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**THE VILLAGE IN THE CITY**  
CÚNG XÓM ('HAMLET WORSHIP')  
IN HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY DURING TẾT,  
THE LUNAR NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

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# **11**

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PATRICK MCALLISTER

## THE VILLAGE IN THE CITY CÚNG XÓM ('HAMLET WORSHIP') IN HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY DURING TẾT, THE LUNAR NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

**ABSTRACT** In recent years an interesting phenomenon can be observed in certain parts of Hồ Chí Minh City, usually about eight or nine days after Tết, the lunar New Year. On street corners and in alleyways in some residential areas at this time, marquees and altar tables are set up for rituals known as lễ cúng xóm, 'hamlet worship', but which in this context means worship by neighbourhood groups. These are groups of households which have at their core those with a common origin in the centre of Vietnam, particularly Quảng Nam province. This paper describes these rituals and outlines their nature and significance. Lễ cúng xóm provides a number of insights into cross-regional ties, the dynamics of internal migration in Vietnam, and the process of adaptation to urban life, as well as giving us glimpses into the nature of Tết and a contemporary urban communal religious activity associated with it.

Every year,<sup>1</sup> on about the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> day after Tết, in Tân Phú and Tân Bình districts of Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC),<sup>2</sup> groups of people who live in the same neighbourhood participate in a ritual that they call

lễ cúng xóm or just cúng xóm, literally, 'hamlet offering' or worship by the members of a hamlet. In this case the group of worshippers marking the start of a new year consists of members of an urban neighbourhood, xóm or khu phố. The exact day varies, to ensure that it is an auspicious one. Ideally, it takes place before people go back to work after the Tết holiday, but in practice this is a preference rather than a requirement. In this paper I outline the organisation and structure of cúng xóm, what it means to the participants, and why it is of some significance to an overall understanding of topics such as internal migration, the nature of these urban neighbourhoods, and Tết, the lunar New Year festival.

People in most other HCMC districts have not heard of cúng xóm, and look puzzled when it is mentioned, often thinking that the word cùng (same, with) is being mispronounced as cúng (worship). Even those who are fairly knowledgeable about Vietnamese customs are a little taken aback when they hear about it. They are not familiar with it because it is a ritual associated with central Vietnam, especially the province of Quảng Nam, Đà Nẵng city,

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Nguyễn Thị Hiệp, from whom I first learnt about cúng xóm, and to members of the organising committee of the cúng xóm that I attended in Tân Phú district, who graciously consented to me being present at their event and to being interviewed afterwards on three occasions, Đoàn Hồng, Nguyễn Thành Hưng and Lưu Văn Chín. I also thank Nguyễn Văn An of Tân Bình district whom I interviewed about cúng xóm in his area. In Đà Nẵng I was generously assisted in my inquiries by Bùi Thị Diễm Trinh, who also translated a number of documents and internet sources for me. I am grateful to the three knowledgeable men who we interviewed there, Trần Dịch, Nguyễn Văn Tấu and Trương Ngọc Bằng. Others who assisted with interviews and translations included Nguyễn Huỳnh Thanh Bình, Phan Thị Thanh Thúy and Nguyễn Thúy Nga. Lê Thị Cẩm Tú has also been very helpful in answering many questions and in assisting with the translation and accuracy of Vietnamese terms in this text. I would also like to acknowledge helpful comments and suggestions made by two reviewers of an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Tân Phú and Tân Bình districts were until 2003 a single district called Tân Bình.

and also Thừa Thiên Huế province,<sup>3</sup> and in Tân Phú and Tân Bình there are many long term migrants from Quảng Nam who arrived in HCMC around 25 or more years ago.

Each HCMC district (*quận*) is divided into named wards (*phường*) and each ward is divided into *khu phố* (quarters, neighbourhoods), numbered sequentially as *khu phố* 1, 2, 3 etc. Each *khu phố* contains a number of smaller units called *tổ*, also numbered rather than named. One *tổ* includes between 10 and 20 houses. This paper is based largely on *cúng xóm* that takes place in a *khu phố* 3 of Hòa Thạnh ward in Tân Phú district, which involves approximately 30 households in three adjoining *tổ*. Between 2011 and 2013 I observed and participated in two *cúng xóm* rituals in this locality, obtained photographic documentation of a third, and made casual observation at two others. Extensive interviews were later conducted on three occasions with some of the organisers and participants, and one interview was conducted with participants in *cúng xóm* in another, separate Tân Bình neighbourhood, Bảy Hiền. This material was expanded through interviews with male ritual leaders in three different Đà Nẵng neighbourhoods, and with a limited amount of internet material, some providing information on *cúng xóm* in Thừa Thiên Huế and Đà Lạt, and two short YouTube clips showing the conduct of *cúng xóm* in Đà Nẵng. There appears to be considerable uniformity across these areas in terms of the formal features of *cúng xóm*.<sup>4</sup> In Đà Lạt and other parts of the Central Highlands *cúng xóm* is also associated with immigrants from Quảng Nam and Thừa Thiên Huế provinces.

Quảng Nam was one of the hardest hit regions in the American war (Carruthers and Trung Định Đăng 2007), suffering greatly from the disruption of village life, dislocation, food shortages, unemployment and repeated mass killings of civilians and destruction of villages (Turse 2013). Many were forced to seek a life elsewhere. The economic situation after the war continued to be dire, as the policy of collectivization failed. With the relaxation of the travel permit system after 1986, out-migration increased as families moved to various parts

of the country, and some found their way to HCMC, often after some years in other centres such as Bình Thuận, Đồng Nai, and Đà Lạt. From this time onwards people from the centre started to arrive in Tân Phú /Tân Bình in greater numbers.<sup>5</sup> At this stage in the migration of people from the centre this area was not heavily populated and poorly developed. There was open space available and the newcomers lived in small wooden shacks without modern facilities. Many came originally to work in the textile industry (see also Carruthers and Trung Định Đăng 2007, 138), some doing piece-work or making silk at home to earn a living. Even today some are associated with this industry, and according to residents the whirr of sewing machines can be heard in some parts of these districts.

Although *cúng xóm* is closely associated with people who originated in Quảng Nam, people originally from other places also participate. At the events that were attended in Tân Phú district, most of the participants had originated from or were family members of migrants from the centre, but a quarter of the men officiating at the ritual were not originally from the centre but from other parts of the country, and the group's leader was originally from the Mekong delta. There are two or three families in the neighbourhood who belong to Christian faiths such as Catholicism and who do not take part in what is a Taoist style ritual incorporating folk beliefs, as well as elements of Buddhism and Confucianism. Apart from this there seem to be few divisions of note in the area, such as between original inhabitants (now a small minority) and later arrivals, and no factional divisions of significance, at least as far as participation in *cúng xóm* is concerned.

