they are each innocent of what I have written.

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## NOTES

- 1 Recent museum displays that emphasise Vietnam’s position within Southeast Asia have the effect of making China disappear. This erasure has many roots, among them Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and China where the former backed Vietnam and the latter Cambodia. This conflict escalated in 1978 when China backed the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam backed a splinter faction led by Hun Sen. When Vietnam backed Hun Sen’s takeover, China responded with shelling across the Vietnam border in early 1979.
- 2 Two anonymous readers challenge my interpretation and insist that the VME has been instrumental in recognising the individual sources of materials on display and that such recognition is now also evident in the Women’s Museum.
- 3 This applies to 1996–2005; I have not seen the revamped museum display that opened in 2010.

- 4 Two anonymous reviewers suggest that I oversimplify and essentialise from the displays, pointing out various contestations among museum staff and their international collaborators, tensions between staff and state officials who monitor exhibits and impose various limitations, and struggles over interpretations among Vietnamese researchers, curators, officials, and journalists. Additionally, notes one reviewer, the VME's recent displays on weddings, on Catholicism in Vietnam, and on the 'subsidy period' have not played up ethnicity. The third reader encouraged greater attention to the erasure of sub-national histories and of ethnic minority transnational networks, and more emphasis on continuities between Vietnamese and French colonial classifications.

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