LEISURE & TOURISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rising tensions: heritage-tourism development and the commodification of “Authentic” culture among the Cham community of Vietnam

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Abstract: This study examines the complexities of cultural-heritage management in Vietnam and the various tensions that arise within initiatives promoting “authentic” versions of cultural practice. In particular, this research investigates local perceptions concerning the commodification of the Cham New Year (Rìa Nâgar) at temple-tower complexes, and explores the implications of sacred religious

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study examines the complexities of cultural-heritage management in Vietnam and the various tensions that arise within initiatives promoting “authentic” versions of cultural practice. In particular, this research investigates local perceptions concerning the commodification of the Cham New Year (Rìa Nâgar) at temple-tower complexes, and explores the implications of sacred religious holidays (ngày lễ) that are organized as festival (lễ hội) events. Arranged by local Vietnamese officials, the implementation of these events for tourists contradicts important Cham worldviews, leading to negative perceptions of tourism among community members, and fears that such practices pose irrevocable damage for Cham spirituality and the future of their ancestral heritage. This research underscores the importance of community involvement with respect to decision making in cultural-heritage management, and that heritage tourism in Vietnam, and Southeast Asia more generally, may be dramatically improved with guidance from indigenous voices and local spiritual leaders.

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holidays (ngày lê) that are organized as festival (lễ hội) events. Arranged by local Vietnamese officials, the implementation of these events for tourists contradicts important Cham worldviews, leading to negative perceptions of tourism among community members, and fears that such practices pose irrevocable damage for Cham spirituality and the future of their ancestral heritage. This research underscores the importance of community involvement with respect to decision making in cultural-heritage management, and that heritage tourism in Vietnam, and Southeast Asia more generally, may be dramatically improved with guidance from indigenous voices and local spiritual leaders.

Subjects: Tourism; Heritage Management & Conservation; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Heritage tourism; sacred space; cultural commodification; indigenous participation; Cham; Vietnam

1. Introduction to rising tensions

The commodification of sacred space is commonplace in contexts of tourism around the world, especially those related to indigenous communities. Nevertheless, sacred spaces play an important role in the creation and maintenance of culture for local populations. The Cham communities of Vietnam have an intimate relationship with numerous cultural-heritage sites around the country, which function as destinations for spiritual practice, festival events, and community experiences. However, economic developments in Vietnam have prioritized these locations within the growing tourism industry, and they are largely treated as keystones to development in the broader transformation of Vietnam into a “developed” nation.

Since the 1986 economic reforms (đổi mới), the tourist industry has become one of Vietnam’s key economic sectors, producing eight percent of the GDP by 2017 (Hampton et al., 2021; Saltiel, 2014; Van Truong & Anh, 2016; Worldbank, 2019). In the 1990s scholars recognized that tourism was playing an increasingly important role in the economy of Vietnam (Var, 1994), and in 2019, Vietnam welcomed 18 million international visitors—a 16.2% increase over the previous year and more than double the 7.9 million visitors in 2015. From 2015 to 2019, the growth rate of the tourism sector averaged 22.7% per year, keeping Vietnam consistently within the group of fastest developing tourist economies in the world.

Cultural tourism is significant for both international and domestic tourists in Vietnam (Lask & Herold, 2004). In this context, the commodification of ethnic minority heritage is a significant component of tourism and tourist experiences, making the preservation of such heritage economically essential (Lask & Herold, 2004; Salemink, 2013; Saltiel, 2014). One of the most recognized destinations for cultural-heritage tourism is the ancient Mỹ Sơn temple complex from the Champâ civilization in the central region, which was designated by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites at the end of the 20th century (UNESCO, 1999). The importance of this international distinction has made Cham heritage a symbolic and economic centerpiece of tourism and development for the country as a whole.

The Champâ civilization temple-tower complexes of the south-central region have likewise become valuable sources of revenue for the tourist industry, and are the focus of this study. While the sites themselves produce a certain amount of revenue for Vietnamese government offices in the form of ticket sales, they also produce revenue for shops, restaurants, hotels, and transportation services, which is in-turn recaptured by government authorities through taxes. Thus, the Vietnamese government profits both from the temple-tower complexes themselves and the tourist markets that these sacred spaces create.
This article investigates how indigenous Cham communities think and speak about the consumption of their “cultural products” for the sake of the tourist industry, which in this case is controlled by Vietnamese state officials. In particular, we examine performances of the Cham New Year (Rija Nâgar) at the Ppo Klaong Garai temple, where throngs of tourists gather to observe these events. Our investigation reveals that, through the processes of cultural commodification, the ceremonial and religious aspects of Rija Nâgar have become increasingly overlooked, and the repackaging of the holiday (ngày lê) for the tourist industry focuses on presenting Rija Nâgar as a festival (lê hoài) for Vietnamese audiences and international visitors.

The tension between a sacred holiday (ngày lê) and a festival (lê hoài) emphasizes practices that contradict the religious beliefs of indigenous communities. Thus, by using the Ppo Klaong Garai temple-tower complex as a case study, we can better evaluate the interplay between Cham perspectives and the practices of Vietnamese government officials with regard to the development of the tourist industry centered on Cham living-heritage sites. To do so, we (1) highlight how Cham cultural heritage is reproduced and transformed through cultural performances that tourists encounter; (2) how these embodied performances and interpretations of them are reliant upon an asymmetric power relationship for defining authenticity; and (3) how performances transform heritage sites into spaces for cultural commodification and resulting ideological contestation.

This examination is crucial in the context of Vietnam’s rapid economic development because heritage tourism remains a central catalyst for these transformations, and a comprehensive understanding of people’s everyday experiences concerning the commodification of their culture presents an opportunity for a more inclusive, equitable, and effective means to promote cultural heritage among future generations. Notions of the sacred and profane may help scholars conceptualize tensions between perceptions of Cham communities regarding the preservation of their heritage sites. Interplay between sacred and profane performances reveal local desires for them to remain spiritually authentic, while Vietnamese government officials and tourists desire a performed “authenticity” for the sake of commodifying indigenous culture to meet the desires of a growing tourist industry.

2. Literature background: The sacred and the profane

While there are various interpretations of the term “sacred”, scholars generally define such cultural spaces as those that regulate access to, and limit behaviors in, a place (Carmichael et al., 1994; Hubert, 1994). Berger states “the sacred” emanates from astonishing numinous power separate from, but connected to, humans (2011, p. 25). Physical objects can also delineate the cultural and religious meanings of a particular location, and they may be decorated artistically to represent the philosophy, tradition, and culture of the community. This is common in Cham communities in Vietnam, where artistic decorations and smaller sacred objects are part and parcel of the delineation of temples and shrines. Accordingly, these locations may be understood as larger sacred objects, adorned by smaller sacred objects, where people come together to create meaning. Sponsel (2008) describes rituals performed at sacred spaces as practices that demonstrate the values and traditions of indigenous people, while also playing a crucial role in strengthening the solidarity of societies. However, as we will demonstrate, such instances can lead to profound contestation.