*Cúng xóm* has two main aspects; *lễ*, ritual or ceremony, and *hội*, festivity. These reflect the ritual's dual purpose: *Lễ* involves worship (*cúng*) as a mark of gratitude and supplication to the deities associated with the land, tutelary spirits, founding ancestors, and those who created and developed the land, who are addressed with prayers aimed at securing peace, prosperity and happiness for the living. The ritual aspect also includes attention to 'wandering spirits' or 'homeless ghosts' (*cô hồn*), the large cohort of unnamed, restless and potentially troublesome spirits of people who never received a proper burial for one reason or another. *Hội*, on the other hand, comes after *lễ*, and refers to the celebration party that follows the worship, the gathering of people living in the area. Communion between the living and the dead is followed by secular commensality and the strengthening of neighbourhood solidarity. Interviewees referred to this as *tập hợp bà con hàng xóm* ('gathering of close neighbours', *bà con* being a word that in other contexts can mean

<sup>3</sup> Đà Nẵng city was part of Quảng Nam province until late 1996, when it was separated and became an independent municipality.

<sup>4</sup> "Cúng xóm" among Huế people in the highlands" ("Cúng xóm" người Huế trên miền thượng), *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 26/1/2011; see <http://dulich.tuoiitre.vn/Index.aspx?ArticleID=422141&ChannelID=682>. "Coming to Đà Lạt to see 'cúng xóm'" (Về Đà Lạt xem "cúng xóm"), *Bao Gia đình*, 15/1/2012; see <http://giadinh.net.vn/201201120314815p0c1000/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom.htm>. "The people of Quảng Nam and the custom of cúng xóm." ("Người dân Quảng Nam và tục Cúng xóm"); see <http://www.baomoi.com/Nguoi-dan-Quang-va-tuc-Cung-xom/54/5788753.epi>. "The custom of cúng xóm at New Year" ("Tục cúng xóm đầu năm"), *Báo Lao Động*, 17/10/2012; See <http://laodong.com.vn/Tin-Tuc/Tuc-cung-xom-dau-nam/32293>.

<sup>5</sup> One of the residents of Hòa Thạnh arrived in the locality as early 1982; he said that at that time there were no other people from Quảng Nam living nearby.



kin). This is a very important aspect of the event; as one interviewee put it: “The main purpose [of *cúng xóm*] is to bring people together. They are busy with their business daily, so they have few [other] chances to meet and talk together. That’s the reason why on the day of *cúng xóm* we gather all members of the neighborhood, to worship the gods/saints and deities, good and bad spirits, ancestors [*thần thánh, âm dương, tổ tiên*]<sup>6</sup> as well as to create a chance for talking.” Others put it similarly: “During the year, we do not have lots of time to share, to talk together, so this is a chance for us to understand each other more” and: “On this day, we gather and talk together, give advice and share many things.” Spiritual security and communal unity and solidarity (*tinh thần đoàn kết*) go hand in hand. This neighbourly collaboration is partly the acting out of a historical identification with the central region, but there is more to it, and interviewees stressed its importance in securing the wellbeing of the area and in forging good neighbourhood relations irrespective of the migrant origins of the participants.<sup>7</sup> Both aspects, ritual and festivity, involve the participants in combining their political, economic and social capital and the construction of a moral community in the practice of the ritual. It is not just the event on the day, but also its planning and organisation, that brings people together, co-operating with each other with a common purpose in mind.

*Cúng xóm* occurs at night, from about 7pm to 10pm. It can be observed quite easily because it takes place out in the open, in a *hẻm* (alley, small street), preferably at a cross-roads or at a corner. In the cases observed in HCMC a temporary gathering place or ‘square’ (*điểm tập trung*) was established at a street corner, with a marquee erected specially for the occasion (referred to as *hội trường*, the hall/the tent) complete with electronic sound system. Each family in the group contributes towards the expense, so if the group is small and does not have enough funds to rent a marquee, the event takes place out in the open. Interviewees explained that *cúng xóm* is an adaptation of worship in village communal houses (*đình*) in the central region. As migrants in Tân Bình they found themselves living in urban neighbourhoods without *đình* or *miếu*.<sup>8</sup> When they needed to worship as a community, they did so as a neighbourhood, holding their ritual in

the street, or in any convenient open space, when the need arose. *Cúng xóm*, they said, was similar to *cúng đình* (worship in the village communal house) but it is a scaled down version adapted to urban conditions and modified in ways that make it somewhat different to *đình* worship, as we shall see below. It is sometimes also called *cúng làng* (village worship).<sup>9</sup> In this sense the ritual is not unlike those that characterise village life in Vietnam, with the urban neighbourhood taking the place of the village. The urban neighbourhood in this case has become a metaphorical village, the centre of social life and the basis of a moral community characterised by the ‘spirit of the village’ (*tinh làng*), which Malarney characterises as “a constellation of values that emphasises equality, solidarity, reciprocity and affective relations between residents” (Malarney 2003, 14). As commentators point out (e.g. Hardy 2003, Endres 2001), despite migration and urbanization, attachment to the natal village remains very important to many Vietnamese and the notion of belonging to a village is an important part of world-view. But *cúng xóm* as described here is also not simply a replica of village worship, which has itself changed in some important ways after the religious revival of the 1980s and 1990s (see Malarney 2002, Endres 2001).

Interviews in Đà Nẵng city revealed that a similar process of religious innovation and revival had taken place there as more people urbanised after the mid-1980s, although those who had recently participated in *cúng xóm* in *đình* and *miếu* there claimed that although the purpose and procedure is similar to that in HCMC, *cúng xóm* in the street for members of a neighbourhood tended to be smaller in terms of the numbers involved. Indeed, YouTube clips of *cúng xóm* in Đà Nẵng, at a crossroads, show a small event with relatively few participants.<sup>10</sup> Interviewees also made the point that all men and women were free to attend *cúng xóm*, whereas rituals performed in the *đình* were usually attended only by seniors as representatives of the families of the village. However, in HCMC *cúng xóm* can be relatively large. At a *cúng xóm* such as the ones I attended in 2011-13 many people took part, and at the feast after the ritual at least 60 adults and about 40 children were present. Others, which I observed taking place nearby at the same time, were much smaller.

<sup>6</sup> According to Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2009, 11) *thần* means spirit or deity, somewhat less significant than *thánh*, meaning god or deity, something more than a saint in Christian terms. Thiện Đỗ (2003, 21), however, refers to *thần-thánh* as “tutelary spirits and holy sages”. I interpret *âm dương* here to refer to the homeless ghosts, some of whom might be troublesome, although this pair in other contexts refers to the living (*dương*) and the dead (*âm*) while *tổ tiên* means ancestors in general or remote ancestors.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewees felt that the ritual would be held even if the majority of participants were not originally from Quảng Nam.

<sup>8</sup> *Miếu* are similar to *đình*, but for the differences between them see Thiện Đỗ (2003, 21).

<sup>9</sup> Interviewees compared Tân Phú and Tân Bình wards to villages, each containing many hamlets (*xóm*): “If you have time to walk around wards 10, 11, 12 of Tân Bình district between 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> January [lunar calendar], you might see some *cúng xóm*.”

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBfYDKyHfEE&feature=relmfu>.

## ORGANISATION OF THE EVENT

In *khu phố 3* of Hòa Thạnh ward, *cúng xóm* is the annual responsibility of a neighbourhood organising committee (*ban tổ chức*). This group collects the funds required from every participating family (the donations are voluntary), appeals for help with various tasks, sets a date and purchases all the things required for it and for the festivity that follows. They inform the area police (*công an khu vực*) and the local representative of the People's Committee of the ward of the date of the event, but do not 'ask for permission' to hold the ritual.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the purchase and preparation of the food and drink, which is the women's responsibility,<sup>12</sup> there is the purchase of important items for worship such as the main offering (*lễ vật*), a roast pig (*heo quay*) and a chicken for the main altar table, which should be a perfect young cockerel with good legs (which are used later to divine the fortunes of the *xóm* in the coming year). Among those interviewed were men who claimed to have organised the very first *cúng xóm* in Hòa Thạnh ward, in 1988. At that time, they said, there had been a number of unfortunate events in the area. One member of the community had been accidentally killed by a collision involving a truck while walking along the road. Another, an elderly man who "never bothered anybody", was involved in a confrontation with other men who had been drinking, who beat him. Most of the people in the vicinity at the time originated from Quảng Nam and they decided that these and other, similarly unfortunate, events, were due to evil spirits/devils (*ma quỷ*) and/or homeless ghosts (*cô hồn* or *âm binh*)<sup>13</sup> which had been causing disorder (*gây xáo trộn*) and lack of solidarity (*làm mất đoàn kết*) in the neighbourhood. Also referred to as 'lonely souls' or 'hungry ghosts' *cô hồn* are the spirits of people said to have died a 'bad death' (Bodemer 2005, 132). They do not have descendants to care for them or their descendants are not able to do so because they do not know where they are buried (if at all). In the central region much attention is paid to these spirits, which include war dead, and many households have an outside shrine dedicated to them, where they are ritually remembered on a regular basis (Kwon 2008). It is thought that providing ritual offerings and praying on their behalf can improve their situation or at least placate them and keep them from causing harm to the living.

<sup>11</sup> We were informed that *cúng xóm* is held with the approval of local government (*chính quyền địa phương*).

<sup>12</sup> Interviewees referred to women as being responsible for the *hậu cần* (logistics) of the event.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewees pointed out that *cô hồn* included dead soldiers whose remains lay undiscovered, and the term *âm binh*, literally 'underworld troops' alludes to this. *Cô hồn* are thought to have the potential to do harm in order to get the attention of the living, if not taken care of, whereas *ma quỷ* (or *con ma*) is a more general term for 'ghosts and devils' who vent their evil nature on the living.

People in Hòa Thạnh ward thought that *cô hồn* might be unhappy because they were not being attended to and thus could not escape their fate, so they were seen as the probable cause of the bad run of events. They felt that it was necessary to do something, they said, to pray for peace (*cầu bình yên*) employing the ritual of *cúng xóm* which they were familiar with, and which they knew was a way of placating the homeless ghosts and also a means of offering worship and supplication to the gods and saints associated with the land. They worshipped so that everyone would feel safe and secure (*cầu quốc thái dân an*)<sup>14</sup>, and they prayed for security and good luck (*cầu an, cầu may mắn*). Within that year, the run of bad luck stopped. A few years later they were late in doing the worship, but they felt restless and were reminded that it was overdue: "One year we worshiped late, I couldn't sleep well. My wife had nightmares." At first they worshipped in a simplified fashion, based on their memories of how to hold the ritual. Later, in the late 1990s, one of the men paid a visit to an area of Tân Bình known as Bảy Hiền, near the market, where many others from Quảng Nam had settled, and he returned with copies of the sacred texts originating in Quảng Nam that are now used, the *sớ* (petition) and the formal ritual instructions (*xướng lễ*) (see below), which enabled them to develop the ritual more fully and formally.

The officiating group at the ritual itself is called *ban tế lễ* (literally the 'group that makes the ritual offering') or *ban nghi lễ*, the ritual committee. The same term is applied to the committee that oversees ritual activities in a village communal house. They are distinguished by their ritual dress – they wear blue brocaded dress called *lễ phục*, including tunics (*áo dài*) and turbans (*khăn đóng*).<sup>15</sup> Their number varies; in a small *xóm* there may be only two or three, in a larger one up to twelve. In the one observed in Tân Phú, *ban tế lễ* was made up of 12 men, 8 of whom actively participated in the rituals. When *cúng xóm* was first celebrated in this area in the late 1980s, these were all men who traced their origins to Quảng Nam, but at present it includes three who migrated from other regions. This group represents the families that participate, and consists of senior men, preferably over 50 years of age. They are appointed on the basis of their good character and reputation for ethical behaviour (*đạo đức*), and are men with prestige (*uy tín*) who are able to mobilise others through their social networks. It is through them that the prayers and wishes of the *xóm* as a whole are successfully conveyed and, hopefully, an-

<sup>14</sup> Literally "pray for the peace and security of the nation."

<sup>15</sup> Though we were told in Đà Nẵng that if the ritual is held on 10 March in the lunar calendar, to co-incide with the collective death anniversary of the Hùng Kings, the officiating group should wear red. It was also said that if the group's leader (*chánh tế*) is over 80 years old, he wears red *lễ phục*.

swered, so they bear a heavy responsibility.<sup>16</sup> They are not part of a local hierarchy such as that traditionally associated with village life in the north, and outside of the ritual context are just ordinary people. Nevertheless the fact that only senior men play this role echoes the nature of worship in the *đình* in northern villages, which was associated with male prestige and power (Endres 2001).



Fig 1: Ban tế lễ - the ritual officiants

The *ban tế lễ* works as a team to ensure that the ritual is properly conducted, dividing the duties between them. It is the only time that they work together – they do not have any other functions or work as a group in relation to any other rituals in the area, and *cúng xóm* is a once a year event, at least in HCMC. In Đà Nẵng, *cúng xóm* is apparently held at year end to coincide with the ritual caring for ancestral graves (*tảo mộ*), as well as during Tết, and also to commemorate the Hùng Kings collective death anniversary on 10 March (lunar calendar) annually, but at such times it is held in a *đình* or *miếu* and is a bigger event.