Tensions between the sacred and profane at sacred spaces is a prominent issue of tourism. The increased impact of global capitalism has pressured many countries to reform their markets to gain access to the potential of capital, including the commodification of cultural products (Appadurai, 1986). Consequently, cultural heritage has been promoted to attract tourists for the sake of economic prosperity. Sacred spaces have become important products themselves, meeting increased demand for experiences of local cultures among tourists (Zeppel, 2006). As a result, local communities became increasingly involved in the tourism industry (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Zeppel, 2006). Yet, the commodification of culture, cultural activities, and sacred spaces presents challenges for local communities (Cole, 2007; Kitiarsa, 2008). Representations and meanings of sacred
spaces become contested, negotiated, and/or reconstructed by a variety of stakeholders (Bianchini, 1993; Mbaiwa, 2011; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Attempts to accommodate the demands of both local communities and tourists may lead to conflicts between them. As we explore in this study, tensions emerge in the context of Cham cultural heritage tourism through the presentation of New Year (Rīja Nāgar) events as festivals (lề hội) for tourist consumption, rather than religious holidays (ngày lề) practiced among the local community.

Rutte (2011) argues that tensions like these manifest in three ways: (1) competition over resources, (2) disruption of local traditions, and (3) eroding spiritual values. Our research aligns well with this perspective, where sacred temple sites become a scarce resource with respect to space and public utility, while simultaneously transforming traditional heritage practices into consumer performances that may erode understanding of these traditions among youth community members. Rutte elaborates an associated problem in this context where sites are perceived to have lost their spiritual value, they could also lose their value as an “authentic” site among tourists. Thus, managing a site to maintain its sacred status while ensuring continued local involvement in the tourist economy is a considerable challenge, but an operational and fundamental imperative (Brayley, 2010; Grimwood, 2009). While scholars have paid increased attention to the impact of tourism on religious practices, these issues remain understudied among ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The present research seeks to fill this gap with a more comprehensive understanding of local perspectives from the indigenous Cham community, particularly with respect to the ways community members conceptualize and speak about instances where heritage traditions are repackaged into a commodity for consumption.

3. Literature background: Commodification

Commodification is the process by which cultural heritage objects and spaces are transformed into commodities to be bought and sold. Commodification is thus dependent on perceived or actual demand of the tourist market (Chambers, 2009). Additionally, commodification is dependent on the perceived authenticity of an object or space. A space or object perceived as inauthentic suffers from depleted value. Nevertheless, this is largely dependent on which actors have the agency to assess value. Objects, activities, and spaces might be altered by government officials to meet the perceived demand of tourists without involving local communities. Thus, many studies demonstrate how commodification may yield a reduction in the perception of authenticity, which in turn can damage objects, activities, and spaces (Cole, 2007; Johnston, 2006; Medina, 2003). This circular pattern of qualitative (i.e. cultural) and quantitative (i.e. economic) degradation for indigenous heritage is a trend that the present research examines, and in the sections that follow, we argue for a more inclusive approach to cultural-heritage management that incorporates indigenous perspectives, voices, and beliefs.

In many cases, commodification causes disputes between local communities, government authorities, and tourist companies (Bianchini, 1993; Mbaiwa, 2011; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Johnston (2006) has demonstrated the consequences of tourism development that happens without the inclusion of local, indigenous perspectives among another community who, much like the Cham, have become synonymous with the cultural-heritage industry of their home country. Johnston’s work among the Maya in Mexico has shown the damaging effects of tourism on sacred sites through their commodification, especially with respect to the desecration of such sites, and the destruction of the surrounding sacred environment of Indigenous Maya communities. In such situations, sacred sites become insecure and their futures uncertain as “authenticity” is determined largely through government recognition rather than indigenous communities. Similarly, Hubert (1994) underscores that increased tourist traffic at indigenous sacred sites is paired with increased inappropriate activities that desecrate such locations. Commodification, in this way, may threaten not only the economic sustainability of heritage sites, but also their religious sanctity and associated communities through physical and spiritual violations.

To mediate between local communities and tourists, state agencies staffed by government officials may create a stage to perform culture, including sacred rituals, for tourists. Cole (2007)
has examined instances where local communities disagree with the performance of religious rituals and sacred rites, while they may agree with cultural performances, such as dances. Community responses were considered to adjust performances for tourists, but the agency to “protect” cultural heritage ultimately remained in the hands of government authorities and legislative bodies (Cole, 2007). Cultures of local communities are thus marketed to meet the external definitions of authenticity to meet the demands of the tourist industry (Tilley, 1997; Timothy, 2014; Zeppel, 1997). In the case of Cham temples throughout Vietnam, the ability to define what counts as “authentic” culture remains largely at the discretion of governing institutions, and the instance of Rāja Nāgar designated as a festival event rather than a religious holiday exemplifies a tension in what—and according to whom—counts as “authentic” cultural tradition.

Some scholars have argued commodification does not always reduce authenticity. Instead, perceived authenticity changes over time, while commodification can generate income and pride in locals’ culture (Bruner, 1991; Cohen, 1988; Tilley, 1997). Furthermore, tourist-oriented commodities might gain new meaning for locals, as they transform into emblems of identity, representing local cultures to an external public (Cole, 2007; Tilley, 1997). In other words, forms of cultural consumption can even enliven a local community, although the effectiveness of such processes only derive from local communities’ ability to access capital returns and control the means and scope of commodity production. Still, it is possible for local communities to generate pride through cultural displays for tourists (Bruner, 1991; Tilley, 1997). Therefore, in situations where there is tension, dispute, or conflict, it is still possible to realign power structures of government officials and local communities with more positive results that respect sacred sites. The present research is intended to inspire similar results among Cham communities, Vietnamese government agencies, and the sacred heritage sites that adorn the landscapes where they call home.

Heritage tourism at sacred sites represents a niche market in broader tourist economies (Shackley, 2001; Timothy, 2014). Nonetheless, heritage tourism can certainly aid in the preservation of culture at such sites by generating capital, while also allowing for communities to continue to use such sites for religious practices (Shackley, 2001). But this must be done with great care and consideration for local communities, as tourists can interrupt local religious practices and trivialize sacred spaces (Carmichael et al., 1992; Sarmiento & Hitchner, 2017). As mentioned above, and as other scholars have demonstrated, inappropriate activities carried out by tourists and associated commercial developments may make matters worse (du Cros et al., 2005).

Heritage management has become a significant issue in the development of policies impacting tourism in Southeast Asia (du Cros et al., 2005) and scholars have argued sustainable tourism is the necessary foundation of long-term development in the region, which requires a mutual commitment from both federal government officials and local communities (Bradford & Lee, 2004). In sum, scholars have critiqued tourism practices that damage host cultures in ways that alter or destroy cultural traditions (Greenwood, 1989; Johnston, 2006; Tilley, 1997; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Timothy & Prideaux, 2004), while others argue commodification does not always reduce the quality of these traditions or result in negative outcomes (Bruner, 1991; Cohen, 1988; Cole, 2007; Tilley, 1997). Commodification of culture presents numerous complexities in the realm of heritage tourism, and each of these relies on the important distinctions for what counts as, and who gets to define, culture as authentic.