The leader of *ban tế lễ* is called *chánh bái* or *chánh tế*. He leads the worship and is associated with the main (central) altar-table. Ranking below him are two men, one associated with the left hand altar, called *tả ban*, one with the right hand altar, called *hữu ban*. *Tả ban* and *hữu ban* play the role of escorts and assistants for *chánh tế*. One man said that the highest altar is “like the President”, the lower ones “like a minister in the government.” These roles are not permanent ones, but alternate from time to time. Another man, called *người dẫn xướng*, plays the role of Master of Ceremonies; he chants instructions (*xướng lễ*) reading from a script written in Sino-Vietnamese that guides the sequence of worship step by step. The first few lines read as follows (standard Vietnamese in brackets):

*Chấp sự giả các tư kỳ sự (Ban lễ chuẩn bị sẵn sàng)* The team is ready  
*Quáng tẩy sở (Rửa mặt và tay)*  
 Wash face and hands  
*Cử sát tế vật (Chánh bái đi vòng quanh kiểm tra lễ vật)* Prepare the offerings  
*Khởi chiêng trống chinh cổ (Đánh chiêng trống)*  
 Play the gong and drums  
*Nhạc sanh hữu nhạc (Chơi nhạc)* Play music

Another important role is that of *người đọc văn* or *đọc sớ*, the one who reads the oration, the *sớ* (petition) also referred to as *chúc* (wishes/requests), alluding to the prayers offered and the favours being asked of the gods. The oration has two somewhat different but overlapping sections: one is for deities (*thần, thánh*), tutelary or guardian spirits (*thần hoàng*), deities associated with the land and the elements, and the spirits of high ranking or meritorious people from the past associated with the land (*thần linh, tiên linh*). The other part of the *sớ* is also called *văn tế*, which means ‘funeral oration’. This refers to the wishes expressed for *cô hồn*, the wandering spirits. As one ritual leader told us, the oration for wandering spirits is sad and mournful, but the one for deities is positive and powerful. The oration is a crucial part of the worship; the orator (who is often *chánh bái*) needs to know how to chant well, and the success of the event depends on this. The words themselves in the oration are not enough, they must be well performed. Sometimes the roles of *người dẫn xướng* and *người đọc văn* are combined into one person. They are chanted in an operatic style (similar to *hát tuồng* or *bài chòi*) which is characteristic of the central region.

Handed down from the past and reproduced every year from a copy of the one from the previous year (the original is burnt as part of the ritual), the oration is written on large yellow paper and held in place in a wooden frame. Formerly it was written in chữ Nôm but nowadays it is written in standard Vietnamese though many of the words are antiquated, Sino-Vietnamese words and not well understood by most participants. These orations (and the instructions read by the master of ceremonies) are similar across various areas and are probably of fairly ancient origin. The ones seen in Đà Nẵng, written in chữ Nôm on old, yellowed and fragile paper, were very similar in content to the ones recorded in HCMC, though there were some variations in the preliminaries because the oration is modified to include the name of the area in which the ritual takes place, the names of the three main celebrants and the name of the locality’s tutelary spirit (see below). Most of the gods and saints referred to in the oration appear to be included primarily as a matter of form and do not refer to the area in HCMC in which the event takes place, though they are nevertheless collectively referred to as deities associated with ‘the land’. In the case of *cô hồn*, no specific spirits

<sup>16</sup> Interviewees said that women are not regarded as suitable ritual officiants.



are mentioned, only various categories. A template for these orations is available on the internet, indicating a high degree of standardization.<sup>17</sup>

Another member of *ban tế lễ* manages the percussion team, which may include men not formally members of the officiating group. In the events observed there were three instruments; a small drum (*trống lệnh*), a brass gong (*chiêng*), and a much larger drum with a base sound (*trống chầu*). The three instruments are beaten in sequence throughout the ceremony and punctuate the actions involved in the worship (the small drum first, followed by the gong and then the bass drum). In addition to the men dressed in blue, there are two or three others dressed in everyday clothes, who act as helpers, pouring rice liquor and tea into the empty cups on the various altar-tables at intervals during the worship, when instructed to do so by the *người dẫn xướng*. During the proceedings observed in Tân Phú a number of young men also assisted from time to time with various tasks such as burning the votive offerings, clearing the altar-tables, etc. (see below).

## THE TABLES FOR WORSHIP

From internet sources and interviews conducted it seems that the number of altar-tables at *cúng xóm* can vary. At the events in Tân Phú that I attended there were four, plus two smaller, supplementary ones. Of the latter, one held some of the offerings that could not fit onto the central table, and the other, prominent in front of the central table, held the roast pig (*heo quay*), initially covered with a large sheet of coloured paper. Three of the four altar-tables were placed adjacent to each other inside the marquee against the back wall, facing the door, the centre one higher than the two on either side of it. These three altar-tables were for the worship of the multitude of deities and spirits, primarily deities associated with the land and the subject of one part of the oration. The middle one was 5 or 6 centimetres higher than the other three and was associated with the highest ranking deities to be worshipped. The tables on either side of it (*tả ban* and *hữu ban*) were associated with lesser ranking saints, meritorious officials of kings linked to the creation and development of the land (referring primarily to the central region, not to Tân Phú ward), such as the founding settlers and mandarins (*tiền hiền*) who created the land, and those who came later (*hậu hiền*) who maintained and developed the land, and figures like Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh a founder of the Southern land (*vùng đất phương Nam*), and Thoại Ngọc Hầu, a famous general of King Nguyễn, who also created and developed many new areas in the South and the Central parts of Vietnam. Nowadays, we were told,

these figures are like heroic martyrs, *anh hùng*, and are called *thánh*, something like a Western ‘saint’. The deities associated with *tả ban* and *hữu ban* are like supporters of the deities associated with the main table. We were told that “it is like a King’s court; the central table is for the King, the right hand one is for civil mandarins, the left hand one is for military mandarins”. In Đà Nẵng we were told that “the left hand table is for the saints who take care of the living, and the right hand table for those who take care of the dead.” In the oration these are referred to as deities of the left altar-table (Tả Ban Liệt Vị Chi Thần) and deities of the right altar-table (Hữu Ban Liệt Vị Chi Thần).



Fig 2: The altar-tables for the deities

Important food offerings on the higher table at *cúng xóm* in Đà Lạt bear out the principle that *cúng xóm* is partly to worship the original inhabitants of the land. There the offerings include things such as sugar cane, sweet potatoes and cassava, apparently due to the fact that this was the basic food of the original inhabitants, the Lạch, K’ho and Mạ ethnic minorities, so these foods are used in the worship to commemorate this and to invite the original hosts and occupiers of the land to enjoy the event. In Đà Lạt too there is fire beside the altar-tables, apparently due to the influence of the Thượng ethnic minority group, among whom fire is ritually important. They also include uncooked meat and uncooked eggs for tigers and other forest animals because Đà Lạt in the old days was a difficult mountainous area and a place where many wild animals lived.<sup>18</sup>

The three altar-tables in Hòa Thạnh were laden with ritual offerings and paraphernalia – brass censers, incense, flowers, candles in brass candle sticks, piles of votive paper offerings (*hàng mã* or *đồ mã*) including paper clothes, paper ‘money’ and ‘gold bullion’. Each had two small cups of water (said to enable the deities to wash their mouths or clean their teeth prior to eating), two empty cups for rice liquor (filled during the worship) and another two for tea (also filled during the worship). The rice liquor, we were told, is ‘consumed’ by the deities dur-

<sup>17</sup> See <http://vespalx.vnweblogs.com/print/21749/263597>.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://giadinh.net.vn/xa-hoi/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom-201201120314815.htm>.



ing the meal, tea afterwards, as is the case with the living. Pots of tea and bottles of rice liquor were also present. The altar-tables were also laden with food: plates of fruit, rice cakes made in the style of central Vietnam (*bánh rò*), a whole boiled chicken (*gà luộc*) attractively displayed with its head up and wings cocked, small bowls of rice and salt, processed pork roll (*chả lụa*), plates of boiled pork, rice gruel (*cháo*), bowls of fish sauce, rice crackers (*bánh tráng nướng*), empty bowls and spoons, and betel quids.<sup>19</sup> There were also small plates each containing an egg, pork and shrimp, called *tam sên* ('three things') on each altar-table. *Tam sên* is a mandatory offering and important symbol at this and other rituals and is said to be 'for the [deities of] land' (*đất đai*), as are the plates of boiled pork.<sup>20</sup> On the small table with the roast pig on it (symbolising good fortune and happiness) was a bottle of soy sauce and a bottle of chilli sauce, and there were some small cucumbers laid next to the roast pig itself.

Opposite these three tables, just outside the doorway of the marquee, was a fourth altar-table, the one for offerings and prayers to the 'wandering spirits'. This was similarly laden with incense, candles, two cups of water, four empty cups, rice cakes (*bánh rò*), *tam sên*, betel quids, a chicken, a plate of pork, processed pork roll, rice crackers, rice, salt, fruit, rice gruel (*cháo*), and also some items not in evidence on the other tables, namely *mứt* (candies, dried fruit), popcorn, and biscuit-candies, considered mandatory for this table. The votive papers were similar to those on the other tables but also contained some papers specifically associated with homeless ghosts. Votive paper offerings are common at most Vietnamese rituals. The dead are thought to have material needs, just like the living, and burning these paper representations of clothing, money, cell phones, jewellery, and so on, transfers these items to the underworld for their use. Homeless ghosts, like other spirits, need material things and sets of votive papers especially for them can be purchased from specialist stores at the markets. These papers include one type, red in colour, with multiple semi-cut out figures representing the many homeless ghosts that require attention and the nature of the wishes being conveyed, written in Chinese characters, such as good fortune, happiness, material plenty, etc. Burning votive offerings for *cô hồn* manifests the concern that the living have for them, by providing them with material things and giving them a sense that they are cared for.

<sup>19</sup> Betel is associated with sociability and used to entertain guests, as indicated in the saying *miếng trầu là đầu câu chuyện*, 'a quid of betel is the start of a conversation'.

<sup>20</sup> For the ritual significance of *tam sên* see <http://vietbao.com/D-1-2-2-282-4-158820/>. See also <http://my.opera.com/nhungngaykyniem/blog/2011/10/31/th>.

## CONDUCT OF THE RITUAL

The rituals that we attended in Tân Phú were conducted in the following manner: At around 7 pm, the men in blue (*ban nghi lễ*) assembled in the marquee, and announcements were made through the loudspeaker system set up for the event to the neighbourhood, to tell everyone that the ritual was about to start. People started to gather outside the marquee to observe the proceedings and, later, to participate in the worship inside it. Many women and girls were otherwise occupied, however, at one of the nearby participating households, where they were busy preparing the food that would be required for the party that took place afterwards. The atmosphere was one of excitement, anticipation and neighbourly co-operation, a joint enterprise in which many people had worked with each other to make the event successful.



Fig 3: Preparing the food for the party

The worship started at the altar for *cô hồn* at the entrance of the marquee. We were told that this was because *cô hồn* are chaotic and troublesome; they are worshipped first so that they can enjoy the offerings made, be satisfied, and go away, ensuring that the space is clear and free of impediment, in a sense, for worshipping the deities. Interviews in Đà Nẵng indicated that this is not done there and that *cô hồn* are worshipped only after the main deities who, we were told, should be worshipped first.

The altar-table for *cô hồn* was prepared by lighting the candles and incense sticks, pouring rice spirit into two cups, and by taking the candies out of their wrappings and spreading them around on the table. The formal worship started with the first instructions being chanted slowly by the *người dẫn*

*xướng*, punctuated after each phrase by percussion (drum and gong beats). His chanted instructions commanded the men in blue to wash their hands, ready the altars, kowtow three times, prostrate themselves, stand erect, and so on, each time with long pauses and percussion sounds in between each short instruction. This continued throughout the ritual, which lasted for nearly two hours. He continuously repeated the instructions such as: *phục hưng* (kneel and kowtow), *bình thân* (stand up), *chước tửu* (pour rice liquor), *giai quỳ* (kneel), sometimes using ritual jargon to convey the next move. The chanting was similar to the style of *hát tuồng*, perhaps, a style found in the Quảng Nam area and other central provinces. Each command that he called out was concluded with a long drawn out descending ‘aaaaa’ sound. At intervals the *người dẫn xướng* commanded the assistants to pour rice liquor into the empty cups, and later, tea. After about 30 minutes his command was to bring over the wooden frame containing the oration and to uncover it. A different man then took over as *người dẫn xướng*, while the first one now started to slowly chant the oration. One man held the wooden frame with the paper on which the sacred words were written, while others stood on either side of him, one holding the microphone, as the drums and gong sounded at regular intervals.

Both the oration for *cô hồn* and that for the deities are similarly structured, as follows:

- Preliminaries – an introduction to the event, its location and its nature.
- *Cảm cáo vu* (‘express gratitude’). Deities and homeless ghosts are addressed in a general way.
- *Viết cung vị* (‘report respectfully’). Deities/homeless ghosts are addressed in detail, using their full titles or, in the case of *cô hồn*, their descriptive categories.
- Expression of appropriate sentiments
- Reflection and conclusion

## THE ORATION FOR HOMELESS GHOSTS

Preliminaries in the oration for *cô hồn* include identifying the time and place of the ritual, the name of the ward, the neighbourhood, and the street,<sup>21</sup> the year and the date according to the Vietnamese zodiac and the luni-solar calendar, and naming the deity associated with the particular year (*hành khiển*). The three main ritual officials are introduced to the deities by name and the deities told that there are offerings for them: “Here we have rice liquor, betel and areca, candles, incense, flowers, fruit and

all kinds of things necessary for worshipping”. The oration then moves on to the next section, called *cảm cáo vu* (‘expression of gratitude’). Here, the deities, including those associated with the land, are addressed in a general way, as are the homeless ghosts, including, for example:

- 36 kinds of homeless spirits (Tam Thập Lục Loại Cô Hồn Đẳng Hưởng )
- Ghosts who are not worshipped (Vọng Yết Tử Lộ Y Vô Tự)
- The nameless unborn (Hữu Danh Vô Vị Hữu Vị Vô Danh )

This is followed by a long section called *viết cung vị* (‘report respectfully’) in which many different kinds or categories of homeless ghosts (*cô hồn các đẳng*)<sup>22</sup> are mentioned, such as those who lived a good life but who do not have graves; people who gave up their lives to save the country and whose bodies were left on the battleground; loyal subjects who sacrificed their lives to show their gratitude to their king or mandarin; those who died in forests, on mountains, or at sea, and whose spirits are far away; poor people and people who travelled around the country, and who suddenly died in remote regions, thus not having a proper burial. The oration includes dishonest and bad people, as well as people who were very famous or who had high positions in society but whose bodies were lost at sea, in rivers and in forests and who are thus all part of the cohort of homeless ghosts.