4. Literature background: Authenticity

Within recent decades, increasing demands of global tourist markets have (re)created traditions to meet the demands of tourists (Timothy, 2009, 2011). Tourists expect to see the daily life of host communities, as well as experience festivals, rituals, cuisine, and see art performances. Many scholars have shown performances of tradition bring economic benefits to local communities and provide an opportunity for locals to promote the understanding of their culture (Beatrice,
Nevertheless, discourses of authenticity are often linked to forms of authority, cultural power, and expert knowledge (Smith, 2006). Authenticity is concerned with the continuity of tradition and perceived change over time. Hobsbawm (1983) has noted in his description of “invented tradition” that notions of authenticity automatically imply a continuity with the past. When this perceived continuity is interrupted or ruptured, the perception of traditions transforms, and they become perceived as inauthentic. Nevertheless, Andrews and Buggey (2008) argue newly created traditions might help to preserve notions of authenticity, especially as oral traditions can evolve. Thus, authenticity is always relative and negotiated, but authenticity needs to be defined by living indigenous populations who understand their culture and traditions more deeply than outside researchers (Lewis & Rose, 2013; Zhu, 2012). While the materiality of heritage sites may change, authenticity may be maintained through spiritual and cultural practices (Weise, 2013). As a result, it is imperative to examine the micro-level experiences of people at heritage sites in order to understand how notions of authenticity emerge through everyday uses of sacred sites like the Cham temples of south-central Vietnam.

The classic studies of MacConnell (1973) introduced contrasting notions of “frontstage” and “backstage” performances, which we have found useful, as they may help explain the negotiation process of local communities in the “staging” of performances for tourists. In this sense, the “frontstage” of the cultural performance space emerges to protect the “backstage” of religious ritual performance. The frontstage performance is for the audience of tourists, while the backstage performance is for communities themselves, and, perhaps, their divinities. While in the frontstage performance there is an explicit need to shape culture to meet demand, it is important to note that violations of local taboos can disrupt the sanctity and perceived authenticity of backstage ritual action. In the sections that follow, we explore this theme based on the relationship of Rija Nâgar defined as a festival versus a religious holiday.

Many studies, including those of Hobsbawm (1983) and Andrews and Buggey (2008) argue cultural heritage is a process, changing to adapt to social context, while Cohen (1988) similarly pointed toward “emergent authenticity” and Silverman (2016) recently discussed “contemporary authenticity”. The present study helps to elaborate these themes through an investigation of ritual performances at sacred spaces, particularly in ways that cultural authenticity emerges from the interactions of audiences, performers, and organizing authorities. At Ppo Klaong Girai Temple, performances of Rija Nâgar often take place in the presence of Vietnamese audiences. While there are Cham religious tourists who may visit the temple from overseas, local authorities largely organize events to cater to domestic tourists and their anticipated expectations. As a result, there is a consistent formulation of the “frontstage” as defined for, and by, individuals from outside of the Cham community.

Cultural tourism at heritage sites and sacred spaces involves a myriad of different individuals who intersect in complex ways. Wang et al. (2020, p. 1) identified four motivational categories for visitors: “fun traveler, devout believer, cultural enthusiast, and religious pragmatist” each of which may have different impacts on the site, performance of ritual, and notions of authenticity corresponding with their differing demands or expectations. While these categories provide an innovative approach to understanding tourists, they do not fully account for other individuals involved in Cham performances at Ppo Klaong Girai. As a result, we maintain that it is essential to examine local perspectives from organizers and performers in order to more fully understand how authenticity emerges in a complex interaction between local communities, visitors, and Vietnamese authorities. This may present a more comprehensive view on heritage management as one that foregrounds the importance of indigenous voices in processes of cultural preservation. In doing so, the present research contrasts with a recent thrust of studies that have examined the global phenomena of religious tourism focusing on international migration (Dowson, 2021; Geary & Shinde, 2021; Paganopoulos, 2021; Soljan & Lira, 2021; Tillonen, 2021). Instead, we take
a nuanced view on local everyday experiences among the Cham community of Vietnam, and the ways that cultural heritage is defined, reproduced, and transformed through embodied everyday interactions across sacred space in the context of tourism.

5. Qualitative research approaches
The present study utilizes qualitative approaches as qualitative methods explore in-depth understanding of meanings and situations of a particular phenomenon, highlighting perceptions and experiences to better understand their worldviews (Bernard, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative methods provide comprehensive understandings of individual experiences and personal interpretations, as well as vital sociocultural concepts such as time and space, history, politics, religion, culture, and society (Stake, 1995). This approach is helpful to identify the experiences, behaviors, and feelings of the local people in their social context (Yin, 2009). Consequently, the research involved initial periods of participant observation in Palei Caklaing, Ninh Thuân province in 2012 and 2013–2014 by our first author, as well as participant observation in Palei Caklaing between 2016 and 2019 by our first and third authors. The initial period of participant observation was used to identify issues specific to the field of Cham Studies that had not yet received scholarly attention, such as the relationship between tourism, perceptions of authenticity, and understandings of local religious traditions. As this was also the hometown of our first author, who is a native speaker of Cham language, we were able to draw upon a total of 31 semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2016 and 2019 (Table 1). During the course of extended field research among the authors, we conducted much more than 31 interviews exploring topics beyond the scope of the present research study. However, as this larger corpus of field-research data was annotated and thematically organized, salient themes emerged allowing us to reach data saturation levels across a subset of different themes. Saturation was gauged in three ways. First, at data collection, when the interviewer assessed that they had a full understanding of each participant’s perspective (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003); second, at data analysis, when coding was exhausted by each of the researchers, and collectively as a group of researchers, and no new codes were emerging (Urquhart, 2012); and third, when it was assessed that no new themes were emerging from the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). These emergent themes helped guide the topical focus of the present research, and the 31 selected interviews were chosen based on purposeful sampling and convenience (Creswell, 2014). Collectively, this collection of data drawn from a larger research corpus helps account for a wide range of perspectives from the community.

In accordance with Cham Ahiér views on religion, it is important to sample scholars, priests, older intellectuals, youth (of any gender), and elder women as separate demographic categories. Credentialed scholars are afforded a special position in Cham society and their views have significant weight in Cham communities. Priests are the religious authorities of the Ahiér community. Meanwhile, elder males who are still knowledgeable but not priests or formally credentialed might be called laity in some contexts. Yet, in Cham Ahiér communities, they are still afforded the status of older intellectuals. These categories contrast with youth (of any gender), who might be viewed as less knowledgeable or more unruly, especially by more senior males.

| No. | Types of interviewees | Interview Code | No of interviews (31) | Group discussion (8) | Language interview |
|-----|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1   | Cham scholars        | Orang_Ka00     | 7                     | 2                    | Cham              |
| 2   | Cham priests         | Orang_Gu00     | 4                     | 2                    | Cham              |
| 3   | Cham older intellectuals | Orang_Ta00    | 3                     | 2                    | Cham              |
| 4   | Cham youth           | Orang_De00     | 8                     | 2                    | Cham              |
| 5   | Cham women           | Orang_Ku00     | 3                     |                      | Cham              |
Nevertheless, as many in the community identify all youth as the ones who will carry traditions in the future, we felt it was important to include their perspectives as well. Finally, and most importantly, elder women (muk) are afforded a special position in Cham Ahiér society as the Cham communities are broadly matrilocal. Elder women may also hold additional status as priestesses and shamanesses (muk paja). Yet, muk tend not to be associated with temple-tower complexes and more so with village level and household level ceremonies. Consequently, it was not terribly surprising that we did not find strong opinions from elder women regarding the pollution of temple-tower complexes. In addition to the first wave of in-depth interviews, eight follow-up conversations were conducted with selected interviewees to verify the data from the interviews.