This is followed by an appropriate expression of sentiments, which in this section of the oration indicate that it is a funeral lament: sorrow is expressed for the many categories of people who died without a proper burial; people with bad destiny; people who had good opportunities in life but who failed to do good things and then died; very rich people who died in remote areas; beggars who died in the street; poor people who suffered under adverse weather and whose bodies disintegrated on the land; those whose spirits seek shelter in difficult places in hot and rainy weather, who need the help of people, who seek shelter when in danger in the mountains and in the sea. Kwon notes that in central Vietnam the oratory for homeless ghosts involves specialists reciting “the traditional incantation of spirit invitation and consolation, calling in all different categories of tragic or displaced death and urging the ghosts to receive the villagers’ gestures of sympathy.” (Kwon 2008, 27).

The oration comes to an end by reflecting on the fact that the living are keeping their promise to pray for the homeless spirits, that they mourn and feel pity for these souls, and they pray that they should

<sup>21</sup> Lane 10, Thoại Ngọc Hầu St, Ward Hòa Thanh, Tân Phú Dist, HCMC.

<sup>22</sup> This term is also used in daily life as a derogatory word to refer to people considered extremely troublesome or obnoxious.



be released from their fate and able to fly to heaven. They express the hope that *cô hồn* will accept the invitation to be present to enjoy the worship, which is portrayed as a prayer for the country to be peaceful and for all people to be happy. They reiterate that they want all living families to prosper and be happy and they express the hope that the gods will help them. They pray that everybody will get the good things in life and fulfil their ambitions, that all families will be helped to be prosperous all year round, wherever they may be, from the North to the South. The oration concludes by noting that spring has arrived, as they pour tea into two cups on the altar. Finally there is an instruction to the officials to bow respectfully in conclusion. Once this first part of the oration is complete, which takes about 20 minutes, there is a long pause while the percussion continues, as the incense burns down and more rice liquor is poured into the cups on the altar, followed later by tea.<sup>23</sup>



Fig 4: Scattering rice on the ground

Once the incense has burnt down some of the offerings (the *tam sên* plate of pork, egg and shrimp from the altar, and the boiled pork, as well as some of the biscuits and candies) are put into a paper bag and taken hurriedly into the main street nearby by a young man and laid down there, as far into the street as possible, along with sticks of incense. Incense is also placed on the way, about half way to the corner, so that *cô hồn* will find their way to the offerings. *Cô hồn* are frequently associated with cross-roads or roads in general. Since they have no home they are always out and about and it is on the roads that they roam “in search of sustenance” (Malarney 2002, 42), and where they are likely to cause bad luck in the form of accidents and injury or death. The votive offerings for *cô hồn* are burnt nearby in the lane, many young people of both sexes assisting with this. The candies, popcorn and candied biscuits, as well as the rice on the table and the water

<sup>23</sup> The spirits then (as with the deities later) are seen as partaking of the meal offered, which is preceded with water to cleanse the mouth and accompanied with rice liquor, followed by tea and betel, in imitation of the way in which a meal is taken by the living.

and rice liquor are strewn around on the ground at the base of the table, outside the marquee, round the corner and in the lane, as the altar is completely dismantled, and the worship moves to the other three altars inside the marquee.

## THE ORATION FOR DEITIES

The next phase is the worship of the deities. First the men uncovered the roast pig and started the worship with chanting by *người dẫn xướng*. The man associated with each altar led the worship at each one in turn, assisted by a man on either side of him, the three of them bowing and prostrating themselves together at regular intervals as the instructions were chanted. Here the aim is to secure the blessings of the deities and “to show gratitude to the Gods, to good as well as bad spirits and to the ancestors who established villages” including the tutelary spirit responsible for the protection of the local area (*thành hoàng bốn cảnh khai hoang*)<sup>24</sup>. This tutelary spirit is a female by the name of Nguyễn Thị Thục, though they do not know much about her apart from the belief that she was probably a pioneer in the local area, the wife of a local saint who was a high ranking mandarin and that she was childless (*thọ phong tuyết tử*). “We just follow the custom. In the *sớ*, we read *Chủ ngung na nương, đào lương bang Nguyễn Thị Thục, phu nhân tôn thần* [The owner of this land, Nguyễn Thị Thục, wife of the god here]. She is the wife of the god here, we do not know about her origin.” Other tutelary saints are also included in the oration but the role of these saints is underplayed, not emphasised as was traditionally the case in village *đình* (Endres 2001).



Fig 5: Reading the oration directed at the deities

The oration to the deities is read by the ritual leader, *chánh bái*. It starts in the same way as the first oration with an identical introduction. Then in the *cắm cáo vu* section the deities are invited to

<sup>24</sup> Literally “wall and moat spirit who colonised the land” (see Thiện Đức 2003)

be present by naming them, using their full titles. Most seem to be deities generally associated with the land and not linked to any specific locality: “We worship the gods in general and the people who cultivated the land. We do not care about their origin...”. As is well known, land in Vietnam is always associated with a variety of spirits who are thought to control and guard it, or who were the first to settle there (Malarney 2002, 41). In this oration, many of them are foundation deities or tutelary guardian spirits, both major ones such as the Great Emperor (Khai Hoàng Đại Đế Hậu Thổ Nguyên Quân), and his wife Madam Vạn Phước (Vạn Phước Phu Nhân), a female saint associated with the land (Thổ Thi Thần Nữ Tôn Thần), the land god (Đương Cảnh Thổ Địa Phước Đức Chánh Thần), and important guardian deities (Bốn Cảnh Thần Hoàng Đại Vương Tôn Thần) as well as lesser tutelary spirits associated with smaller areas (Bốn Xứ Bốn Thổ Chi Thần) or people of virtue or merit who discovered and developed the original area in the centre. The original settlers, those who first broke fresh land (Tiền Hiền) as well as those that followed them later (Hậu Hiền) are mentioned, as are those who did good things for people in the past. We were told that the original inhabitants of the land in the central region (i.e. of the Champa kingdom, Chiêm Thành in Hán Việt) were driven away by the Kinh, so some of the deities invoked are associated with these first settlers. Ancestors of all generations are invoked generally (Lịch Đới Tổ Sư Chi Vị), and their kinship statuses later mentioned in detail (Thổ Nguyên, Thổ Xứ, Thổ Mạnh, Thổ Trọng, Thổ Hậu, Thổ Bá, Thổ Phụ, Thổ Mẫu, Thổ Tử, Thổ Tôn, Thổ Hôn, Thổ Tế, Thổ Chủ, Thổ Phủ, Thần Quan Chi Thần). Most of the deities cited are not well known by ordinary people, while some are known by shorter names, such as the mother goddess Thánh Mẫu, here called Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ Thánh Mẫu Tiên Nương (Great Miraculous Mother of the 9<sup>th</sup> Heaven).