The interview questions gathered respondents’ demographic information, probed which issues interviewees considered were important with regard to the development of sacred spaces as tourist sites, and explored the interviewees perception of these issues at Cham sacred sites. We have only translated selected quotes into English. Furthermore, we coded the interviews in Cham language to maintain anonymity and protect confidentiality.

This comprehensive research design accounts for a diverse number of perspectives from the community, as well as our research team. While our second author was at first a tourist at Champă and Cham-heritage sites (2006, 2007, 2008), they also developed an etic view as a researcher, having learned to speak Cham language, while they did in-depth research, including participation and numerous semi-structured interviews with members of the Cham community on a variety of aspects of Cham history, language, and religion (2012, 2013–2014), which allowed us to identify conversational targets and topics for continued research. Likewise, our third author first visited Cham cultural sites as a tourist (2012), and later returned to conduct Cham-language learning in Ho Chi Minh City (2014) and extended doctoral-dissertation research with the Fulbright program and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for anthropological research (2016–2017, 2018). These experiences helped to continue field research of thematic topics, and included numerous interviews with members of the community and audio-visual documentation of cultural events. Finally, our first author was born and raised in the Cham Ahiér religious community, while also having completed graduate studies abroad, thus having developed both emic and etic views of the Cham community. While no researcher on our team is a Vietnamese government official, both read and speak Vietnamese with a degree of professional fluency and interacted with Vietnamese government officials frequently during fieldwork. Thus, we were able to develop in-depth understandings of community views in conversation with government practices. For the interviews, research ethics applications were approved as part of the fieldwork data for their doctoral thesis. Ethics approval clearance was obtained in 2016 and included a research proposal, draft interview questions, and consent forms.

6. Researching the local village
Research was conducted in the south-central Vietnamese province of Ninh Thuận (Figure 1). We primarily focused on the Cham Ahiér communities of Ninh Phước district, Ninh Thuận, which is to the southwest of Phan Rang City, the provincial capital, and due south of the Ppo Klaon Garai temple-tower complex. All the lands of the province were once part of the Champă kingdom of Pânduranga, which also included lands in Khánh Hòa and Phú Yên province to the north, along with Bình Thuận and Đồng Nai province to the south. Pânduranga was the last independent Cham polity in what is now Vietnam and was annexed by the Nguyễn Vietnamese emperor Minh Mạng in 1832 CE. While contemporary Cham populations are widely distributed throughout Vietnam in nearly every province, they are mostly concentrated in southern and south-central provinces. With a population of around 178,000, the Cham population of Ninh Thuận accounts for approximately 50% of the total Cham population in Vietnam (GSO, 2019). There are sizable diaspora Cham communities in Cambodia and Malaysia, but Cham communities in Ninh Thuận are widely perceived as more deeply rooted in their ancestral homelands—despite Vietnamese annexation of
their territory. Communities (palei) in Ninh Thuận keep traditional knowledge through a well-preserved manuscript culture, are home to many indigenous intellectuals, and have cultural practices that are widely perceived as authentic. The persistence of Cham heritage in this region has made it into a destination for visitors arriving by bus or by train, and is therefore an optimal location for investigating the intersections of cultural preservation efforts and the promotion of cultural heritage in the tourism industry.

The ritual practices performed at Cham temples (bimong kalan) and shrines (danaok) represent one of the most complex and prominent displays of living indigenous heritage. They are closely connected to the everyday life of people in Cham communities (palei) as well as the memory of the important ancestral spirits (muk kei). In recent years, the major temple-tower complexes and even smaller shrines have gained renewed symbolic significance for Cham communities. More and more youth have a growing sense of identity and have been inspired to pursue the revival of their culture. The holidays and festivals performed at these sacred spaces connect members of the community to a greater understanding of their history and reify their beliefs, as well as their sense of communal identity (Noseworthy, 2013). Ppo Klaong Garai is even a broader symbol of Cham identity that has been recognized in Cham Muslim communities in Cambodia and in diaspora in the United States. This growth has gone hand-in-hand with the emphasis on promotion of Cham culture as a commodity by the provincial government in Ninh Thuận in recent decades. Ninh Thuận officials backed the construction of display houses to showcase indigenous culture and “traditional handicrafts” for tourists. They have also held programs to promote handicraft products to the public and promote the understanding of Cham culture. These actions attracted even more tourists to the province, generating income. Thus, there is a strong potential for continued growth of the tourist industry in this region, although many policies have been implemented primarily to exploit the region for economic development, without concern for the desire of local communities. For example, the Vietnamese Law on Cultural Heritage in 2001 has conflated all historical, cultural, and religious sites into a single category of “cultural heritage.” Thus, many sacred spiritual spaces
have been converted to profane secular sites, and these semantic distinctions may help to account for why Rīja Nāgar performances may be classified and normatively organized as festival events (lễ hội) rather than religious holidays (ngày lễ). There has been recognition of these sites as “cultural sites” and “national heritage sites” as well as “special national heritage sites” although none of these categories really reflects an appropriate consideration of sacred spaces (Roszko, 2011). Furthermore, many religious ceremonies have been repackaged as “folk festivals” moving intangible elements of cultural heritage toward the profane spheres of secularization and governmentalization (Cham, 2017). The Ppo Klaong Garai temple and Cham New Year (Rīja Nāgar) ceremonies are examples of these trends, where indigenous values of this religious site and ceremonial practices are rarely addressed, if ever, in the practice of conservation a heritage site that also functions as a primary tourist attraction of the province.

7. Cham views on religious systems and rija ceremonies

To understand the case of Rīja Nāgar and Ppo Klaong Garai, scholars need to understand Cham views on sacred temples, rituals and gods. Fortunately, we can rely upon the works of Cham scholars who have published in Vietnamese and our long-term fieldwork in Cham communities to do so. Cham temple-towers (bimong kalan) are viewed as one of the most—if not the most—sacred locations for Cham religious communities. While there are four religious communities in the province, being Cham Jat (Animist), Ahīër (syncretic Hinduism with some Islamic influence), Awal-Bani (syncretic Islam with some Hindu influence), and Cham Islam (Sunni Islam), all individuals respect the site of the Ppo Klaong Garai temple-tower complex. It is especially sacred for the Cham Ahīër religious community. Indeed, Ppo Klaong Garai was a historical king of Champā who was transformed into an Ahīër god. Yet, we should not be mistaken, during Ahīër holidays, Cham Jat, Bani, and even Islam will also visit the site to show their respect. Further, Jat, Bani, and Ahīër communities all believe that god(s) and/or spirits (yang) are incredibly powerful, with the power to protect and bless human beings if they are ceremoniously venerated. However, yang might also punish Cham communities if their sacred spaces are disturbed, desecrated, destroyed, or even just not venerated properly. Everyone is responsible for protecting sacred spaces associated with their spiritual beliefs, regardless of religious affiliations and negatively impacted sacred spaces are understood to have a negative impact on the entire Cham community. Therefore, temples need to be kept peacefully during the times when they are not being used for religious ceremonies, to avoid profane disturbance from humans. To preserve ritual purity, residential areas must not be built nearby them, and the doors of temples can only be opened after purification rituals have been performed by Ahīër priests. Furthermore, as they are only spaces for worship, Cham visitors avoid the use of foul language and engaging in bad behavior at sacred spaces. Not doing so would be an act of impurity and could be punished by yang. Furthermore, the proper days for rituals are selected in accordance with the Cham lunisolar calendar (sakawi Cam). The calendar governs high-holidays, agricultural rituals, feasting days, and taboo days, organizing the principles of when life-cycle rituals should be performed and how the Awal-Bani and Ahīër religious communities can each have their high-holidays without conflicting with one another (Phan, 2014; Sakaya, 2016). At temple-tower complexes in Ninh Thuận four holidays are performed each year: Yuer Yang in the fourth month, Katé in the seventh, Cambur in the ninth, and Peh Pabah Mbeng Yang in the eleventh. If ceremonies are conducted in the proper sequence, in accordance with the Cham calendar (sakawi Cam), the result is good weather, abundant crops, and growth of the Cham community (Sakaya, 2003).

The Cham Ahīër belief system is broadly polytheistic, sharing yang with both Cham Jat communities and Cham Bani communities. For example, Ppo Yang Cek, Ppo Yang Tasik, and Ppo Tanah are shared with Cham Jat communities, as is the worship of the ancestors (Muk Kei). They also share a certain number of divinities with the Cham Awal-Bani belief system, which are influenced by notions of Islamic divinities, and transformed into an understanding of “new yang” (yang baru) in the Ahīër belief system, including Ppo Kuk Ulahuk, Ppo Awluah (Allah), Mohamat, and Ali. Those deities that are associated with Hindu influence or temple-tower complexes are called “old yang” (yang klak) in the Cham Ahīër system. Examples of yang klak include historical royals who have
been transformed into gods, such as Ppo Klaong Garai and Ppo Romé, as well as localized variants of Hindu deities, such as Ppo Yang Sibayeng and other local gods who were not royalty but are still understood to have been people that have been deified, such as Ppo Inâ Nâgar. The worship of Cham Jat, Ahier, and Awal may have distinct connotations, while they have rituals that may appear quite similar in practice. Nonetheless, the arrangement of gods into yang biruw and yang klaak is also vital for the shape of Cham Ahier rituals. The yang klaak gods are worshiped at temples and in household settings. They are worshiped during Katê, Cambur, Yuer Yang, and Peh Pambeng Yang ceremonies at temples. In household settings, yang klaak are worshiped during Puis or Payak ceremonies. The understanding of yang klaak is that they are rooted locally, from their origins to their worship, in areas that are now Ninh Thuân, Binh Thuân, and Khánh Hòa provinces. At the temple-tower complexes, rituals are led by the senior Ahier priest (Ppo Adhia), an assistant priest responsible for devotional hymns (Ong Kadhar), and a senior priestess who also serves as a spirit medium (Muk Paju). Smaller ceremonies at village shrines (danaok) and at individual households might only be serviced by the Ong Kadhar and Muk Paju.

Based upon the Cham understanding of yang biruw, there are several gods and saints that could have only arrived at their current forms in Cham communities after the arrival of Islam and the increase of Malay cultural influence on the royal court of Pânduranga. A category of court rituals gradually developed into religious ceremonies called rija. These include the Ahier ceremonies of the New Year (Rija Nâgar), Day rija (Rija Hârei), and Evening rija (Rija Dayap). They also include the Awal-Bani ceremonies of Rija Praong. Because there are different understandings of the Awal and Ahier yang in each of these ceremonies, we need not delineate them here. Yet, it is important to understand that the officiants of rija differ from the temple ceremonies. There are only a male priest (Ong Maduer) and a female priestess (Muk Rija). The Ong Maduer is a ritual officiant in rija ceremonies at the family and village levels, having no ritual connection with the temple-tower complexes of the Ahier religious community. Similarly, the Muk Rija is a vital officiant for village and family level religious ceremonies. However, a Muk Rija may appear at temple-tower complexes with her extended family-clan network during prescribed times to bring offerings to the temples on behalf of community members. In the case of the Cham Ahier rija they offer a grilled chicken, square rice cakes, an egg, and a bottle of rice-wine to Ppo Bin Nathuer, whom they venerate in this case as a synthesized head if the yang biruw. They only perform their rituals at the community (palei) and family (boah song) levels. They do not perform their rituals at temple-tower complexes (bimong-kalan). Furthermore, because the Ong Maduer are representative of the yang biruw system, for them to perform at temple-tower complexes would be a taboo that violates the principles of Cham ethical codes (adat Cam) (See, Table 2 & Table 3).

While we have found many elements of Cham heritage have been commodified to promote tourism—including objects like pottery wares, clothing, or decorative woven cloths and sashes—we have also found that there can be tension surrounding the performance of Cham religious rituals at heritage sites that are also sacred spaces, while those sites are being commodified for the sake of the tourist industry. In particular, we found that the Cham New Year (Rija Nâgar) ceremony was somewhat frequently performed at Cham temple-tower complexes to cater to tourist audiences during the course of our fieldwork, perhaps most notably in 2017 marked by the occasion of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (Tết Nguyên Đán). The performers were from a Ninh Thuân province Cham performing arts group (Đoàn Nghệ Thuật Đàn Gân Chăm Ninh Thuân). However, as we have begun to highlight above and will further detail below in our findings, this use of Rija Nâgar is a violation of Cham cultural practices and the regulations governing these religious practices (adat Cam).