Also mentioned are deities associated with the five elements (Ngũ Hành Tiên Nương Tôn Thần) and with the natural environment, the forests (Mộc Trụ Thần Quan Tôn Thần), the female saint of sea & water (Hà Bá Thủy Quan Chi Thần), the five directions, and the five evil spirits (Ngũ Phương Ngũ Đế Thần Quan; Ngũ Phương Ngũ Quỷ Chi Thần) and those associated with rivers, lakes and seas (Tả Thần Trà Hữu Quốc Lũy Thần Quan). His Satanic Majesty is included too (Tiêu Diện Đại Sĩ Diêm Khẩu Quỷ Vương Tôn Thần).

Deities associated with the family and with the house form another group - the saint associated with the fate of the family (Bốn Mạng Tiên Sư Tôn Thần) and the 5 Saints who bless the family (Ngũ Tự Gia Đường Tôn Thần), the Saints of the kitchen (Đông Trù Tây Mạn Táo Phủ Thần Quan), the wells (Bốn Tỉnh Thần Quan Tôn Thần), the gardens, and house building (Tiên Sư Thổ Công Tôn Thần). Mythical sacred animals are included in the long

list: “Blue Dragon, Red Phoenix, White Tiger, Black Turtle” (Thanh Long Châu Tước Bạch Hổ Huyền Võ), and so are sacred tigers and snakes (Lâm Sơn Hồ Giáo Chi Thần; Câu Trận Đằng Xà Liệt Vị Chi Thần). The Saints of the New Year (Kiêm Niên Thái Tuế Chí Đức Tôn Thần) and those who come down to earth on New Year’s Eve (Hành Binh Hành Khiển Chi Thần) are also invoked.

The second part of the oration also includes reference to the ‘homeless ghosts’ but only briefly and generally, since they are dealt with in detail in the first part:

- Ghosts who are not worshipped (Bốn Xứ Vô Y Vô Tự)
- 36 kinds of homeless ghosts (Tam Thập Lục Loại Cô Hồn)
- Young people who died of diseases or accidents or wars (Đẳng Chúng Chương Công Cữu Cữu)
- The unborn who have no names (Hữu Danh Vô Vị Hữu Vị Vô Danh)

The second part of the oration ends with an invitation to all the named deities, spirits and ghosts to come and enjoy the worship. They are told that the worship is about to end and the saints and spirits are respectfully asked to bless them and the land. They are asked to help the living, to bring good health to people and peace to the land, good business, prosperity. They are asked to let all the prayers of the living come true. The men all bow to signal the end of the oration.

The ‘dual organisation’ of *cúng xóm* as described here echoes descriptions of rituals in villages in the central region (Kwon 2008, 27). Here, ancestral rituals in the home include attention to the homeless ghosts at the shrine outside the home, and rituals in communal houses in honour of village founding settlers are followed by worship of the homeless ghosts at an external shrine. Kwon sees the attention to homeless ghosts as constituting “an act of hospitality for the unknown and unrelated” since the villagers welcome “spiritual identities foreign to the community” in “the spirit of cosmopolitanism” (2008, 41). The contrast between the two aspects of the ritual is seen as one between “the affirmation of moral solidarity on one side [worship of village ancestors] and the expression of universal hospitality on the other. The local memory and the cosmopolitan memory coexist in the ritual complex but nevertheless exist separately in the structure of worship” (2008, 41). In the case examined here, however, the deities invoked are those generally associated with the central region, remote ‘ancestors’ only in the sense of being original settlers and others associated with the land (though ancestors in general are also mentioned), mythical figures, general Taoist deities, and so on, with the exception of the one tutelary spirit, who seems to be the only local deity



mentioned. This pretty ‘cosmopolitan’ bunch, like the homeless ghosts, is also offered hospitality, as the offerings on the altar tables and the structure of the event indicate. This emphasis on deities and homeless ghosts rather than on ancestors makes *cúng xóm* rather different from both worship in communal halls and in family homes during Tết. Yet it is in keeping with a neighbourhood group of urban worshippers whose actual village ancestors (those associated with their ancestral village, *quê hương*) are numerous and diverse, since there are many different villages involved, and not of immediate relevance in the new urban context where they would indicate divisions rather than unity.

## CONCLUDING THE RITUAL

During the worship rice liquor is poured into the cups on the altar-tables three times. At the end of the worship the three men associated with the three altars are required to drink the liquor, an action called *hũu phước*, which implies, we were told, that the rice liquor is a favour from the saints. One glass of rice liquor is given to the leader (*chánh bái*), who kowtows, sips it, and then pours it on the ground as an offering to the deities and to the land. The plate of boiled pork is placed on the ground under the table, also for ‘the land’ (*đất đai*). This dish of pork is called *thọ tợ*, and it, too, is seen as a gift from the deities, which brings good fortune, peace and health (*may mắn, an lành, sức khỏe*) to the people. *Chánh bái* sips the rice liquor as representative of the people of the neighbourhood, but there is no need to eat the pork, it was said, it should just be put on the ground. The act of sipping the liquor and putting the pork on the ground is called *ấm phước* (literally a ‘toast’). The rice and the salt from the altar-tables is scattered around on the ground. The *tam sên* (pork, egg and prawn) is put into a bag and given away, since it is now desacralized. According to one of our interviewees, this food is meant to be placed at the crossroads as “a gift to say good bye to our guests” (the deities invited to the event). In the old days, he said, “we put food on a raft and floated it down river so the deities could use the food when they are hungry. Now we have no river here, so we put it in a basket and leave it at a three-way crossroad. The food left at the cross roads can be used by any traveller. It is to say good bye to the saints, not to *cô hồn*.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Thiện Đỗ (2003, 36) records a similar past practice of sending shrimp, duck egg and meat down river on a bamboo raft, but in this case for the homeless ghosts, to ‘lure them away’. The raft-boat was called *tàu tam sanh* (‘three life boat’).



Fig 6: Worship by members of the neighbourhood

The gong and drums continue to beat as all the men in blue kowtow four times at all three of the altars, which takes a few minutes. Now the other people who have gathered outside watching the proceedings are told that they can come in and worship at these tables, and many men and women do so, burning incense and kowtowing at the three main altar-tables. Shortly afterwards they are reminded on the loudspeaker system to stay for the party.

The votive papers from the main altar-tables are now burnt, a number of young men, boys and girls helping with this. It takes 10 or 15 minutes due to the large volume of *hàng mã*. They also burn the large yellow oration papers. The men in blue wait for these papers to finish burning before they proceed. All the remaining items are now removed from the altar-tables, and one man starts to carve up the roast pig in preparation for the party. Tết songs and other music with a fast beat came across the loudspeaker system as a joyous party atmosphere replaces the solemn one of worship.