8. Sacred heritage on stage
Based on our long-form interviews with members of the community, we found that many are skeptical of offering ritual religious performances for tourists when compared with cultural performances of song, music, and dance, which we found most community members supported. Because the Rija Nâgar ceremonies are not associated with temple-tower complexes in the Cham
religious system (See: Figure 2, below), we also found that most individuals were skeptical of this practice. Importantly, we should note that the dances associated with Rija Nâgar are not the same as dances performed on normal days. Yet, local authorities asked Cham priests to perform Rija Nâgar at temples on profane ordinary days because they viewed these religious performances as aesthetically interesting. However, this request was rejected by the Council of Cham Ahiér Dignitaries:

The exploitation of rituals and customs at the temple for tourism is not acceptable. The authorities asked us to perform dance at the temple on ordinary days for servicing tourists. Surely, the Cham people do not dare dance and play music or cook food at the temple for serving tourists because our tradition is not allowed to do that. If we do, gods will punish us (Orang_Ta002).
The elder even went further, having an extremely negative impact, which has “… hurt the spiritual tradition … ” and “… trampled on the religious heritage … ” meaning ‘… Cham people cannot accept [it] … ’ (Orang_Ta002). We should note here that there are multiple consequences for violating the proper performance of ritual in accordance with the Cham calendar. First, there is an understanding that the gods will punish the community. Second, there is an understanding that spiritual traditions will be hurt. Here, the implication is that if these traditions are not passed down, then future generations will risk the punishment of the gods as well. Finally, there is an appeal to the notion of religious heritage, which is theoretically protected by the Vietnamese state, but also has the implication that if the traditions are not upheld, then future generations will be punished. Another elder responded in a similar fashion but also going further to imply the Ppo Adhia were being specifically punished:

I think more about the spirituality when many generations of Po Adhia at Ppo Klaong Garai that have passed away. Do you see Ppo Adhia such as [A, B, C], They all passed away when they were just upgraded to the highest dignity in the Cham community at Ppo Klaong Garai area after a short time of their rule. Do you know why? I think that is because the Ppo Klaong Garai temple is open every day but the Ppo Adhia did not comment or claim anything against the government. Therefore, the gods were angry and punished them. Why do Po Adhia dignitaries in Ppo Inê Nâgar and Ppo Romê temples still live for many years, while many generations of Ppo Adhia priests of Ppo Klaong Garai temple have passed way soon? (Orang_Ta001).

In this case, it is notable that both the Ppo Inê Nâgar and Ppo Romê temples in Ninh Thuân province are open only for Cham Ahier holidays. Otherwise, the doors remain closed, and they are not open to tourists. However, the elder suspects that the Ppo Adhia who are charged with the upholding of rituals at the Ppo Klaong Garai face a form of divine retribution that simply shortens their life expectancy. The elder’s interpretation suggests they expect greater resistance to Vietnamese commodification of the Cham holy site for the tourist industry. They, thus, explain the lack of resistance as an additional act that justifies retribution. Notably, however, it is the Cham community rather than the Vietnamese community that is punished in this interpretation. Upon reflection of their views, after conversation with others, our first author took some notes in their field journal to explain why this was a critical issue for the understanding of Cham religion:

One day, to my surprise, I heard the sounds of Cham traditional instruments mixing with the noises of tourists who were watching a ritual performance. When I got closer, I recognised the dance and music for the Rija Nâgar - Cham New Year ceremony which is performed by Cham folk priests, however, the people who were performing this day were definitely not.
Moreover, the purpose of this ritual is to celebrate Cham New Year, but in this case, it was being used by the local authority to perform for tourists on Vietnamese Lunar New Year. In addition, traditionally speaking, this ritual is only allowed to be performed in the Cham villages, not at the temple space. This lack of knowledge on the authority side changed the meaning, practice, and purpose of the ritual. Who is responsible for this action? I wonder if they have ever thought of the reactions from the Cham community about this incident? (Diary 16/2/2017).

Our ongoing conversations with Vietnamese heritage site management staff between 2012 and 2017 indicated that they had a very poor understanding of Cham religions and Cham culture more broadly. Most could not distinguish between the yang klak and yang biruw system. While some knew the word rija, most did not even understand the basic history and form of these rituals or how these rituals were conducted in accordance with the yang klak-biruw systems (See: Table 2 & 3). We expected further complications to arise as the cultural and religious contrasts in this case were particularly stark: taking Cham ceremonies for the New Year (normally roughly in April, in current cycles) and performing them during the Vietnamese New Year (Tết Nguyên Đán, most often January or February in current cycles) represented, according to many members of the community, both a form of appropriation and cooptation. One of our respondents exclaimed:

It is completely wrong in our culture. How dare they do that? The Maduen priest is another Cham religious folk system. How can Maduen priests dare to do ceremonies at the Ahiér temple? Who allowed this? (Orang_Ka002).

Many other local Cham who are well-informed on matters of Cham religion reacted strongly to the circumstance. One of the Ahiér priests reflected:

They do not know Cham culture. I was surprised and shocked that they [Vietnamese authorities] allowed the performance of Rija ritual for tourism at the temple. They did not ask us about that. They do not know what differences there are between ceremonies at the temple and the Rija ceremony system at home. Why did they bring the Rija Nâgar to the temple? It is a conflict about culture. They offered a sacred ceremony that is only allowed to take place in the village with other priests. Those priests do not belong to Ahiér religion. They are destroying our culture (Orang_Gu001).

Here we must take note how respondents described the performance of the ritual in an inappropriate space as tantamount to cultural destruction. According to discussions with Cham Ahiér priests, the inappropriate performance of a ritual pollutes the sacred space of the temple-tower complexes. This can lead to cosmological punishments for the Cham community as a whole, while it also erodes the value of the sacred space itself. Despite widespread objections from Cham community members concerning these practices, on yet another occasion, Vietnamese heritage managers required a troop of Cham folk artists to perform traditional dances and music for tourists resembling Rija Nâgar ceremonies (See: Figure 3, below).

Our informal inquiries among some of the members of this troop indicated that they were comprised of Cham individuals who were members of the local provincial administration and were thus required to comply with the directives of their Vietnamese supervisors. If they did not comply and obey their orders, they could be disciplined, or even terminated. According to some local Cham scholars, the main issue here is that heritage managers do not understand Cham culture and philosophy:

The Cham yang are classified into two groups: the old (klak) and new (biruw). Music and dance performances are very common in ceremonies such as Rija rituals. For Maduen priests and Muk Rija, a female medium can only conduct ceremonies at the family and village. If heritage managers don’t understand that, they will make it wrong again (Orang_Ka001).
Some young members of the Cham community reflected upon the circumstance as well:

Everyone talked about this issue in coffee shops and on websites and other online social networks. They were angry about this disrespect to the Cham community. I just hope they learn from this experience to avoid it happening in the future. Otherwise, there will be conflicts (Orang_De001).

Performing inappropriate rituals at the sacred site showed disrespect to the Cham community. The temple is sacred because it is a shrine of King Ppo Klaong Garai who every Cham person respects and worships. The important thing is that the authorities should understand the core issue of the Cham traditions. That is the resting place of the King so that it must not be disturbed. They don’t understand about that, so they have been doing wrong (Orang_De005).

Performing Rija Nâgar ritual at the temple is a part of the problem of the lack of respect for the Cham spirituality. Ppo Klaong Garai temple is a place for Cham worship and is also a place for visitors today to explore. However, they are not allowed to make noise at the spiritual site and also distort the Cham culture. Performing at the exhibition house is more reasonable (Orang_De008).