Fig 7: Burning the votive offerings

The sides of the marquee are taken off, leaving the roof in case of rain. Five large round tables are set out, ten chairs at each of them, and they are rapidly laid with all the food and drink that has been prepared earlier in a nearby house. Children sit on a large mat on the ground outside, not far away. There is a lot of food and drink and the collective nature of the night is vocally manifest in the loud and repeated toast, ‘*một, hai, ba, dzô!!*’ (‘one, two, three, go!’), as men toast each other and drink it down in unison. Chopsticks repeatedly range across the table to place a delicacy on a neighbour’s plate. People get up to go to another table to offer or receive drink, chat with a friend, and so on. Men, in particular, are hardly seated and the eating hardly begun before they are up and about, moving between tables, offering and receiving beer, individual to individual. Gentler music plays in the background now, complementing the very happy social atmosphere.



Fig 8: The feast after the ritual is concluded



Fig 9: Children enjoying the food

## THE COCK’S LEGS

The lower legs of the young rooster (*gà giò*) that is offered on the main altar-table are kept one side and taken the next day to a lay ritual specialist (*thầy cúng*) believed to be able to divine the future of the neighbourhood and its people on the basis of the appearance of the legs and feet, which he examines (*coi giò gà*). One man explained that “*Thầy* will look at the toes, legs, and tendons of the cock, and this

tells you something... He will look at it and tell you all the things that will happen in your area.” One year, we were told, *thầy* predicted, on the basis of this divination, that there would be a fire in that neighbourhood, and he was right, there was a fire that destroyed some houses. Another time he predicted the death of the ritual leader, *chánh bái*, and he did indeed die that year from illness. Due to this some people no longer dare to take the cock’s legs to *thầy*. A specialist may also be involved in choosing an auspicious day for the ritual, and in some cases may attend and participate in the worship.

## CONCLUSION

The people of Hòa Thành Ward are justly proud of their ability to organise *cúng xóm* every year. They see it as a sign that relationships within the community are good, a mark of their unity/solidarity (*tinh thần đoàn kết*), and they mention that there are other communities that do not live up to this standard, some of which have tried to organise *cúng xóm* but have failed to do so. To many who participate this pride is linked to their social memory, to their origin in Quảng Nam, and this connection with each other is given practical expression in the ritual, knowledge of which is part of their social capital in the city. But their ties to locality are dual, the one situated in the past, the other in everyday life, which they attempt to control through a style of worship drawn from memory of another place and time. The performance of this ritual, therefore, fuses past and present and mediates between them in the production of a sense of locality, using objects (such as *bánh rò*, the rice cakes associated with the centre) and texts associated with the past, but used to construct a sense of belonging in the present. The ritual form may be relatively unchanged and ‘traditional’ in some ways but its function is different,<sup>26</sup> it is a response to new urban circumstances and lifestyles and an acting out of aspects of this, a construction of community and locality as well as an act of memory. Thus it also incorporates people not originally from the centre, people who do not share the social memory of those with ties to Quảng Nam.

So the significance of ancestral tie with the centre should not be overstated. In Vietnam it is customary for migrants to visit their original homes (*quê hương*) during Tết, and some of these early migrants from the centre still do so if they have relatives there, but most have now been settled in HCMC for a long time and no longer have close kin at their places of origin. For some, participation in *cúng xóm* may substitute for the Tết visit to the original home and enable people to express their continued attachment to and identification with it.

<sup>26</sup> See Di Gregorio and Saleminck (2007, 440).



In some cases, however, migrants have developed a new home town: the children of migrants from the centre to Đà Lạt, who have since moved to work in HCMC, return to Đà Lạt during Tết and participate in *cúng xóm* there, so Đà Lạt is now effectively their *quê hương*, or perhaps their 'second hometown' (*quê hương thứ hai*).<sup>27</sup> Similar trends are in evidence with some of the residents of Hoà Thành, while others visit Quảng Nam occasionally but not for Tết. For example, the family of Nguyễn Thị Hiệp visited relatives in Quảng Nam in mid-2012. Both her parents were born there but left in the early 1970s. Both her father and her mother's family settled in Bình Thuận district, where her mother and father met and later married. After a number of years, during which they had three daughters, the family moved to HCMC, where there were better prospects for work, and where Nguyễn Thị Hiệp and two other children were born. During Tết 2013 and 2014 the family visited kin in their 'second hometown' in Bình Thuận, but they still think of themselves as originally from Quảng Nam. In other cases, according to people interviewed, Tân Phú / Tân Bình, or HCMC itself, have become their 'second home town'.

The notion of belonging here, then, is hybrid (Lovell 1998). Belonging to an ancestral home in Quảng Nam merges with belonging to another centre as well as to an urban neighbourhood, members of which have diverse origins but whose good relationship with each other is regarded as very important. This emphasis on solidarity and a sense of community associated with an urban neighbourhood contrasts with the emphasis on family that is an important aspect of Tết (though according to internet sources there are also some instances of *cúng xóm* in Đà Lạt which include only extended family members living in the same neighbourhood, and which are referred to as *cúng xóm gia đình* – 'family *cúng xóm*').<sup>28</sup> In addition to the spiritual meaning (*ý nghĩa tâm linh*), *cúng xóm* is also an opportunity for everyone in the locality to come together and give each other best wishes for the New Year. It is a chance for different families to get together to talk about work and business and to put aside any differences or disagreements of the past year, in the spirit of Tết, and to welcome the New Year with joy and friendliness. In this sense *cúng xóm* ideally helps to ensure a happy and trouble-free New Year.

Finally, *cúng xóm* as described here seems to be part of the religious revival that has characterised Vietnam for the last 25-30 years, noted by many writers (e.g. Taylor 2007). In Đà Nẵng we were told that there was a long period from about 1975 on-

wards during which *cúng xóm* did not take place, or took place very infrequently, because it was forbidden by the state. In the 1980s it was practiced secretly in Đà Nẵng, and during the 1990s it was again done openly without fear of reprisal. This appears to correlate with Malarney's (2002, 189) findings on the worship of the village guardian spirit in the northern village which was the subject of his study. This worship was not held between 1946 and 1993, when it was conducted by "a group of senior village men, wearing blue mandarin robes and caps, solemnly worshipping the spirit in the communal house as a large assembly of villagers looked on" following a "a long lost charter describing the ritual's proper conduct" that had recently been found. In the communal house was "the scroll that contained the guardian spirits identities" (Malarney 2002, 191-2). Government policy had been to desacralize communal houses and prohibit the holding of rituals there. The beginning of the reversal of this process was in the mid-1970s, and by the early 1990s "communal house rites had begun all over the country" (Malarney 2002, 205) and started to gain official approval (as well as official attempts to construct them as good for the nation).

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<sup>27</sup> See <http://giadinh.net.vn/xa-hoi/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom-201201120314815.htm>; <http://giadinh.net.vn/201201120314815p0c1000/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom.htm>

<sup>28</sup> See <http://giadinh.net.vn/xa-hoi/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom-201201120314815.htm>; <http://giadinh.net.vn/201201120314815p0c1000/ve-da-lat-xem-cung-xom.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> McAllister P.A. 2013. "Religion, the state and the Vietnamese lunar new year." *Anthropology Today* 29 (2): 18-23; McAllister, P.A. 2012. "Connecting places, constructing Tết: Home, city and the making of the lunar New Year in urban Vietnam." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43 (1): 111-32.

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