From the young members of the Cham community quoted above, as well as other younger individuals we spoke to in the community, three predominant themed emerged: First, the issue was widely discussed and debated in public forums, especially on social-media websites that draw the attention (and participation) of Cham from outside the province and from the wider global diaspora community. In this way, the “frontstage” performances resulted in numerous “back-stage” controversies, which then were brought to their own stage on public social-media networks, and this level of attention was felt to exacerbate the situation even further. Second, the apparent tensions between Vietnamese authorities and the improper organization of Cham cultural practice was largely explained by an apparent lack of knowledge on the part of Vietnamese organizers, and potential remedies could derive from more concerted efforts to learn about Cham culture from respected members of the community. And third, many young people agreed and were excited that the site could be open to tourists, so long as they respect the living heritage site properly as a sacred space.
Throughout all of our interviews, members of the Cham community almost unanimously criticized the performance of Rija Nāgar at temple-tower complexes as a repackaged commodity for tourists. We found even in the statements of those that were involved in the performance that they felt explicitly coerced into doing so. We also found that community members were willing to suggest a range of alternatives to help cater to the tourist market. In this way, many respondents did not feel opposed entirely to the commodification of Cham culture, however they did not support the implementation of Cham religious rituals as a commodity. Alternative performances, dances, and music for tourists were all suggestions that community members supported, as these practices “express pride in Cham culture” and desire to “share the value of culture with visitors.” To improve the circumstance, many felt that a key resolution would be adequate consultation with community leadership and collaboration between Vietnamese heritage authorities for the organizational planning of cultural events. While the government officials likely had good intentions for organizing these performances, with the aim of promoting Cham cultural heritage from the region, they acted inappropriately according to the perceptions of the community due to a lack of expertise in Cham culture and religious understanding. The unfortunate result was, in aiming to attract tourists with a lễ hội (festival) version of Rija Nagar, the ngày lễ (religious holiday) reality of what this event means to locals resulted in a widespread negative response and online controversy concerning cultural-heritage preservation practices in Vietnam.

9. The effects of commodifying authenticity

Our research supports the notion that when there is a commodification of heritage, the process of commodification can have adverse effects on local communities (Greenwood, 1989; Johnston, 2006; Tilley, 1997; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Of course, we acknowledge what recent studies have shown in that local communities may benefit from tourism and be stimulated to preserve their culture as a result (Cohen, 1988; Cole, 2007; Tilley, 1997). Yet, it is also important to emphasize that positive changes can come as a result of inclusive management (Bruner, 1991; Cole, 2007; Medina, 2003; Tilley, 1997). Tourism requires a balance between development and conservation in these cases, to minimize the adverse effects of tourism on cultural, economic and social life among host communities (Timothy, 2014). Our research shows the commodification of Champã temple-tower complexes can have a dramatically adverse effect.

Commodification of sacred space has the implications of transforming the temple itself. As taboos are violated, Ppo Klaong Garai becomes spiritually polluted according to sacred Cham beliefs. As a result, Cham communities are punished and priests at the site have diminished life-spans as part of this cosmic punishment. More broadly, this is conceptualized as diminishing the sacred nature of the temple-tower, and as this sacred dimension of Ppo Klaong Girai is lost, so too is the authentic use and meaning of this space among the community. Such degrading processes have the potential to compound over time and result in the circular process discussed earlier in this research, whereas cultural quality decreases, so too does the quantitative potential of this location for generating tourism revenue in the province. In this way, authenticity, as defined by the community, is an integral part of the success of the tourism economy, and by extension, the successful development of Vietnam is one that must incorporate voices from indigenous communities.

Commodification changes both physical and intangible forms of heritage (du Cros & McKercher, 2015). Values of authenticity, the site as a tourist commodity, and the site as a sacred space are thus interrelated, and this is very much apparent at Ppo Klaong Girai. Non-Cham locals have begun to see the temple as a “theme park” and recreational space, which presents a beautiful background image for photos and selfies, leisure, and other social activities. During the course of our fieldwork we witnessed Vietnamese tourists interacting with the sacred site in such a fashion on many occasions. Such instances may be read as the everyday “backgrounds” and normative behaviors that permit, and create demand for, the “frontstage” performance of sacred village rituals as profane festival events.
These findings support ongoing scholarly discussions that critically examine the role of the tourist industry and argue that the exploitation of indigenous communities and their cultures frequently leads to the destruction of heritage spaces through commercialisation, desecration, and the loss of the sacred environment (Greenwood, 1989; Johnston, 2006; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Scholars have argued development in tourism and commodification leads to tensions between communities and government officials, especially in the tension between the use of culture as commodity for economic gain by governments and expressions of identity by local communities (Bianchini, 1993; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Tensions are greater when governments do not include local leadership in decisions about what should and should not be commodified, and the present study furthers this literature with a perspective from the Cham community in Vietnam.

Differences in the status and agency of stakeholders also impacts what goals and interests will be the focus of development (Yang, 2007; Yang et al., 2016). Our findings demonstrate tension between Cham community members and Vietnamese government authorities over the usage of sacred spaces for tourist activities, and the tensions that arise when events are not properly organized with respect to sacred cultural traditions. A sacred ritual performed at an improper time and place disturbs the cosmological balance of Awal-Bani and Ahiér. Individuals in the community expressed a prioritization of spiritual interests, and their right to express their religious identity, over the priorities of provincial officials or the potential benefits that heritage tourism might bring. Other scholars suggest that mutually developed economic relationships between local communities and state authorities have the potential to improve long-term development (Yang, 2007; Yang et al., 2016). Thus, a productive path forward, in this case, could begin with increased Cham involvement in decision-making processes. Indeed, previous studies have shown the lack of agency among indigenous communities is a problem that results in negative outcomes and may be exploitative for local communities (Johnston, 2006; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009, p. 61; Kwon, 2017). Unfortunately, our interviewees explained that Cham officials ultimately have no power to manage the temple-tower sites as power rests with provincial authorities first and religious dignitaries second, if at all. There is an expressed desire to reverse the ordering of this relationship or, at the very least, make it more equitable and inclusive for members of the Cham community.

As this study demonstrates, the performance of Rija Nāgar rituals at Ppo Klaang Garai temple-tower complex to attract tourists violates Cham religious principles. The ruptures in timing, placement, and participant structure mean that the existential purpose of the ritual is disrupted. In turn, these actions pollute the site and erode the sacred space in the eyes of local Cham community members. Hence, many feel that Rija Nāgar has been co-opted as a commodity, rather than performed to serve spiritual needs. Such reconstructed and commodified forms of “authentic” culture erodes perception of the ritual and space among local communities (See, also: Suntikul, 2013). Community members consistently disagreed with this practice as it was implemented, but suggested performing other dances and music at the temple-grounds, away from the sacred site, so as to create cultural displays for tourists, but not infringe on sacred cultural belief systems. Cole (2007) has argued that while cultural performances may be acceptable to promote local cultures, sacred religious rituals should not be staged or commodified for tourists’ expectations. As we have seen from the perspectives represented in this study, the implications of staged religious rituals at sacred sites is both socially problematic and spiritually existential.

Following studies of comparable cases (Hubert, 1994; Shepherd et al., 2012; D Timothy & Olsen, 2006), our research highlights how pollution and erosion of sacred space may lead to the erosion and erasure of indigenous culture. While MacCannell (1973) has argued that locals can use “staged authenticity” as a resistance tool to minimize negative cultural commodification and to create equality between hosts and guests, we maintain that this constructed performance of “authenticity” for the purposes of economic consumption still may carry negative consequences for social and spiritual realities among the local community.
We should note that the transformation of Rija Nâgar—or the Cham New Year—through “authentic” commodification in tourism is not an entirely unique phenomenon. Indeed, from a regional perspective, scholars have studied parallel circumstances across the Asia-Pacific, including ritual performances in Vanuatu (Tilley, 1997), on the island of Bali in Indonesia (Cole, 2007), and even traditional wedding performances in the People’s Republic of China (Wang, 1999). Furthermore, we have also seen this occur with other Southeast Asian New Year’s ceremonies, such as the Pimei New Year in Laos (Suntikul & Jachna, 2013), as well as among other ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Salemink (2013, 2016) studied Gong musical performances among upland minority populations and noted the performances of heritage were often decontextualized from their heritage sites, becoming transposed into spaces for the consumption of tourists and visitors. Our analysis works in conversation with these studies, and presents instances where indigenous new year ceremonies are implemented during national holiday vacation sessions for the purposes of generating revenue in the tourism sector. Such applications of culture-as-commodity in the sacred space of Ppo Klaong Garai relies on a misunderstanding of basic Cham religious principles by local Vietnamese authorities. From their perspective and organization of this event, Rija Nâgar was simply an ethnic performance that could be transposed and used to represent Cham identity. Many of our interviewees expressed dismay that tourists were being introduced to Cham heritage with a distorted view of cultural practice and religious belief. Most were genuinely interested in having positive relationships with tourists and government officials, however they specifically expressed desires to change the power relationships among these relationships. Interviewees preferred Cham Ahiër priests, rather than others from outside the community, as those granted direct control over temple-tower complexes. In other words, the community responses to this situation involved deep critical reflection for the ways that this situation was problematic, and also used religious understanding to provide probable solutions to the ways that cultural-heritage management could be reformulated in ways that are both more effective and more inclusive of community voices.

10. Conclusion: Towards a more inclusive future

In this article we have explored the perceptions of Cham community members in Vietnam regarding the commodification of culture. While we noted some examples of cultural commodification that community members broadly accepted, important tensions emerged as Vietnamese heritage officials implemented a Cham New Year (Rija Nâgar) religious ceremony at a sacred temple-tower complex, Ppo Klaong Garai. Under normal circumstances, this ceremony takes place at the village level and during the appropriate time of the year according to the Cham calendar (sakawi Cam). However, the organization of Rija Nâgar during the Vietnamese Lunar Year as a festival (lê hüi) event sparked controversy among the community and on online social-media networks. There were fears of spiritual retaliation that erupted, as well as consensus that purported “authentic” versions of Cham culture put on display for tourists would lead to greater misunderstandings of traditional heritage, and threaten the survival of ancestral traditions. We found that many community members attributed these problems to local authorities’ misunderstanding of Cham cultural values and religious practice. Proposed solutions focused on incorporating religious dignitaries in the organization and implementation of cultural activities in heritage-tourism settings, especially those at sacred temple-tower complexes where they are cultural stewards. Accordingly, participants made clear that a more inclusive approach to heritage-tourism management would have alleviated fears that the temple-complex became polluted through violations of cosmological boundaries, heritage was being ignored, the potential death of their priesthood, and threatened extinction of their culture. Sacred religious practices unfolded in profane settings, and such tensions illuminated power relationships at the local level in defining “authentic” versions of cultural heritage, as well as the implications that such distinctions may have on people’s everyday lives. The definition of authenticity, in this case, was firmly established by local authorities and institutions, resulting in a largely negative reception among the community for a seemingly well-intended cultural event.
Nevertheless, within this case study, contested notions of “authenticity” also emerge as metacultural discourses in everyday life. Cham cultural-heritage preservation is an overt category often talked about in local villages, found in media publications, discussed in ancient manuscripts, shared among online communities, and is even the topical focus of some folk music. Ideologies of cultural degradation persist across generations, and are inspired by the loss of the Champa kingdom to the Vietnamese in 1832 (Brunelle, 2009). In the context of heritage tourism, this metacultural discourse becomes a form of social action whereby members of the community situate themselves in relation to local authorities, and articulate pathways for the transformation of provincial administration relating to their cultural legacy.

Accordingly, this research study contributes to current themes in tourism research exploring the interactions between different actors and stakeholders at cultural-heritage sites. The complex intersections between the indigenous community, government officials, and the tourist industry may lead to unintended conflicts, but they are not without resolve. Remedies for these types of situations are relatively simple to implement, and would only require a concerted effort among local authorities to include Cham Ahier priests in the decision-making and organizational processes. While many scholars have focused on the macro-level effects of heritage-tourism in Southeast Asia, the micro-level realities of people’s lived experience is an essential component of the effective management of heritage sites and the long-term preservation of indigenous cultural heritage over time. Along these lines, this study makes a contribution to the understanding of Vietnam’s national development that relies on a robust tourism infrastructure for financial capital and incentives for Vietnamese nationals, as well as foreign visitors, to travel and stimulate the growing economy. Within this important sector of Vietnam’s changing landscapes, indigenous communities and their ancestral traditions may be read as integral catalysts for the transformation of Vietnam into a “developed” nation.

Along the way towards this idealized social and economic achievement, tourism development will likely continue to commoditize other forms of cultural heritage found throughout Vietnam. However, this case study among the Cham is a reminder that processes of commoditization are not monolithic, and some instances of profane cultural expression turned commodity will be met with embrace as a means to celebrate and preserve traditional Cham heritage with the world. At the same time, instances of sacred practice, and especially those happening at sacred temple-tower complexes, will not likely be embraced with the same level of support and enthusiasm from the local community. As a result, commoditization is not singularly good or bad, but rather, like other oppositional social categories in contemporary Vietnam, remains “uncomfortably both” (Harms, 2011). The interplay between categories of sacred and profane in this context is a unifying thread that invokes complex metacultural discursive practices in everyday life, delineates value and helps to inform processes of commoditization, and illuminates the broader asymmetric power relations between local authorities and indigenous communities in Vietnam.

We maintain that more inclusive and collaborative frameworks for cultural-heritage management would contribute to a greater understanding of Vietnam as a multicultural society. Such approaches would also be in-line with the trajectories of the emerging national government policies related to tourism development. According to a report from the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, there is a requirement to build a “national brand” for the tourist sector, involving offices of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which have bureaus in every province (Tien et al., 2019). Due to the enormous increase in tourism, there has also been recent legislation fighting the rampant degradation of natural landscapes as tourists bring pollution with them to local communities (Tung, 2020). We believe that an equally inclusive approach in these areas, incorporating minority groups and indigenous perspectives, would greatly benefit the government’s proposed development initiatives. Our research underscores a need to recognize the values of indigenous worldviews, and maintains that community involvement is imperative for decision-making processes and the ultimate successes in protecting and promoting heritage for generations of the future.
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